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National recovery and resilience plan: Implications for Romania's agriculture

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NATIONAL RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE PLAN. IMPLICATIONS FOR ROMANIA'S AGRICULTURE

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has generated a serious economic and social crisis in the European Union. This in return produced a vigorous EU reply that took among other the shape of a strong financial response through the provisional instrument of the NextGenerationEU financial instrument. One of the key tools is the so-called Resilience and Recovery Mechanism that sees the allocation toward the Member States of important sums of money through grants and loans. The key rule to be followed by the Member States is to provide a National Recovery and Resilience Plan that underlines the measures taken by the State in order to reform its economy following the lines of a green and digital transition. The end outcome is to create a better economy that would withstand future shocks. Even though the emphasis is put on the green transition it also has an impact on the agricultural system. This impact may vary depending on each Member State ingenuity in drafting the targets to be reached in their National Recovery and Resilience Plans. In the case of Romania, we had a very ambitious agricultural component in the early drafts of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan that latter own following yet difficult to discern technical and administrative reasons were downgraded toward a more modest approach, both in scope and financial resources allocated to the agricultural sector, especially for reforestation and educational sector. The end hope is that the measures taken in adjacent sectors would have a positive spill over effect and that the agricultural sector would be the indirect beneficiary of these reforms.

Keywords: National Recovery and Resilience Plan, agricultural sector, Romania, reforms, European Union financing, COVID-19 pandemic

JEL classification: Q00, Z18

INTRODUCTION

Following the pandemic, the Member States of the European Union were dealing with an unprecedented medical and economic crisis that required some extraordinary measures. The first such answer was to put to work the general escape clause of the EU fiscal framework that was supposed to provide the flexibility “to take all necessary measures for supporting our health and civil protection systems and to protect our economies” in March 2020 (Council of the EU, 2020a). It will be the beginning of a long process of adopting various economic, health and freedom of movement measures that are shaping how the European society works. The 2020 pandemic measures are in effect some of the most important ones taken in the Union history, if only we look at the numbers.

After the initial 2020 financial measures the European Union has started to provide a coherent financial instrument for helping the Member States to cope with the pandemic economic shock – the Next Generation EU (NGEU), the Covid-19 recovery package of approximately 750 billion euros (in 2018 prices) of which 390 bn grants and 360 bn loans (Council of the European Union, 2020b).

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Table 1. The financial effort of pandemic response measures

Measures taken	Allocated amount	Percentage (own calculus)	Total amount
National measures taken using the general escape clause	€ 575 bn	13,69%	€ 4.2 trillion
SURE – EU financial assistance for short-time work schemes	€ 100 bn	2,38%	
Direct EU support, including the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative	€70 bn	1,66%	
National liquidity measures, including some schemes approved under temporary flexible EU State aid rules	€3 045 bn	72,5%	
European Subsidiarity Mechanism, pandemic crisis support for Member States	€240 bn	5,71%	
EIB – European Investment Bank Group financing for businesses	€200 bn		

Source: *The EU in 2020 (European Commission, 2021a) and author's own calculus*

The economic analysts spoke about the need to have a three phase economic and financial response to the pandemic. The Phase 1 measures are of immediate response measures meant to save companies and national economies (*Emergency liquidity*); Phase 2 is about *Solvency support* while Phase 3 is about economic recovery (*Rebooting the economy*) (the NextGen measures and the Resilience and recovery instruments, of interest for our paper). Phase 2 and Phase 3 are being guided by four key principles: Financial viability; Level playing field; EU societal goals and Share in future profits. As practical measures for Phase 2 we have the EU Equity Fund while for Phase 3 we have EU Recovery Fund (Anderson et al., 2020).

The NGEU is a provisional programme established in 2020 that is supposed to “provide the Union with the necessary means to address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the agreement the Commission will be able to borrow up to €750 billion on the markets” (European Council, 2020). The core of the NGEU and our subject of interest is the Recovery and Resilience Facility: €672.5 billion (Council of the European Union, 2021c).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Having in mind the complexity of the topic and the technical limitations of this document, in order to accomplish the intended results, the research methodology includes a mix of analysis instruments. First of all, we are going to have a desk research on the today state of play by analysing the official and technical documentation available. Secondly we try to have an empirical analysis of the case of Romania – how this process of drafting the NPRR took place, the main risks and opportunities etc. Thirdly we shall try to provide a series of answers and possible policy recommendation. The article will try to provide answers to questions such as: *What is NPRR and why does it matter? What is its impact on Romania's agriculture? What to expect in the future?* And also would try to identify ways of better using it for the welfare of the agricultural system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When we analyse the NextGenerationEU (NGEU) we need to have in mind first of all one thing – it is a temporary instrument, whose funds need to be contracted by the Member States until 2023 and then spent by the end of 2026. It is in this context that its centrepiece, the Recovery and Resilience Facility needs to be understood.

This Facility has a mixed component, made of loans and grants available for the Member States (a total of €723.8 billion, of which, loans €385.8 billion; of which, grants €338.0 billion), which aims “to mitigate the economic and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic” and also to “make European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions” (European Commission, 2021). For that purpose, each Member State must create its own Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) that would provide the roadmap for accessing the EU funds.

That makes the NRRP more like a business plan, which must follow some basic rules in order to be evaluated and adopted. Thus one of the first rule to be respected is that of the need for double

transitions: green and digital. Thus the recovery and resilience plan needs to include a minimum of 37% of expenditure for climate investments and reforms and a minimum of 20% of expenditure to foster the digital transition. The Commission will assess national plans against these targets (European Commission, 2021b).

It is also required to have some flagship areas that are essential for the green and digital transition and that can provide much needed jobs.

Table 2. Flagships area for investments and reforms

POWER UP	Clean technologies and renewables
RENOVATE	Energy efficiency of buildings
RECHARGE AND REFUEL	Sustainable transport and charging stations
CONNECT	Roll-out of rapid broadband services
MODERNISE	Digitalisation of public administration
SCALE-UP	Data cloud capacities and sustainable processors
RESKILL AND UPSKILL	Education and training to support digital skills

Source: Recovery and Resilience Facility (European Commission, 2021c)

The MFF 2021 – 2027, alongside NGEU, wants to jump start Europe for a speedy recovery and for a greener, digital and resilient European Union. The challenge is thus not only to come back to the pre-crisis moment but to advance toward a better future. „The investment we make through Next Generation EU will not only help kick-start the economies and support workers, companies and regions today. It will invest in the future and make us more resilient so that we emerge stronger and further forward than before. We will accelerate the twin green and digital transition and make sure that people are at the heart of the recovery” (European Commission, 2020d).

For that purpose, within the Recovery and Resilience Facility was established an allocation key that intends to see that the resources (grants component) are mainly allocated to the most affected States. For obtaining these amounts of money each Member State must submit a National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) that “shall set out the reform and investment agenda of the Member State concerned” (Regulation (EU) 2021/241).

The NRRP acts as a national investment and reform agenda established by the State, given its national particularities and they “should enable Member States to enhance their economic growth potential, job creation and economic and social resilience, and to meet the objectives of the green and digital transitions” (European Commission, 2021a).

Before going toward, the national level there are also a series of aspects to be taken into consideration when we speak about the NRRP and its measures. One such aspect is the fact that the double transition, green and digital, requires several aspects such as: state coordination, developed administrative capacity, a strong political consensus and other aspects of magnitude that require full mobilisation of the state and of the European Union. Also it emphasised strong differences regarding the resilience of various economic sectors as well between the Member States and between various regions inside the national states (Pilati, 2021). We may add the fact that impact of the pandemic was not uniform throughout the EU Member States.

The NRRP, from a theoretical point of view, intends to be a coherent package of public investments and reforms proposed on the basis of the Country-Specific Recommendations 2019-2020. Respecting the timeline and duration of the European mechanism that manages it, the proposed reforms and the public investment projects submitted must be carried out by 2026.

When discussing about the NRRP we need also to have in mind a series of risks facing its implementation. The specialty literature, for instance, has identified a series of key risks facing the implementation of the NextGenEU, risks such as: 1) the multiplicity of targets that can weaken the impact; 2) sustaining imbalances through subsidies; 3) starting the recovery programme late; 4) lack of an European dimension in the economy and finally 5) the capacity to manage a successful recovery plan (of most importance for Romania, especially). And it also proposed ways to mitigate the risks

and have a successful implementation: 1) the national reforms as a pillar to recovery; 2) EU reforms in order to improve the efficiency of the implementation and its speed; 3) useful labour market policies and finally 4) to enhance and improve the public private partnerships (Nunez Ferrer J, 2021)

For Romania the adoption of the NRRP was, in accordance with the official documents and statements, the result of a highly interactive process that started in January 2021. Were organized both public debates as well as a consultation process where the relevant stakeholders were invited to submit project proposals. Thus a total of 13 public debates were organized with approx. 3 900 persons registered and a total of 1 700 proposals were received out of which 1 470 were the result of public consultations (MIPE, 2021a).

Of particular interest for the field of agriculture were the: a) the 5 February debate 2021 on Agriculture; b) the 11 February 2021 debate on reducing the rural – urban gap and c) the 12 February debate on the topic of Green transition (MIPE, 2021b).

Concerning the Agriculture sector, in the debate the participants submitted specific proposals, such as:

- the establishment of a national network for the storage of agricultural and food products to be financed (in the context in which over 70% of the consumed products come from imports, because we have not developed the storage capacity),

- the set-up of centres for collecting and washing wool (MIPE, 2021c).

As regards the Green transition debate the participants submitted specific proposals, such as:

- achieving a forestry strategy and developing sustainable transport,
- supporting the buildings energy efficiency and
- solutions for economic recovery of the Danube Delta,
- revitalizing fish farms and
- restoring flood protection systems,
- solutions for conservation of species and habitats (MIPE, 2021d).

As for reducing the rural – urban gap although the measures have some indirect consequences on the agriculture sector: by improving the life standards in the rural area we can hope to improve the motivation for people to stay there and therefore reduce the pressure on the work force that affects the rural sector.

Some of the punctual demands were:

- interventions for the development of medical services in rural areas,
- investments in thermal rehabilitation,
- investments in improving public lighting (MIPE, 2021e).

The discussion went further on throughout this year (2021) as the line ministries and representative stakeholders envisaged their proposal on how the NRRP can influence for good the agricultural sector.

When we speak about the national debate we need also to briefly outline the European context as well as realise a short comparative outlook with comparable Member States. As early as 2020 think tanks such as Farm Europe envisaged a series of recommendations that needed to be taken into consideration by the European Union institutions as they forged the Recovery Plan. Such proposals were quite variate and among them we can count proposals such as:

- supplementary “resources should be committed between 2022 and 2024” for the rural development;
- providing “dual-purpose investments in farms. (...) reduce the environmental footprint (...) improve the economic situation of farmers.(...)” providing enough investments for “digital or smart farming tools and systems, and on production of bio methane from livestock effluents”;
- “(...) reinforce the co-financing rates for those investments” (Farm Europe, 2020).

Coming closer to home we can mention the case of our neighbouring country Bulgaria. As late as the beginning of September 2021 the Bulgarian plan was focusing “on funding for innovation in agriculture” (Nikolov, 2021)

They switched from the initial plans focused on the restoration of irrigation canals in the country due to the poor administrative track record of the state-owned company responsible for their maintenance.

Table 3. Proposals of the Bulgarian NRRP with impact on the agricultural sector

Amount	Destination	Further details
€275 million	fund to promote the technological and environmental transition of agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ projects for broadband internet in rural areas ➤ only registered agricultural producers will be able to apply for projects under the fund.
€14 million	build a system for direct communication between farmers and the administration, called “digitalisation of farm-to-table processes”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ this system will help control the use of plant protection products and fertilisers by digitising farmers’ diaries. ➤ this software will also control the use of antibiotics in animals’ breeding.

Source: Nikolov, 2021

As regards Romania’s case, the earlier 2020 draft versions of the NRRP were more generous with the agricultural aspects. Thus the November 2020 version of “PNRR contained a complex project for water management in agriculture (irrigation, drainage / drainage and anti-hail system), worth 6.5 billion euros, a project undertaken in the Government Program, together with the Network for storage, processing and distribution of Romanian products, another project that did not take place in PNRR.” (Oros, 2021).

Table 4. Investments and reforms in Romania’s NRRP with an impact on the agricultural sector

Type	Name	Short description and outcome
Investment 1	Afforestation and reforestation national campaign, including urban forests	(...) between fields with agricultural crops By 30 June 2026.
Reform 2	Reform of the management system of protected natural areas for the coherent and effective implementation of the European Biodiversity Strategy	(...) to operationalise the current framework for designating nature protected areas, in particular through the establishment of a mechanism to link legislation specific to the various sectors with an impact on biodiversity (...)
Investment 2	Development of infrastructure for manure and other compostable agricultural waste management	The investment shall primarily consist of the establishment of integrated communal systems for manure recovery, composting stations and compost management equipment for large farm communities, biogas systems and the purchase of equipment for the management of agricultural compost. 254 integrated systems for the collection of compostable agricultural waste - by 30 June 2026.
Investment 7	Transformation of agricultural high schools into professionalisation centres	The objective of this investment is to support 57 agricultural colleges, which shall be organised in 5 regional centres corresponding to the 5 agricultural universities established in Romania. Activities funded: - Modernise, renovate and extend school laboratories, workshops and IT laboratories, canteens, accommodation for students. - Purchase biological material, agricultural equipment and machinery for performing agricultural works. - Teachers training based on a specific agriculture-related curricula developed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Education. Each agricultural school shall be equipped with an IT laboratory, which shall include simulators and software necessary for theoretical and practical teaching/learning activities.
Investment 14	Equipping of practice workshops in VET schools	The objective of this investment is to equip school workshops within VET education units, including dual training units (and excluding those with an agricultural profile, which are subject of Investment 7). (...)

Source: Romania’s NRRP (MIPE, 2021f)

Yet the EU official rejected the irrigations projects as not being green enough and therefore the current NRRP has fewer direct mentions to agriculture as well as fewer relevant projects (Wall-Street, 2021).

Thus following the Plan submitted to the European Commission on 27.09.2021 we can mention the following measures related to the agricultural sector, as you can see in Table 4.

CONCLUSIONS

After the publication of Romania's NRRP at an academic debated organized in Bucharest on 28 September 2021, on the topic of the post-pandemic economic recovery a series of important ideas were mentioned that, in this author opinion, should be taken into consideration. First is that of the need to have a management expectation about NRRP as the citizens' expectations regarding it are very high, and in the case of lower performance in implementing the planned reforms there is a risk that the disappointment of citizens will be very high. That the way in which the investments are done is of outmost importance. The second main idea that is of importance is that Romania, in its capacity as a „very late absorber” is unlikely to reach an 100% contracting rate in the next couple of years and it may face the risk of a financing that emphasizes the formal aspects instead of the quality of investments (EIR, 2021). This is important for us because we already have had a high level of initial expectations for the agricultural sector, not materialized in the final form.

At the time of drafting of this article is premature to say that will the impact of NRRP on the Romanian agricultural sector would be. One first conclusion is that there is a significant difference between the initial perceptions and expectations and the end results of the approved NRRP. The reasons for this gap are rather unclear at the time being, the official and unofficial statements being rather ambiguous and speaking of not enough green projects (especially those in the irrigation sector).

We have also been witness to a public consultation process, early 2021 that proven to be quite a democratic one, as the all the data as well as the rules of participation were publicly available for all the relevant stakeholders. Yet there is still the problem of perception, as all too often the NRRP was either idealised, as a solution for all the national problems or criticised as being inefficient and too costly, due to its loan component.

Regarding Romania's agriculture, the best outcome that was obtained is represented, in this author opinion, by the investment in the educational sector. The results are still uncertain as the investments in education only see their output on medium and long term and they are difficult to quantify. Yet this investment seems to be the best we could get nowadays.

Also the investments in reforestation and agricultural waste management are also of interest as they help our agricultural system to become more sustainable on the long term and also greener. The green and digital transition would have a tremendous impact on Romania's agriculture in the long term and it all depends on our ability to manage this transition if the outcome would be a positive one or if we would be on the losing edge of this bet on the future.

In this author opinion the NRRP has a more significant indirect role in the support of the agricultural reform. Romania's agriculture is plagued by issues such as aging, reduce availability of the workforce, pollution problems, climate change challenges, low automatization and reduce level of the quality of life in the rural area that generates an exodus of the able population to the urban areas. If the NRRP succeeds in the medium term investments plan, an over ambitious one, we can say that the spill over effects would significantly influence the agricultural ecosystem and generate highly positive effects.

Another significant meta-risk is related to the question of governance, more precisely of the idea of good governance, which is essential for implementing the NRRP. In the absence of good governance any plan is subject to failure and we already have had a controversial process of generating the NRRP.

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