

## ANALYSIS OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS AND ITS MITIGATION IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS MANAGING EUROPEAN FUNDS IN ROMANIA

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the dynamics of organizational stress within public institutions in Romania responsible for managing European funds. By analysing the interaction between specific performance requirements, the complexity of fund management processes, and their impact on employee well-being, the study reveals ways in which organizational stress can not only be identified but also effectively mitigated. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research highlights employees' perceptions of specific stress factors and their effects on workplace performance and satisfaction. Key sources of stress include high workloads, pressure from tight deadlines associated with EU-funded projects, and the complexity of regulations and administrative procedures. Additionally, the study identifies several effective mitigation strategies, including improving internal communication, developing professional training programs focused on stress management, and implementing flexible work mechanisms. In conclusion, the research underscores the need for a proactive approach to managing organizational stress in Romanian public institutions administering European funds. The included recommendations provide a foundation for developing more effective internal policies aimed at increasing employee resilience and optimizing organizational performance within the challenging context of managing European funds.*

**KEYWORDS:** *employee well-being, european funds, organizational stress, public institutions, stress mitigation.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Romania's accession to European structures has provided many advantages as well as significant challenges for government entities involved in managing European funds. This task requires strict discipline and transparency, simultaneously generating heightened organizational stress that affects the effectiveness, productivity, and well-being of employees. In this complex situation, the present paper aims to explore how organizational stress impacts Romanian public institutions that manage EU funds, identifying the main causes of stress and investigating effective methods for its reduction.

Using an interdisciplinary methodology that combines organizational theory with case studies from Romania, this study offers a detailed view of the influence of organizational stress on the performance of government entities. Special emphasis is placed on innovative and sustainable solutions for improving stress management in the workplace, examining both individual tactics and organizational-level interventions that can assist employees and contribute to creating a healthier and more efficient work environment.

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Adaptability is essential for survival; despite the fact that modern humans are less challenged by the natural environment, they frequently face the intense challenges of society. Continuous social and economic changes represent a major test for human adaptability (Zorlentan, 1996).

This paper adds a new perspective to the existing literature on the challenges and solutions related to organizational stress in the public sector in Romania, highlighting the necessity of adaptability and innovation in human resource management. Through its in-depth analysis, the study aims to serve as a resource for policymakers and specialists in developing effective policies and strategies to combat organizational stress, which is vital for optimizing the management of European funds in Romania.

## **2. ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS**

### **2.1 Sources of organizational stress in a general context and specific to the public sector**

Originating from the English language, the term "stress" encompasses a range of similar nouns that have subtle differences in meaning: pressure, burden, effort, demand, tension, constraint, and nervous strain. The introduction of the concept of stress into medical terminology is attributed to the scientist H. Selye in 1936 (Russu, 1993). According to this initial definition, stress represents the body's generic response to any type of demand. H. Selye describes stress as the organism's struggle to adjust to environmental demands, naming this process the General Adaptation Syndrome (G.A.S.), later known as Selye's Syndrome. This concept quickly gained popularity and international recognition due to its wide applicability in everyday vocabulary. The study of stress has paved the way for a positive perspective on it, promoting understanding, awareness, and the development of skills to respond effectively to the daily challenges of the environment.

Regarding the constituent elements of stress, more recent research has shown that stress is not limited to external aggressions or threats; surprisingly, even moments of joy can trigger stress. Essentially, stress manifests in any situation that disrupts the physical and/or psychological balance or integrity of the organism due to internal or external factors, in the face of which the individual lacks standard strategies to mitigate or eliminate the threat.

A notable study identifying and classifying the main sources of stress was conducted in 1968 by two American professors from the University of Washington, T.H. Holmes and R.H. Rahe (Organ, 1986). They highlighted 43 stress factors assessed by different subjects through a methodology that used the loss of a loved one as a reference point, rated at 100 points.

Except for universally relevant stress factors, such as those that pose life-threatening situations or exceed maximum tolerability thresholds, there is no stress factor perceived uniformly by all individuals. Individual differences lead to significant variations in responses to the same stressful stimulus, reflecting the wide diversity of stress experiences.

In the organizational context, two main sources of stress, both psychological in nature, are role conflict and role ambiguity. Role conflict occurs when an individual faces contradictory or unacceptable demands within the organization, often caught between differing expectations from superiors and subordinates. These conflicting situations can take many forms. On the other hand, role ambiguity refers to the lack or insufficiency of information necessary for adequately fulfilling tasks. This leads to uncertainty regarding objectives, specific tasks, expected performance from the organization, and evaluation and motivation criteria. The degree to which role ambiguity is stressful largely depends on individual tolerance for ambiguity, which varies significantly among people (Iliescu, 2004).

These two main types of stress factors exhibit a wide range of manifestations within organizations and are perceived differently by employees, depending on both personal characteristics and the position held in the organizational hierarchy. Generally, managers are more susceptible to the harmful effects of these types of stress compared to operational employees. Analyzing the causes of organizational stress reveals a distinction between factors specific to managers and those more

commonly encountered by operational staff, as well as common causes between these two groups. Ambiguity in defining roles can create stress for both leaders and operational employees. This form of stress arises from a series of deficiencies related to project planning, including imprecise descriptions of objectives or the omission of essential details in job descriptions. Unclear tasks can lead to overlapping efforts or the execution of the same activities across multiple departments, causing uncertainty, dissatisfaction, and frustration. Another contributing factor is a weak information system characterized by the provision of incomplete, outdated, or irrelevant information. Additionally, the existence of a strong informal network can spread rumors that contradict official information, amplifying organizational stress.

Workplace stress can stem from various sources affecting employees across all fields. Among these sources are high workloads, role ambiguity, job instability, precarious work-life balance, lack of support from management, and insufficient resources necessary for the effective completion of tasks (Vîrgă and Sîrboiu, 2012; Popa et al., 2024). In today's dynamic work environments, these factors significantly contribute to the overall stress level experienced by employees, affecting productivity, health, and job satisfaction (Radu C., et al, 2020).

In the public sector, these general factors are intensified by the specific challenges of this environment. Employees face increased pressures from the public and media for flawless performance and must navigate complex bureaucracy while adhering to strict regulations that can limit innovation. Budget constraints exacerbate these challenges by restricting access to modern technology and increasing workloads. Moreover, work in public service often involves emotionally demanding situations related to community welfare and safety, adding an additional dimension to employee stress.

Identifying and understanding these sources of stress is essential for developing effective strategies that minimize their impact on employees and organizational performance. A comprehensive strategy should include improving internal communication, promoting continuous professional development, offering flexible work options to balance professional and personal life, and ensuring access to necessary resources and adequate support.

## **2.2 The impact of stress on individual and organizational performance**

According to H. Selye, a pioneer in stress research, this phenomenon represents a mechanism for mobilization and defense of the body in the face of unforeseen situations, manifesting through varied reactions from one person to another and from one context to another. Thus, individual responses to stress are not necessarily negative. For some, stress acts as a vital stimulant, energizing their existence (Bienertova- Vasku et al., 2020). Individuals with inherent or trained resilience to stress exhibit certain characteristics: self-confidence in various situations, viewing change as an opportunity rather than a threat, deep commitment to professional and personal life, willingness to take risks, perseverance in the face of obstacles or challenges, flexibility in thinking and actions, and the recognition that while they cannot control stressful situations, they can accept and overcome them by continually developing personal resources (Roudseep, 1986).

Regarding the fatigue specific to organizational stress, individuals may go through several stages: initially, there is the alarm phase, characterized by increased irritability, susceptibility, concentration problems, memory disturbances, and insomnia; this is followed by the agitation phase marked by excessive reactions. In this stage, individuals become extremely distrustful of others and may adopt aggressive behaviors in an attempt to manage all problems alone, leading to a loss of perspective and excessive detail-oriented control (Bugard, 1960). These two phases are reversible if identified and treated properly, allowing individuals to regain balance by recognizing and eliminating the causes.

The final phase is exhaustion, triggered by the accumulation of fatigue that significantly affects physical and mental health. Organizational stress contributes to the emergence of so-called

occupational diseases, with cardiovascular diseases frequently mentioned. Medical studies suggest that approximately 75% of cardiac incidents are caused by daily and organizational stress.

In addition to these direct effects on individual health, stress can have repercussions on family life due to limited time spent with family, adverse behavioral changes, and a lack of interest in common issues. These aspects affect not only managers, who often feel guilty about this situation, but also their family members. Moreover, staff turnover can be linked to organizational stress. Absenteeism and resignations are seen as ways employees try to temporarily reduce their stress levels. Research indicates a strong connection between high stress levels and staff turnover (Anderson and Grunert, 1997).

Stress, a constant element in contemporary life, significantly influences both personal efficiency and that of organizations. At the individual level, stress may manifest as physical symptoms such as exhaustion, headaches, and sleep problems, as well as psychological effects like anxiety, depression, and decreased attention. These symptoms can seriously compromise a person's ability to perform tasks effectively, negatively impacting productivity and innovation. Additionally, stress can damage workplace relationships, fostering irritability and less collaborative behavior, which weakens collective performance.

From an organizational perspective, the negative effects of stress are diverse. High stress levels among employees can lead to increased absenteeism and staff turnover, disrupting daily activities and generating additional costs related to recruitment and training. Employees affected by stress are also more susceptible to mistakes and accidents, jeopardizing work quality and workplace safety. This can have repercussions on the organization's reputation and may lead to legal consequences.

Despite these evident issues, positive solutions exist. Organizations that identify the negative impact of stress and implement strategies to alleviate it—such as wellness programs, promoting a supportive organizational culture, and ensuring a reasonable workload—can improve employee well-being. This not only enhances individual performance but also contributes to building organizational resilience, improving productivity and long-term success (Gabor et al., 2024).

### **3. MANAGEMENT OF EUROPEAN FUNDS IN ROMANIA**

#### **3.1 The role of public institutions in managing european funds**

The importance of public institutions in managing EU funds is crucial for the effective distribution and use of these financial resources, thereby contributing to solidarity and economic and social development within the European Union. These funds are intended to support various sectors, including infrastructure, research, education, and environmental protection, and require a robust management and monitoring framework. Public institutions, operating at multiple levels—European, national, regional, and local—are pivotal in this effort. At the EU level, entities such as the European Commission set political directions, budgets, and oversee the implementation of funding programs. They ensure that the allocation of funds aligns with the strategic objectives of the EU, such as innovation, digitalization, and the green transition.

National and regional institutions take on the task of detailed planning and execution. They select projects that meet EU criteria, manage funding applications, evaluate proposals, and monitor project progress. This process necessitates close collaboration with local authorities to align projects with both EU goals and the needs of local communities.

Additionally, these institutions verify compliance with EU regulations regarding state aid, public procurement, and financial management. They are essential in supervising projects, assessing their impact, and ensuring the transparent and responsible use of funds.

Through these efforts, public institutions facilitate the connection between European ambitions and local contexts. Proper management of European funds not only supports the realization of specific projects but also promotes widespread economic cohesion and solidarity within the EU.

### **3.2 Historical overview of benefits for staff in public institutions in Romania involved in projects funded by european funds**

In 2004, Romania was in the pre-accession stage to the European Union, at which point the method of incentivizing staff in public institutions who would be part of project teams was legislated through *Law no. 490/2004 regarding the financial incentives for personnel managing community funds*.

In 2005, the aforementioned law came into effect, stipulating an increase in the base salaries of specialized staff within the structures responsible for managing community financial assistance granted to Romania through pre-accession instruments and structural and cohesion funds, by at least 50% compared to those provided by law, but no more than 100%.

Subsequently, with the issuance of *Government Decision no. 543/2006 approving the structures within the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Rural Development responsible for managing community financial assistance, as well as the regulations for granting salary rights to the relevant staff*, the increase in base salaries was set at 75% of the amounts stipulated by law. Additionally, this government decision introduced a new condition that personnel appointed to project teams had to meet: having at least 75% of job duties specifically related to managing non-reimbursable community financial assistance, as specified in their job description, out of the total job responsibilities. This provision was subsequently adopted in *Government Decision no. 606/2009*.

Starting from mid-2009, when *Government Decision no. 606/2009* came into effect, the conditions for granting the 75% salary increase were tightened by introducing the stipulation that this percentage would only be granted to personnel receiving a "very good" rating following their annual evaluation. The same legislative act included specific provisions for newly hired personnel starting in June 2009, stating that base salaries would only be increased by 25% compared to those specified by law, until the first performance evaluation.

In mid-2017, *the Framework Law no. 153/2017* distinguished between two methods of salary increase for staff involved in project teams:

On one hand, there is the personnel who, for their work on projects funded by European funds, benefit from a salary increase of up to 50%, proportional to the time allocated to project activities, only if personnel expenses were eligible for reimbursement from European funds. On the other hand, there is the personnel managing projects funded by public funds, for whom the salary increases decreased from 75% to 25%.

At the end of 2017, *the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 91/2017, which amended and completed the Framework Law no. 153/2017*, changed, once again, the condition for granting salary increases for personnel working on projects funded by European funds, eliminating the condition for reimbursement from European funds of personnel expenses. At the same time, it raised the percentage of salary increases for personnel managing projects funded by public funds, from a base salary increase of up to 25% to an increase of up to 35%.

In 2018, *the Government Decision no. 325/2018* established salary increase percentages for personnel working on projects, of up to 50%, depending on the actual monthly working time on project activities. Later, it was replaced by *the Government Decision no. 234/2023*.

Also in 2018, two conditions were established for granting salary increases to personnel in public institutions managing European funds: they must have specific duties related to managing non-reimbursable European financial assistance, representing at least 75% of the total job responsibilities, and be part of a structure provided in *Government Decision no. 29/2018*.

Romania's accession to the European Union has significantly changed the work of staff in public institutions, with personnel appointed to project teams having to align with more complex requirements agreed upon by the European Commission.

As we can see, the benefits for personnel involved in project teams have changed over the years, sometimes involving more restrictive conditions to qualify for substantial salary increases, while at other times, legislative acts have relaxed the conditions for granting salary incentives, making it

absolutely necessary for specialized staff in public institutions to complete documentation within a deadline for the implementation of projects funded by European funds.

### **3.3 Specific challenges and stress factors associated with managing European funds**

Managing European finances, while opening important doors for progress and advancement, is accompanied by its own set of challenges and sources of tension. A major barrier is the need to navigate the intricate regulations of the European Union. This imposes strict rules for the allocation, use, and documentation of fund expenditures. Adhering to these norms requires a detailed understanding of EU legislation, often leading to cumbersome and time-consuming administrative procedures (Beldiman et al., 2022).

Another significant issue is the competition for funding. In an environment where many organizations vie for finite resources, it is crucial to develop strong proposals that align with EU requirements regarding innovation, sustainability, and social impact. This competition not only increases pressure but also demands advanced skills in project management and proposal writing.

Moreover, the proper administration of European funds requires strict financial monitoring. Ensuring transparency and accountability in managing funds is vital to prevent sanctions or funding cancellations. This necessitates careful financial planning, ongoing oversight, and detailed reporting, all of which can be sources of stress, especially with the possibility of audits from EU institutions.

Additionally, meeting established objectives within specified timelines can be daunting. Projects funded by European funds tend to be ambitious and complex, requiring collaboration among various stakeholders from different sectors. Delays or unforeseen obstacles can create tension for project managers striving to meet EU requirements for efficient and timely project completion.

In conclusion, while managing European funds offers a path to significant achievements, it requires a high level of expertise, patience, and resilience due to its regulatory complexity, competitive nature, financial oversight, and pressures associated with meeting strict project objectives.

### **3.4 Institutions and entities responsible for coordinating, managing, and controlling the funds granted under the recovery and resilience mechanism**

For a better understanding of the structures required to be involved at the national level in managing European funds, we will use Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) as a case study, which aims to modernize Romania with the support of the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism (RRM), a highly relevant topic.

In 2021, the RRM was established to support six pillars of European significance: green transition; digital transformation; functional economic growth based on competitiveness, development, and innovation; social and territorial cohesion; health—both economic and social, as well as institutional, by increasing crisis management capacity; and educational policies based on skill acquisition for new generations.

The European Union's support instrument aims to restore Romania during the 2021-2026 period to overcome the crisis triggered by COVID-19 through the implementation of major reforms to develop a strong economy.

*The Government Emergency Ordinance No. 124/2021* establishes the institutions and entities with responsibilities for coordinating, managing, and controlling the funds granted under the RRM:

The Ministry of Finance receives the funds allocated by the European Commission for the implementation of the NRRP in Romania. Subsequently, the Ministry of Investments and European Projects, as the national coordinator (NC), signs financing agreements with the reform and/or investment coordinators (R/IC) to implement the reforms and/or investments financed under the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism (RRM).

Finally, three committees—two inter-ministerial ones (for coordinating the NRRP and for public procurement, alongside the National Agency for Public Procurement) and one monitoring committee

with a consultative and informational role—track the progress of investments and reforms implemented by ministries, institutions, or agencies (R/IC), provide solutions where needed to resolve identified issues, and ensure compliance with applicable procedures.

To prevent and combat irregularities, several institutions ensure that the funds are used for their intended purpose and in a transparent manner. In this regard, the European Anti-Fraud Office examines any potential misuse of funds granted by the European Commission. The Department for Anti-Fraud and the European Public Prosecutor’s Office closely monitor the destination of funds, both to protect and to defend the financial interests of the European Union. Regarding corruption offenses, the National Anticorruption Directorate conducts criminal investigations to combat them, while the National Integrity Agency works to eliminate conflicts of interest. Additionally, the Court of Accounts, through the Audit Authority, audits the implementation of the NRRP, and the Competition Council ensures compliance with state aid and competition regulations regarding the reforms and investments funded under the RRM.

The macroeconomic impact of the RRM is analyzed by the National Commission for Strategy and Forecast.

As we can see, the institutional framework for managing European funds under the RRM for the 2021–2026 period is vast, and since it is crucial to ensure efficient financial management of the funds and absorption capacity, the role and collaboration of these institutions are absolutely essential.

## **4. STRATEGIES FOR MITIGATING ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS**

### **4.1 Specific strategies applicable in the context of romanian public institutions managing european funds**

The administration of European financial resources by Romanian government entities requires a sophisticated methodology that balances strict adherence to European Union directives with effective strategic planning and implementation. A key component of this approach is establishing a robust framework to ensure transparency and accountability. This involves setting up transparent and easily accessible mechanisms for monitoring how funds are allocated and spent, thus ensuring that every amount is judiciously invested and compliant with EU regulations.

Another fundamental pillar is skills development. Romanian state institutions frequently face challenges due to the complexity of European legislation and the technical demands of project management. Therefore, investing in training programs for employees to enhance their understanding of EU regulations, as well as financial management and project execution skills, can significantly increase the capacity to utilize available funds effectively.

Encouraging collaborations between the public sector, private sector, and non-governmental organizations is an additional valuable strategy. Such partnerships can bring in additional expertise, resources, and new perspectives, contributing to more innovative and sustainable projects.

Local community involvement plays a key role. Engaging citizens in the early stages of planning and execution can ensure that initiatives address the genuine needs of the population, thus increasing the likelihood of project success and community support.

Finally, implementing a detailed monitoring and evaluation system is crucial. These procedures not only validate compliance with EU standards but also facilitate the identification of best practices and areas needing improvement, thus enabling continuous optimization of fund management.

By adopting these approaches, Romanian state institutions are able to fully leverage the advantages offered by European funding, driving significant socio-economic growth at the national level.

Regarding stress management in organizations, initiating an effective strategy requires a precise identification of employee stress levels and its triggering factors. The organization must thoroughly examine the two main sources of stress: internal conflict and role ambiguity. It is essential to determine each individual's tolerance level or the optimal stress level for adequate management.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Confronting and reducing stress in the organizational environment initially focuses on recognizing and understanding the phenomenon of stress, with the aim of shifting the individual's perspective from a negative, fatalistic one to an aware and optimistic one. The first stage involves cognitive training aimed at adapting to stress (Dafinoiu, 1993).

This process involves identifying the underlying causes of stress rather than focusing solely on symptoms. It is essential to address situations perceived as stressful directly, by comparing them with objective reality, acknowledging that change is possible, and acting in accordance with this recognition.

The knowledge process seeks to gain a rational perspective on stress factors, which is vital for developing effective behavioral strategies. This methodology suggests that, at the first sign of stress, the individual should examine their thoughts with questions such as: What thoughts are running through my mind right now? Why are these thoughts occurring at this moment? What are the immediate effects, both positive and negative, on my emotions, internal state, and outward behavior? Are my thoughts justified? What arguments can I bring for and against (Zorlentan, 1996)?

In addition to this cognitive approach, experts also suggest other methods such as physical exercise, relaxation techniques, meditation, and humor.

In the current context in Romania, many stress-relief strategies may seem inaccessible or a luxury. However, the stress sources identified in this study represent only a part of a broader range that can be explored in future research. In conclusion, neglecting stress equates to the unnecessary and premature waste of any organization's most valuable resource—human capital.

In the context of organizational stress encountered in public entities responsible for managing European funds, it can be said that the specific job demands are the primary element that could trigger stress. According to the research titled "*Stress Prevention in Work*" conducted by the International Labour Organization in 2012, it is essential for professional tasks to be fairly distributed among employees. Avoiding worker overload through the assignment of an excessive workload is necessary to prevent occupational stress. It is crucial to prevent undue pressures generated by unrealistic deadlines. Optimal performance and employee well-being are closely linked to adjusting the workload to each team member's capacity, requiring effective collaboration between project managers and subordinates. Various practical approaches are recommended to improve this situation, including:

- Balancing the overall workload
- Preventing excessive demands on employees
- Setting realistic deadlines
- Clearly defining each employee's duties and responsibilities
- Preventing situations in which employees' capabilities are underutilized.

Moreover, the "*Stress Prevention in Work*" study by the International Labour Organization suggests that improving working conditions and organization to maximize employees' potential, training them to develop skills and competencies, adequately planning deadlines for an efficient distribution of tasks over a reasonable period, promoting regular discussions on workload between managers and their teams, and periodically assessing current and future activity levels are essential for increasing performance and maintaining a healthy workforce.

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