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From a Greenhorn to an Anticipatory Precursor

Austria's miscellaneous experiences with 15 years of ERDF Funding

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Abstract

With its accession to the European Union in 1995 Austria gained access to European structural funding. Thus, Austria's regional policy achieved important incentives, at the same time its conditions changed considerably - a system had to be taken over that was equally implemented for at that time 15, nowadays 27 member states. What kind of added value of these 15 years of structural funding for the regional policy in Austria can be assessed? And what kind of lessons learnt can help to formulate prospective propositions for 2013+?

During the last three funding periods manifold evaluations of single programs have been carried out showing predominantly encouraging results for regional development conditions as well as for the administrative implementation processes. Herewith Austria is currently very well positioned within Europe. But an integrated reflection on the added value of the European funding for the regional policy of Austria has been missing so far. The recent Lisbonising reform of the structural funds brought a new architecture of strategic concepts. In Austria these new requirements were taken as an incentive for a comprehensive and integrative reflection process to provide a sound basis for the national strategy and its follow-ups in 2007-2013. This process was primarily based on a quantitatively oriented pilot study conducted by the Austrian Institute of Economic Research as well as a specific analyses of evaluators from the areas of regional, labor market and rural development policies.

The reflections have firstly nurtured the critical assessment of limitations associated with the structural funds - still persisting in the current funding period - leading to uncertainties and restrictions with regard to innovation as well as to a large increase in administrative requirements. But they also offer a basis for constructive inputs for the discussion process for 2013+ aiming at a strengthening of the innovative and impulse-providing power of structural funds programs.

So the paper will discuss the added-value as well as shortcomings of 15 years of structural funding on Austria's regional policy. In addition it will draw the bow from an impact assessment to the ongoing discussion process for 2013+. On the basis of the Austrian experiences the paper will reveal two possible ways for 2013+ altering between simplification on one and a completely new governance role for the Commission on the other hand.

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1 A Greenhorn Gains Experience

With its accession to the European Union in 1995 Austria gained access to European Structural Funding. Thus, Austria's regional policy achieved important incentives, at the same time its conditions changed considerably - a sophisticated funding system had to be rapidly taken over that was equally implemented for at that time 15, nowadays 27 member states. Altogether almost 1.6 bn EUR of European Funding were reserved for diverse structural projects in Austria's regions (1995-2006), which had to be complemented by adequate national funds due to the requested additionality. For Austria as net contributor to the EU the absorption factor of the funding was of high priority, a high level of spending was asking for quick absorption, time remained a bottleneck (eg. Huber 2009).

But funding conditions have permanently changed: the current funding period 2007-2013 is Austria's third ERDF-period. With regard to the constant optimization endeavors of the structural funds (esp. Agenda 2000 and the reforms in the light of the Lisbon process) each period has brought new challenges for the Austrian regional policy. So today a strong innovation focus is required and the absorption-problem has given way to an allocation problem.

All in all the last 15 years allowed Austria to gain valuable and diverse experiences. Manifold evaluations of single programs in separate funding periods have been carried out on the national and the regional level to depict the positive impact of the ERDF funding in Austria (e.g. Hesina et al., 2004). Most of the evaluation work has shown interesting findings especially in relation to induced quantitative changes (employment data). In addition also the quantitative impact of the totaling ERDF-funding on the national level was caught comprehensively by a pilot analysis (Mayerhofer et al., 2008). It was able to identify encouraging results related to a catch-up process of employment and labor market in the funded regions compared to non-funded regions.

But what's about the policy dimension of regional development? Some evaluations were addressing the policy dimension within their specific angle. But an integrated qualitative reflection on the added value of the European funding for the regional policy of Austria was missing so far. What kind of added value of these 15 years of structural funding for the regional policy in Austria can be assessed? What kind of changes have been initiated and in which way the Austrian regional policy has been influenced? And what kind of lessons learnt can help to formulate prospective propositions for 2013+? In this regard a qualitative synopsis has been undertaken based on former specific evaluations and on a broad range of interviews with ERDF-experts in different fields. The paper is mainly based on this synopsis (Pech/Zumbusch 2009, Gruber 2009) as well as on the STRAT.AT Strategic Report for Austria pursuant to Article 29 Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006 (ÖROK 2009) and its corresponding workshops STRAT.AT+ organized by the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK).

2 15 Diverse Years of ERDF-Funding in Austria

Since Austria's late participation in its first ERDF-funding period 1995-1999, the ERDF has undergone some important changes. During the last funding periods more money has been spent for a broader range of innovation related measures culminating in a paradigm shift in the current funding period 2007-2013: At present the objectives of cohesion and reduction of disparities are mainly transferred to the European level, the regional programs (especially outside the convergence-regions) are guided by a clear orientation on growth and strengths (e.g. Bachtler 2006, Gruber/Zumbusch 2007).

Concurrently raises of the funding budget, formal reforms and the pursuit of more consistency and efficiency have shaped the development of the ERDF over the last 15 years. The reforms of the agenda

2000 and those in the light of the Lisbon process marked crucial milestones on the way to a greater concentration with regard to contents (innovation, R&D) as well as money.

In the way of these changes in the funding regime Austrian programs cofinanced by the ERDF were reduced from three spatial objectives programs, seven Community initiatives and additional Art. 10-ERDF measures in 1995-1999 to currently three objectives. As stable constancies during all these changes going on have only remained the specific position of the Austrian region "Burgenland" as a structural weak region (objective 1 in 1995-1999 and 2000-2006, convergence region since 2007), the broad funding of regions in all nine Austrian Länder as well as the emphasized status of territorial co-operation.

<i>Agenda 2000</i>	<i>„Lisbon“</i>	
1995 - 1999	2000 - 2006	2007 - 2013
reduction of regional disparities in the EU (cohesion)		
sustainable economic development, high competitiveness, innovation capacities, high employment, protection of the environment and gender mainstreaming		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Obj-1, Obj-2, Obj-5b ▪ Community initiatives: Interreg II, Leader II, Urban, KMU, Resider II, Rechar II, Retex II ▪ Art. 10-EFRE: RIS, RISI 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Obj-1 and Obj-2 ▪ Community initiatives: Interreg III, Urban II ▪ Innovative Actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Convergence ▪ Regional Competitiveness and Employment ▪ European Territorial Cooperation
450 Mio. EUR ERDF	1.080 Mio. EUR ERDF	936 Mio. € EFRE-Mittel

Figure 1: 15 Years of ERDF Funding in Austria

Source: Pech/Zumbusch 2009.

During the past funding periods the operational programs of the different objectives in Austria have showed a strong focus on...

- modernization, structural improvements and enlargement of capacities in commerce and industry,
- R&D funding for single companies,
- formation (and location) of new companies;
- technological infrastructure (e.g. technology centers etc.);
- investments in touristic enterprises as well as infrastructure for tourism.

Thus, so far material investments have dominated the Austrian ERDF-interventions . In consequence this kind of investment was also responsible for 80 % of new employment in the funding periods 1995-2006 (Gruber/Zumbusch, 2008).

In addition many initiatives have been undertaken in the field of endogenous development, as they have already constituted an important element of Austria's regional policy in the years before EU-accession. With help of the ERDF regional initiatives in Austria have been broadened, strategy finding processes as well as discussions about regional approaches have been initiated, intermediary institutions for regional management have been established in almost all Austrian regions, but also other kinds of regional action groups or cultural activities have been supported.

Besides, also the Community-initiatives have brought some specific and for Austria quite new thematic additions. Especially INTERREG for territorial cooperation as well as URBAN for issues of urban development have been of great importance for Austria. Furthermore, even with only small resources the innovative actions took over a significant function as they rendered risky and innovative approaches possible. With the recent reforms of the structural funds for the current period URBAN and the innovative actions have been integrated into the three objectives. On the other hand territorial co-

operation has been upgraded to a self-contained objective and emphasized as important task of the Austrian regional policy.

ERDF-resources (in €)	1995-99	2000-2006	2007-2013
Objective-1 Burgenland / Convergence	107.640.000	181.519.085	125.026.964
Objective 2 (incl. Phasing-out) / RCE	70.236.576	705.603.606	555.039.057
Objective 5b (K, NÖ, OÖ, S, ST, T)	174.896.450	-	-
Innovative Actions	-	25.100.000	-
INTERREG II-A / III-A / ETZ IV-A*	50.542.239	249.218.434	223.590.000
INTERREG III B*	-	57.204.518	33.410.000
INTERREG II-C/ III-C / IV-C	20.906.000	78.736.092	-
URBAN / URBAN II (Wien, Graz)	9.728.950	8.526.975	-
Austria SME	7.603.570	-	-
RETEX II	1.912.088	-	-
RESIDER II	4.392.796	-	-
RECHAR II	1.437.190	-	-
Subtotal	449.295.859	1.305.908.710	937.066.021
Total ERDF 1995-2013			2.692.270.590

Figure 2: ERDF-programs and their resources in Austria (1995-99, 2000-2006, 2007-2013)

*... exclusively Austrian share

Source: ÖROK 2009; Pech/Zumbusch, 2009.

So, currently ERDF-funding in Austria is carried out in the frame of three objectives (see table 1). About 125 mio ERDF-funding for the convergence-objective in Burgenland (complemented by 52 mio ESF-funding), about 555 mio ERDF-funding for the objective "regional competitiveness and employment" (complemented by 472 mio ESF-funding for the employment part) as well as 257 mio ERDF-funding for territorial cooperation are actually running in projects with regional impact.

3 Experiences of the last 2 ERDF-funding periods 1995-2006

3.1 Regional Policy Gained Importance

The ERDF is the only European fund with an explicitly regional focus. Thus, in the 15 years of ERDF-funding in Austria it has attracted notice to the Austrian regions. Questions of regional development have increasingly been found on the policy agenda of the regional and federal government. But also inside the regions ample expectations were roused, whose fulfillments though were predominantly reliant on proactive initiatives of the regions themselves.

3.1.1 Valorization of Regional Policy and Regional Development in Austria

The ERDF-funding has brought a considerable valorization of regional policy and regional development in Austria. Regional policy has achieved a more articulated profile and gained attention on the federal level as well as on the level of the Austrian Länder. The ERDF, its funding regime and its resources have turned out as "enabling-effect", which reduced resistances and indifferences against regional approaches and made widespread effects possible. The two main expectations from before the

EU-accession as there were (i) more money and therewith more importance for regional policy as well as (ii) a better achievement of objectives due to more resources seemed to rapidly fulfill (Schremmer/Steiner 2003). The required additionality of the ERDF-funding caused a broad relocation of political priorities in favor of regional aspects, in consequence available financial resources for regional policy improved significantly. With this regard a multitude of different actors and institutions discovered a strong regional interest (Fassbender/ Gruber 2004). Much of this first euphoria calmed down quite fast in the coming years and the community of regional policy reconcentrated. Nevertheless a strengthened regional orientation of public actions persisted. The level of activities in regional development was enduringly raised.

Before the EU-accession the Austrian regional policy ("Austrian Policy of endogenous renewal") was strongly orientated to an activation of existing regional strengths and potentials. Existent resources and capacities of the regions were very much in the foreground (Gerhardter/ Gruber 2001). The ERDF-funding brought a certain relocation to a regional policy that was strongly orientated on regional problems especially on (small-scale) problematic regions as well as characterized by a stronger top-down approach (Huber 2007). But inside the ERDF-regime this orientation was gradually abandoned during the last funding periods and (re-)developed to a more large-scale (since 2007 even without the delimitations of small eligible regions) and potential orientated approach. Therewith the Austrian regional policy is in principle able to revert to its basic understanding of regional development - but now even in coalition with the ERDF that means with more funding, and a broader political, and public perception. Though, with regard to the driving forces in global competition the current approach of the European Commission placed emphasis on a new quality of innovation, on a more technology driven dimension of innovation. In this way the Commission is heading to a direction which is in this specification also new for the Austrian regional policy.

3.1.2 Capacity building and decentralized activation structures

By the 15 years of ERDF funding the Austrian regions have got important impetus for strengthening their capacity building. Strategy based approaches have been enforced and the density as well as diversity of regional projects has been enlarged. According to the guiding principles of 'endogenous renewal' a large number of initiatives had been undertaken already before the EU-accession, especially in the focus-regions of the Austrian endogenous regional policy (regions with industrial restructuring and rural areas) (Gerhardter/Gruber 2001:21). These developments have considerably been enlarged since 1995. So especially in structural weak regions (defined as eligible regions) the ERDF funding has made possible the implementation of more projects or a greater support to the undertaken projects. Initiatives which had before been implemented quite scattered, gained volume and professionalism. Density as well as diversity of regional initiatives have raised.

Herewith Austrian regions have showed a growing self-confidence, tried to position and define themselves clearly. These endeavors highlighted the strong need for better capacities in project and strategic management. At the same time also the ERDF-funding regime with its requirement for program driven and integrative approaches strongly required regional capacity building. The embeddedness of regional initiatives in longer lasting strategies as well as systematic approaches (multilevel partnerships, integration of regional stakeholder, etc.) induced considerably policy innovations, and improved the policy productivity.

Qualitative observations led to the conclusion that development conditions of the regions have also improved due to the creation of regional intermediate bodies and a series of decentralized activation and support structures with ERDF-funding. These institutions like regional managements, regional

impulse centers, start-up centers or technology centers were understood as instruments to mobilize endogenous potentials.

Especially the regional managements have developed to an important regional contact point and to coordinative institutions as they are meanwhile to be found in almost all Austrian regions. They act as regional development agencies, which are responsible for the first consulting work, for project development, for the networking of regional actors as well as for the management of regional development (Draxl et al., 2004). They are bundling important "territorial" competencies. In general, they are bottom-up driven and dependent on local initiatives. But currently a stronger top-down tendency can be observed with regard to organizational aspects and the projects undertaken, showing a stronger program driven approach better corresponding to thematic orientations defined by the Länder. Herewith the regional managements have changed from intermediary institutions in the regions to intermediaries between the Länder and the local level. Though, a clear formal position of the regional managements in the Austrian multilevel governance system is still missing. Till now the success of regional managements is strongly dependant on the specific regional manager, his capabilities and his capacities. Especially the cooperation with other decentralized institutions as well as necessary information flows are not fully standardized. The degree of ERDF-funding for regional managements in Austria decreased significantly in the current funding period.

So all in all a dense net of regional organizations has been established. Herewith possibilities for targeted multilevel governance have been improved, and the adaptability of the regions to national and international developments and programs has been increased. At the same time questions of responsibilities or of co-operations have been kept unanswered, and the requirements for meta-coordination and clarification of functions have strongly increased. Certainly it is difficult to differentiate between general developments in regional economy and such developments causally determined by the Austrian ERDF-funding. On one hand the impact of the ERDF must not be overestimated, on the other hand it is beyond controversy that its funding has considerably fastened, enhanced and broadened regional development initiatives. So the ERDF has exerted an important acceleration effect on regional policy issues in Austria.

3.2 Innovation versus Mainstream for Regional Policy Objectives

By "agenda setting" the ERDF has significantly been influencing the focus of the Austrian regional policy. Thus, most of the issues were not completely new on the agenda. The few really new issues included issues of general sociopolitical relevance, which were pinned by the ERDF as horizontal tasks for regional policy (gender mainstreaming, environmental protection), as well as the two issues territorial cooperation and urban problems. But for a large part the ERDF picked up emergent, locally already tested approaches, made them (more) assertive and asserted their breakthrough in the Austrian regional policy. Herewith the ERDF became the medium to disseminate issues by its funding and to anchor them as integral part of the regional policy whereas really innovative approaches had difficulties to get implemented in the frame of the ERDF-programs.

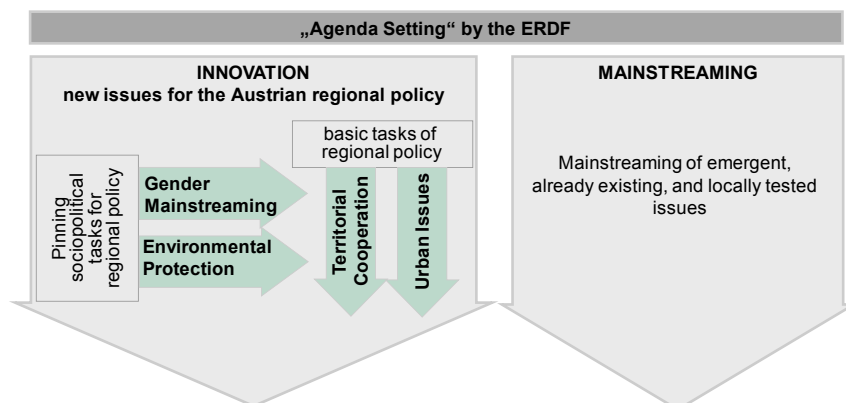


Figure 3: ERDF Agenda Setting for the Austrian Regional Policy

Source: Pech/Zumbusch 2009.

3.2.1 New Issues for the Austrian Regional Policy

The ERDF has defined sociopolitically interesting issues as horizontal objectives (gender mainstreaming and environmental protection) and set them on the regional policy agenda. Thereby awareness, sensitivity, and attentiveness for these matters has been raised in Austria. Their implementation however has been unequally successful.

Gender Mainstreaming has been integrated in all Austrian ERDF-programs by explicit commitments at program level. At project level on the contrary only few initiatives can be found. At the operative level the issue is still not persistently anchored (Hesina et al. 2004). ERDF-funding issues are mainly addressing investive and infrastructural areas. A consequent implementation of gender mainstreaming therefore would have asked for a substantial change in the logic of the funding regime. As a minimal approach boni have been induced for the qualitative consideration of specific systemic components of gender mainstreaming. A consistent development of such complex rating systems and an adequate incentive scheme has not been taken place so far. In addition the Austrian focus on the absorption of ERDF-funding entailed in case of doubt a neglect of the horizontal objectives (Gindl et al., 2004). And often small solutions have been arranged (especially checklists etc.) which missed the root of the matter.

On the contrary the **protection of the environment** is meanwhile well considered in the Austrian regional policy. The ERDF programs of the last two funding periods showed (i) globally formulated avowals of the relevance of an intact environment (ii) specific funding schemes for projects as well as (iii) in part also explicit environmental measures. Though, a consistent integration of environmental aspects at the project level has not been carried out so far, correspondingly there are no persistent selection criteria for projects to be found (Hesina 2003:3). But the broad set of environmental laws at the national as well as the European level combined with important financial incentives e.g. by the ERDF managed to regulate the issue much more binding than in the field of gender mainstreaming. So today environmental protection is well integrated in the Austrian regional policy - even in an international comparison.

By the **INTERREG programs** the cooperation range of the Austrian regions was significantly enlarged. A huge number of cross-border, transnational as well as interregional co-operations has been initiated. For Austria this funding approach was completely new. Especially INTERREG-A has been of great importance for the small Austria with its long borders. During the last funding periods Austria was involved in seven different INTERREG A programs which brought more than 290 mio EUR of ERDF-funding in the Austria border regions for more than 3.000 different projects. Though, in general

most of the time INTERREG funded projects showed only loosely coupled and separately implemented project parts. Projects embedded in conjoint long lasting strategies are still missing especially in the cross-border regions at the former external EU-frontiers. However, important learning was induced: decision makers in the Austrian regional policy have learnt to cross borders in thinking and acting. A common understanding was enforced and a basis for international thinking was provided. INTERREG projects have helped to better understand the functioning of the different administrations, their processes and procedures. Especially the establishment of cross border organizational structures for programming and implementing the INTERREG-funding, the coordination of procedures as well as the definition of common standards and values have enforced policy learning.

Though, nowadays the INTERREG programs are acting in an environment shaped by progressive cooperation and integration. In particular border regions develop to common areas of living, working and leisure. In the past INTERREG-funding played an important role in inducing or accelerating cross border cooperations. In the future INTERREG will have to fill a specific niche in this field.

Also the issue of **R&D** got more integrated in the policies of the Austrian regions by the ERDF-funding. At the national level Austria had already been quite active before the EU-accession. But with the help of more funding the R&D issues got also more attention and became more assertive at the regional level and its policy approaches. According to the Lisbon objectives the ERDF-Focus on R&D in the Austrian programs hits its peak in the current funding period. Nevertheless, the ERDF-programs have never completely reflected the Austrian R&D field. Especially in the first funding period they were in strong contrast to new and innovative approaches developed by the federal government and regional funding agencies in Austria (Gruber 1999:46). So by international comparison the Austrian ERDF-programs showed a significant high proportion of R&D expenditures but with a strong traditional orientation regarding the contents and instruments applied. In the focus were mainly grants and credits for single companies and their research projects, supports of corresponding infrastructures (mainly material and only few immaterial soft measures) as well as consulting services.

Urban issues had been largely neglected by the Austrian regional policy before the EU-accession due to in international comparison well manageable problems and a predominantly rural structure. In the frame of URBAN and URBAN II the ERDF cofinanced projects for the economic and social reactivation of urban districts in Vienna and Graz with 18,3 Mio EUR. Despite or due to their quite few resources the programs enable experimenting with innovative approaches. Herewith important stimuli were induced, especially policy learning was facilitated with regard to a comprehensive project management and cooperation. But these effects remained in most cases quite local. Stimuli in the sense of a new policy for urban areas in Austria have so far not been induced.

3.2.2 Innovative Approaches in the ERDF cofinanced regional policy

With regard to the absorption problem and aiming at a high budget depletion the Austrian ERDF-funding were dominated by more traditional approaches. A strong tendency to already tested measures, to demand-driven interventions as well as to capital investment subsidies could be found in both funding periods of the past (e.g. Gruber et al. 2003, Behrendt et al. 2003). They tried to reach their specific objectives and an optimal binding of the resources in a consistent and straight-lined way. So in the end the different Austrian programs even showed strong analogies without some regional specifics (Gruber 1999, Gruber/Zumbusch 2008). So especially the big programs of the objectives 1 and 2 represented (only) good Austrian mainstream.

But the proportion of innovative approaches has progressively raised over the last funding periods - albeit more in the programming than in the implementation. The Commission tried to push policy innovations amongst others by soft measures. So a few innovative approaches have been tested and in-

tegrated in the programs for 2007-2013. Thus, the current funding period will probably show a higher innovation degree as its predecessors. A more radical change to a strong innovation orientation could not be reached due to the participative character of the Austrian programming, the broad range of involved institutions and therefore a certain inertia.

In general one could attest an evasion of more innovative approaches to smaller ERDF-(pilot)programs on one hand and to national initiatives without EU-confinancing on the other hand. Some of the ERDF pilot-programs (Art. 10 ERDF, RIS, RISI, innovative actions) are assessed as quite innovative. Although they correspond to the same funding regime like the objectives programs, they were benefitting from a programming "light". Also other factors, especially that their funding was restricted on only two years, that they did not have to act inside the narrow areas of the small eligible regions, and that their resources were quite small, were certainly of advantage. But the pilot-programs had also a different philosophy - so that different types of projects, a different investment in the development of projects, and less political obligation for compensations were possible. Especially the Innovative Actions of the Commission served deliberately as experimental laboratory for many Austrian regions and provided space for risks. The intention of the Innovative Action was, that the experiences of the experiments can be generalized and integrated into the objectives programs (European Commission 2006a). So in the current funding period the funding scheme 'Innovative Actions' does not exist any longer.

3.3 Innovation versus Mainstream concerning the Regional Policy Cycle

The European structural policy and its funding regimes (esp. ERDF) constitute a "policy melting pot" as it is typical for regional policy in general. After all, almost any intervention has in a way a kind of regional impact. As a consequence decision-makers of different policy fields try to claim the ERDF for their specific objectives (environment, gender, information society, R&D, SME etc.). Thereby the ERDF becomes a prime example for an overload of funding programs (Tarschys 2003).

In the ERDF no clear hierarchy of objectives seems to exist. All objectives meld together to the range of structural funding objectives fixed in the EU treaties and are communicated equally. Trade-offs between the different objectives are not addressed (e.g. the required short-term effects on employment and a high innovation degree of programs), so that in the programming and implementation phase broad discussions are opened. In addition some implicit expectations are not consistently and explicitly defined (e.g. a high innovation degree of the programs, the visibility of the European investments or the integration of the different structural funds without harmonizing the specific logics). As a consequence the ERDF funding gives home to a broad range of expectations and objectives which partially generate intrinsic contradictions and areas of conflicts. Thus, the actors involved are struggling in an intricate situation, in which they have to undertake adequate initiatives and to find pragmatic ways to keep the two basic objectives of the ERDF convergence and cohesion in mind. In the basic program-documents of the ERDF also policy innovations are required. The administrative regime is hindering these requirements. Complex and difficult administrative conditions have so far been limiting policy innovation and enforcing risk-averse performance of responsible funding agencies.

3.3.1 Administrative Challenges

The large ERDF programs of the past funding periods have kept the intrinsic danger of structural preservation and herewith had not given that much place for policy learning and policy experimentation as the Commission was asking for. In consequence the innovation degree remained modest especially

in comparison to other national - not EU cofinanced - programs. The reasons are mainly to be found in the administrative area.

- The ERDF-resources had to be bound and spend in a certain time (further enforced by the n+2 rule). well known measures with a high absorption capacity were necessary.
- By its administrative conditions ERDF-funding took up a significantly greater effort for all funding agencies involved. Concerning investment-projects with ERDF-cofinancing the additional workload was estimated to approximately 20% compared with not ERDF-cofinanced projects. Concerning projects with personnel expenditures the additional effort was even higher.
- The definition of small eligible regions without urban centers and their potentials constituted a major limiting factor. Critical masses were difficult to reach, projects for developing clusters of for technology transfer were not reasonable in that kind of isolated way.
- Ambiguities and space for interpretations in the funding regime entailed uncertainties.

So many reasons were to be found that induced strategic behavior towards projects with facile administration. Though, in general actors of the Austrian regional policy have learnt quite a lot about the correct handling of the ERDF regime.

3.3.2 Efficiency in Programming and Implementing ERDF-funding

The federal system of Austria brings about a fragmentation of the economic and regional communities being reflected by an equally fragmented funding scene. At the beginning of structural funding in Austria the strategic decision had been taken that ERDF-funding would mainly be implemented by already established organizations with broad experiences in funding as well as by their known programs and their well positioned instruments. In addition, a multitude of funding agencies was involved to assure the depletion of the funding resources. As a consequence all in all a large number of different institutions and organization was involved in the ERDF implementation processes in Austria. And this number decreased only marginally over the last two funding periods.

At the same time this way of implementing the ERDF-funding assured (i) an integrated and efficient implementation from the first day on, (ii) a good budget-depletion and (iii) a broad learning of the administrative sector. With these advantages Austria was well positioned in the international comparison. However, in retrospect this efficiency shows also some ambivalence.

- The absorption of ERDF-funding was assured by a limited number of (traditional) measures (investment support for single companies).
- By using the existing organizations the window of opportunity for a reform of the Austria funding system (bundling of the fragmented funding-agencies) was missed.
- The integration of ERDF-funding in the established Austrian funding system und the additional use of the ERDF-resources caused a suboptimal visibility of the ERDF-resources.
- The large number of involved institutions and organizations in the ERDF-implementation is responsible for a certain inertia concerning the broad ERDF-portfolio in Austria, by defending their tenures strategic changes and concentrations are impeded.
- By involving such a large number of institutions also the effort for communication and coordination was increased. So the already high administrative work load for the program coordinators in the regions was further enlarged by home-made efforts due to the large number of involved (but not always cooperative) institutions (Huber 1999).

- All institutions, even these with only small ERDF-contributions had to deal with the complex structures and procedures of the ERDF regime. So for many institutions the positive effect of an ERDF-involvement (more budget) was foiled by a higher work load and administrative efforts.

3.3.3 Policy Learning

However the ERDF-funding induced important learning processes for the Austrian regional policy. This was the case even though or maybe also because the former flexible regional policy (time, scale and contents) of Austria dominated by informal coordination was confronted with the rigid and bureaucratic planning system of the Union (Huber 2007). For the fragmented funding system in Austria the ERDF regime was of great advantage especially in the beginning. It induced a structuring of the Austrian regional policy and a harmonization of its funding. With regard to the implementation of funding a certain standardization and professionalizing was stimulated (Gruber et al. 2004).

Regional policy performance was improved on the national but also at the regional level, as regional policy passed on to a more program-driven, integrative development approach with systematic participation of relevant stakeholders and clearly defined procedures. Initiatives became more demand driven and strategic. Long-term programs with corresponding funding allocation enhanced the consistency and reliability - especially in comparison to the former annual funding schemes of the Austrian federal government. At the same time the long-term orientated programs opened the possibilities for more strategy driven approaches and durable initiatives. Also the definition of regional specifics and priorities was enforced. Objectives as well as initiatives in regional policy were better communicated.

In the first funding period policy learning was dominated by the challenges of changes by taking over the ERDF system. In the second funding period learning was more constructive and based on a reflected and intentional handling of the ERDF requirements as well as their transference on the Austrian system. A greater sovereignty and a greater assertiveness with regard to the ERDF regime can also be judged as important learning effects.

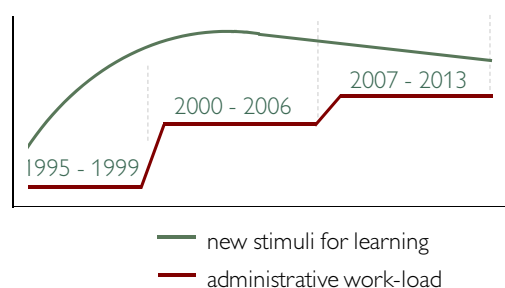


Figure 4: New stimuli for learning versus administrative efforts by the ERDF funding

Source: Pech/Zumbusch 2009.

A high proportion of learning concerned the technical, administrative parts of the funding (Gruber et al. 2004). These learning effects can be considered as largely exploited, as the funding system is adapted and professionalized. Herewith it tends to get more difficult for the ERDF to continuously yield new learning stimuli for the Austrian regional policy.

3.3.4 Improved coordination horizontally and vertically

In the years of ERDF funding regional actors also learnt a lot of each other. The large number of institutions and issues involved in the programming made a broad process necessary. Austria already had had a long tradition at a informal level of cooperation, the relevant stakeholders had known each other (Huber 2006). Due to the ERDF-requirements the communication had to intensify and had to consider formal standards. Horizontal as well as vertical or cross border coordination processes were necessary asking at the same time also for bridging different policy fields. So with the help of the ERDF the communication in Austria between administration and funding agencies, between the federal level and the *Länder* improved significantly especially between those units involved in the operational implementation of the ERDF programs (Hesina et al. 2002). Though, in this context it has also to be taken into account that the efforts for communication and coordination increased considerably. In the sense of the Austrian tradition the formally required ERDF communication needs were embedded in a dense net of informal information exchange. These forums were for a long time dominated by technical administrative issues, strategic discussions and orientation were discussed only infrequently (InTe-Reg 1998)..

3.3.5 Evaluation and Monitoring Culture for the Austrian Regional Policy

Even before the EU accession evaluations were quite common in Austria. Though, in the field of regional policy evaluations had not been formally required nor an integral element of the policy cycle (Huber 2006). But with regard to the upcoming evaluation criteria of the ERDF preparatory initiatives to integrate evaluation into the Austrian regional policy had been undertaken (Holzinger 2001). So the ERDF induced already in advance important stimuli for intensifying evaluating activities.

In the first funding period the European concept of program evaluation dominated the Austrian evaluation activities with its three phases ex-ante, interim and ex-post. Formal procedures had to be considered and adopted (Huber 2006). Nevertheless, evaluation was seen as a dynamic instrument for learning and a common evaluation culture for the Austrian regional policy was desired. Thus over the past two funding periods an intensive discussion around the evaluation issue took place - especially at the national level. In this context process-orientated ongoing evaluation approaches attracted strong interest, also in reaction to the narrow and unilateral requirements of the Commission. Institutional arrangements followed: in the first funding period the federal chancellery established "Checkpoint EVA" as coordinative platform for all the different evaluations going on in the Austrian regional policy (Holzinger 2001). In the second funding period one step further to a greater professionalization in evaluation was set: firstly with the innovative coordination and working platform ("KAP-EVA") and secondly with ongoing evaluations instead of punctual interim evaluations. These ongoing evaluations which accompany the delivery process over the whole period and assess the implementing process turned out to be a helpful instrument especially for working on some issues in more detail and for disposing continuously of actual information about the implementation and the effects of the programs. The corresponding need for coordination, cooperation and discussion was rendered possible by the KAP-EVA platform (Strohmeier/ Holzinger 2006).

With this kind of accompanying evaluation Austria's regional policy emancipated from evaluation criteria of the Commission and placed an important innovation. While the Commission was quite concerned about it in the beginnings, this skepticism decreased and the approach was even integrated in the programming documents for the current funding period.

In addition, the ERDF also induced a monitoring culture for the Austrian regional policy. Since 1995 Austria succeeded to establish in a short time substantial and in many aspects well defined monitoring systems. The ERDF programs brought the essential stimulus for the first implementation of an ob-

ligatory and comprehensive monitoring system for Austrian regional funding, which had an important impact on the professionalization of program implementation (Hesina et al. 2004).

3.4 Concluding remarks to the ERDF-funding in the past funding periods

The ERDF-funding has since 1995 significantly increased the importance of regional policy and regional development. By means of more resources indifference or even resistances have been reduced and political attentiveness increased. Of the same significant importance was the policy and administrative learning induced by the ERDF-funding, which exceeded by far purely technical issues. Professionalization and standardization were the consequence. Capacity building in the sense of program-driven, integrative and strategic development processes was induced. An evaluation and monitoring culture was developed. In addition new issues were set on the regional policy agenda and made more assertive.

In particular, the increased valorization of the Austrian regional policy and its better endowment made it possible, to implement tested approaches nation-wide and to affect herewith the (Austrian) mainstream. After all, the ERDF regime constitutes also a mirror of current flows and discussions in regional policy and it transports common understandings of policy approaches. Thus, the ERDF succeeded to broaden innovative but so far isolated and only locally implemented initiatives and to integrate these approaches as fix elements into the Austrian regional policy. Nevertheless the ERDF-funding took place in an area of conflict between conservation of traditional structures on one hand and pressure to a greater innovation-degree on the other hand.

As a consequence of this area of conflict the Austrian ERDF programs tried to manage the balancing act between requirements and feasibility in the frame of the rigid funding-conditions. Altogether the ERDF programs did not correspond to the innovation degree in federal policies without EU cofinancing. In particular this holds true for the regional research-, technology- and innovation-policy. So the ERDF programs did not induce many innovations themselves, but they remained open for innovations to pick them up and help them getting accepted. However, the programs tried successfully to keep - in the framework of the complex, and bureaucratic funding regime - a certain innovation-degree by funding challenging but also (in administrative terms) manageable projects.

4 Reflections on the Current ERDF-Funding Period in Austria

The intended Lisbonising of the European structural funds asked for a reform of the funds. For the funding period 2007-2013 three objectives were defined, the Community initiatives were suspended, urban development and territorial cooperation were integrated in the three objectives, and the implementation system was adapted. The focus of the reforms was on (i) the necessity of a stronger concentration of allocation on the Lisbon issues and herewith on R&D and innovation, on (ii) the specification of strategic multilevel-governance processes as well as on (iii) the abolishment of the small delimitations of eligible regions. For the years 2007-2013 all in all 936 mio. EUR of ERDF resources will go into 21 different ERDF programs in Austria ("convergence"-program in the Burgenland, 8 regional "competitiveness" programs, 12 cross border and transnational programs).

National Strategic Reference Framework were defined for linking the European cohesion guidelines on one hand and the regional as well as national implementation programs on the other hand. This National Strategic Reference Framework, in Austria the so called STRAT.AT, constitutes a coordinative and connective element for all the Austrian programs, clearly focused on the required innovation.

In the year 2009 this STRAT.AT plan was revised and adapted. Its implementation is strategically accompanied in the framework of regular STRAT.ATplus Workshops to clarify together certain issues in more detail.

Due to the limited ERDF-resources on one hand and to the abolishment of the delimitations of small eligible regions on the other hand the new funding period brought a significant change to the Austrian regional policy: from an absorption problem to an allocation problem. Especially in the field of R&D and innovation the competition will increase as the urban centers and herewith more potential addressees can henceforth be integrated into the initiatives. In contrast, in the field of administration only few aspects will change in the coming years. The increase in flexibility at the program-level was counteracted by additional administrative rules (partially caused by factors within Austria itself). This results in an increasingly negative attitude towards EU funds, and risk-averse funding behavior. Adequate reforms are still outstanding.

With regard to the two objectives "regional competitiveness" and "convergence-phasing out" the Austrian programs have picked up the new paradigm of an innovation focused regional policy and show one of the strongest Lisbon orientations in international comparison. First implementation data confirms this alignment. In total 91 % of the projected resources of the Structural Funds are indicatively assigned to areas which contribute directly to the Lisbon objectives („Lisbon-Earmarking“). In comparison, the regional competitiveness-programs of the EU-15 show an average proportion of 81 %. Even in the group of the so called European "Innovation-leaders" (Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany, UK) (EIS 2008) the proportion of Lisbon-earmarked funding is at an average only at 85%. and herewith below the Austrian one. Yet, in the framework of the Lisbon objectives the Austrian ERDF-programs concentrate very much on RTDI-related interventions especially on innovative investments in companies and less on highly innovative R&D projects. The "European Territorial Cooperation" programs with Austrian participation show a broader orientation. Their activities are also focused on energy, transport and tourism, in addition to innovation. In the meantime, all 12 ETC-programs with Austrian participation were off to a successful start, despite new and significant administrative challenges, such as joint program implementation and the lead partner principle.

So altogether especially the following points turned out to be critical for the implementation phase of the Austrian ERDF programs in 2007-2013:

- the closure of the 2000–2006 period allowed projects to be approved until 2008. Hence de facto two program generations were running in parallel during the 2007–2008 time period.
- the administrative framework of the structural funds and the timely and resource-appropriate commitment of capacities for their delivery;
- the effects of the financial and economic crisis, in particular for company-related funding.

Considering the delays which are intrinsic to the structural funding system, the implementation of the current ERDF-programs in Austria had a good start. Austria's programs were among the first which were approved by the Commission and which were able to set the administrative framework conditions for implementation purposes very early on.

5 Austria's Experiences for the Ongoing Discussions for 2014+

The ERDF funding in Austria has induced important learning stimuli for the Austrian regional policy. But many of these stimuli have to be considered as already exploited. Also the broad integration of diverse funding agencies can no longer bring about an added value. Thus, in the coming years questions will raise how to organize and implement ERDF-funding in Austria to assure a continuous bene-

fit from important ERDF-impacts. From an Austrian perspective the ERDF will have to take a clear position with respect to the Austrian regional policy. There is a broad range of possibilities how this position could look like: so the ERDF could concentrate on a few flagship-initiatives, but it could also constitute to a pure financing instrument for regional strategies or focusing exclusively on experimenting and innovative approaches.

An examination of the qualitative impacts of ERDF funding in Austria (Gruber, 2009) shows, among other things, the restrictions associated with the structural funds, which result in great uncertainties and limitations with regard to the level of innovation, as well as a large increase in management requirements. While a part of this issue may be "home-made", the principal problem is a resulting out of the entire EU regulative. The reforms for the period 2007–2013 resulted in simplifications for some areas, including an increased strategic orientation with respect to programming, and the removal of small-micro-zoning. However, these effects were also accompanied by significantly higher requirements, particularly with regard to the management and control system, which caused extremely high preparation and maintenance requirements as well as time delays. In consequence, the relationship between planning, flexibility in implementation along with the required controls no longer seems to be at equilibrium. This is resulting in an increasingly negative attitude towards EU funds, and risk-averse funding behavior.

Initiatives designed to achieve "simplification" which have been introduced at the EU level are generally welcomed. However, it must also be noted that these (i) create a number of new questions without providing any ascertainment of the same, (ii) are not far-reaching enough, and (iii) above all, are too late. They are now used during a phase in which the implementation processes have already been defined (ÖROK 2009). Moreover, further detailed provisions and an integration into the funding system are required to achieve an implementation of "simplification" initiatives within Austria, which in turn requires new adjustments, for example as part of management and control systems etc. (Bauer-Wolf et al., 2009).

What do all these experiences mean to the discussion on the future design of EU structural policy? Austria's experience regarding ERDF funding resulted in a mainly agreed-upon view that funding initiatives in regional policy programs must be limited to a "good Austrian mainstream", within existing national and EU general conditions.

5.1 European level: Continuity and purification

A new balance between flexibility in implementation and the required controls must be established. This refers to a reduction in the number of different control levels, associated verification methods as well as a reduction in the number and density of documentation to a reasonable level. There is a need for adequate differentiation by types of interventions and objectives (key word: principle of proportionality): Large infrastructure projects and programs require different financing, reporting and control mechanisms than funds for small enterprises, advisory and soft initiatives or RTD-related initiatives. Changing institutional arrangements – something that has been formulated as a central element in the "Barca Report", among others – require totally different understanding of management than interventions focusing on large infrastructure projects (ÖROK, 2009).

A new understanding of compliance with "good governance" principles is required. These require an avoidance of excessive regulatory density, associated with a timely and clear definition for individual provisions as well as the prevention of a subsequent or new interpretation of provisions on the part of the European Commission (ibid.). The use of monitoring and management instruments must also be viewed in this context. Indicator- and output-based management in the conventional format is viewed with increasing criticism especially when it comes to regional interventions which build on complex development initiatives. In this context, the use of monitoring and evaluation processes which are able

to cover the core information requirement at a European level and also serve as feedback instruments for program management is viewed as an important factor. First, an approach involving the use of codes and core indicators is still viewed as adequate, followed by an increased concentration on compiling development processes.

In addition the reform and significant simplification of cooperation across funds, including cooperation regarding the development of rural areas, is seen as important from almost all Austrian partners. The simplification and expansion of the current 'cross financing' opportunities is considered a possible approach in this context. This would broaden the scope for regionally adequate interventions. Also, territorial cooperation requires adequate conditions. Traditionally, territorial cooperation is attributed considerable significance, also due to the fact that it creates visible and direct European added value. Still, important development steps are required in this area. They include for example a regulation that takes into account the specifics of the co-operation programs, a consideration of regional specifics in program development, or the introduction of a discussion process regarding the design and implementation of – particularly transnational – cooperation programs.

A strengthened focus on functionally linked regions and a "variable geometry" in regional delineations should be discussed in this context. It may consist of a combination of spatial (for example spatial development) and inter-regional components (e. g. in the area of innovation), which may enable a strategic but spatially more flexible orientation of territorial cooperation. Depending on the contents, the role of the European Commission in transnational and cross-border programs should be revisited or strengthened (ibid.).

So the future role of EU Commission in ERDF funding could for example show the following two specifications:

- Reintroduction of innovation programs: Evaluations of previous SF periods showed important positive impacts of the ERDF-pilot and innovation programs. These programs provided impulses from the outside, were very attractive to regions, and allowed to check and implement new approaches. Whereas the number of Community initiatives and pilot actions was disproportionately high during the 1994–1999 period, their complete integration into the main objective programs is eliminating their specific advantages.
- Strengthen the management of information exchange and learning processes at the EU level: The function of the European Commission, which is also discussed in the "Barca Report", must be significantly strengthened. This requires new formats for the management of learning processes, which go beyond the new form of the detailed direction of regional development processes in formal negotiation, management and monitoring committees, as indicated in the "Barca Report".

So all in all the Commission has two strategic possibilities: (i) a far reaching simplification on one hand to find a new balance between flexibility in implementation and the required controls/documentation, or (ii) a completely new mode of governance on the other hand. The second option would ask for an encompassing compliance with "good governance" principles (-putting more time into the negotiations and then withdraw), for contractual relationships (e.g. Barca report) as well as for learning and innovative stimuli (pilot programs for innovation, formats for the management of learning processes, etc.).

5.2 National level: Simplification and concentration

But there are still a lot of duties for the national level remaining. Even if the basic principles of ERDF funding are not fundamentally changed, there are some possibilities for the Austrian regional policy to take action:

- strengthening the focus on functional perspectives (and hence also transfer-aspects of variable geometries to the Austrian level);
- rethinking intra-Austrian conditions in order to increase the innovation character of the ERDF (e.g increasing the strategic character, more proactive project development, etc.);
- equipping the involved bodies with sufficient and critical funds (cost – benefit);
- looking comprehensively at existing developments, in order to make the contributions of different interventions (regional, national, EU) more transparent;
- making better use of development potentials which go beyond certain policy fields (particularly territorial employment pacts at the regional level) in order to achieve a better integration with economic development policies;
- continuously developing the governance structure, with a focus on the reduction of the regulatory density caused internally, as well as on the intensification of coordination at the federal level and a strengthened integration of operative funding institutions.

As the main development challenges for Austria in the coming years may be mentioned the fields of (i) innovation: innovation and adaptability of companies and regions; (ii) resources, energy and climate, including location development; and (iii) people (education, integration and social inclusion, ageing). In this context, even more attention will have to be paid to an integrative and synergetic management of issues (e. g. innovation and ageing, innovation and environment, energy and climate technologies).

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