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The Hurdles to Obtaining European Funds by Polish Beneficiaries – Quantitative Research

Abstract

The main objective for writing this article is to present the barriers to accessing EU funds at the stage of preparing an application for funding, as well as the barriers to executing project activities. The research objective, question, and problem as well as the statistical description of the research group and the measurement instruments have been highlighted in the article. The author attempts to answer the following questions: what are the main barriers/hurdles encountered by Polish beneficiaries of EU funds allocated under national and regional operational programmes; which of the identified barriers to accessing EU funds is perceived as the most hindering in the process of executing EU projects; and how is the impact of EU funds on regional development assessed from the perspective of those people executing projects and taking part in projects financed with EU funds?

The following barriers can be enumerated as the most significant: the withholding of subsequent funding tranches while maintaining the obligation to pursue project execution, the highly bureaucratic application process for a subsidy, the bureaucratic system of post-project accounting, and the long deadlines for transferring subsequent tranches of funding. An analysis of the findings confirms that the beneficiaries of EU funds primarily fear losing financial liquidity. Receiving a subsidy in the form of a refinancing of the incurred costs requires, on the one hand, efficient project management, and, on the other, a well-functioning institutional system that should support project recipients in their investment endeavours.

Keywords: European Union, European Funds, Barriers, Projects

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Introduction

European structural funds, in conjunction with national funds, are currently one of the main financial factors supporting not only investment in the development of human capital – which directly improves citizens' standard of living – but also investment in the development of large and small infrastructure. Enhanced investment activity contributes to labour market recovery thus generating employment and wage growth, which, in due course, positively affects the volume of consumer demand. Investments implemented with the participation of EU funds also generate positive changes in the sectoral structure of the economy, which result in a surge in the dynamics of productivity growth (Bartkiewicz, Dębowski, 2010).

It is estimated (based on data from the PKO BP Economic Quarterly – 09.2020) that the executed projects contributed to an increase in the GDP level from 0.5 to about 1.0% per annum in relation to the GDP level Poland would have achieved had it not been for the investments from EU funds. It is therefore vital to effectively conduct the regional development policy with the application of structural funds to a great extent, since it enables the restructuring of rural areas, along with an improvement of the quality of infrastructure and the development of the SME sector. The problem of the absorption capacity of Polish regions with regard to the utilisation of EU funds is one of the biggest issues that always arises before the new programming period.

The actual level of fund utilisation is affected, *inter alia*, by the preparation of public institutions, especially as regards the knowledge and skills of administrative staff devising the rules and procedures for announced competitions, the efficiency of payment institutions and entities conducting supervisory activities, as well as the creativity of project recipients who are the main beneficiaries of this form of financing. Statistical data confirm that Poland is the largest net recipient of aid granted under the EU structural funds, but also records a high level of absorption under individual operational programmes (Eurostat, 2022, Fundusze, 2022) The foregoing became feasible owing to significant investor interest in this form of funding and the increased efficiency of the functioning of public institutions responsible for the distribution of structural funds.

The role that is currently attributed to this form of financing of Poland's economic development requires an apt diagnosis of the barriers/hurdles to accessing EU funds that have arisen which, on the one hand, will increase the level of absorption of the European funding, and, on the

other hand, will allow for the partial or complete elimination of impediments in the process of the application and execution of projects.

The research carried out by I. Bostan, C.M. Lazar, N. Asalos, I. Munteanu, and G.M. Horga constitutes a great example of how the accessibility level of EU funds and their impact on the economic development can be evaluated. The conducted research allows one to determine the direct relation between EU funds and the economic, social, and environmental effects and competitiveness of SMEs (Bostan et al., 2019, pp. 460–467).

Research Assumptions

An apt diagnosis of the barriers to accessing EU funds, on the one hand, enhances the capacity in the process of EU funding absorption, and on the other hand – enables the elimination or minimisation of hurdles arising in the process of the application and management of executed projects. In view of the foregoing, the author has decided to conduct a quantitative study with the application of *the Pencil and Paper Interview* (Ward, Clark, Zabriskie, 2014, pp. 84–105) so as to identify the barriers to accessing and utilising EU funds. The following factors had a direct impact on selecting the research tool: the standardisation of the place of research (Faculty of Management, University of Warsaw), and the possibility to provide explanations in the event a question is not understood.

Research Objective, Question, and Problem

In 2020, another programming period came to an end. An analysis of the implemented forms of support confirms that the European structural funds have been one of the main determinants supporting Poland's social and economic development. The **research objectives** have been presented on two levels – cognitive and practical. The **cognitive objective** is to examine the groups of the main barriers/hurdles that occur at the application and implementation stage of activities co-financed with EU funds. The **practical objective** is to identify the greatest barriers that, on the one hand, hinder the preparation and execution of projects co-financed with EU funds, and, on the other hand, directly affect the effectiveness of EU funding utilisation.

The research problem and research question have been formulated.

Research problem: *in what way do the identified barriers/hurdles affect the application process and the process of project implementation financed with EU funds?*

Research question: *what are the main barriers perceived by Polish beneficiaries of EU funds under national and regional operational programmes?*

A study of what future beneficiaries think about said barriers is significant since application activity is dependent upon the perception of difficulties. Among other things, a socially-shared belief that financial requirements constitute the greatest barrier while information factors – the least significant, has been empirically examined. Those who consider the application for EU funds to be too troublesome may, due to their beliefs, never undertake this form of funding their investment (Dubel, 2020).

Characteristics of the Respondents

The selection of people for the study was deliberate and was carried out as part of the projects implemented by the Faculty of Management of the University of Warsaw, which were co-financed by the European Social Fund. The participants were representatives from the national administration sector and employees of local government administration hired in municipal, district, and voivodeship self-government units at managerial and non-managerial positions, entrepreneurs, co-owners and owners of SMEs, as well as representatives of non-governmental organisations. The people taking part in the study can be divided into two main groups. The first are those who created their applications themselves and have experience in the preparation thereof. The second encompasses participants of various types of activities co-financed by the European Social Fund or the European Regional Development Fund.

277 people ($N = 277$) took part in the study. Men constituted 32.9% of the respondents ($N = 91$), with 67.1% of the respondents being women ($N = 186$). The majority of the respondents had a higher education of the second degree ($N = 234$), which constituted 84.5% of the respondents. 13% of the respondents were people with a higher education of the first degree ($N = 36$), while 2.5% of the respondents were people with a vocational and secondary education ($N = 7$). All the participants correctly completed the received questionnaires.

The majority of the respondents – 58.5% specifically – are employed in the public administration sector ($N = 162$), and 12.3% of the respondents work for large businesses ($N = 34$). A comparable number of respondents ($N = 36$) work in the sector of medium-sized enterprises and in the sector of micro and small enterprises ($N = 25$). There were two entrepreneurs/business owners in the group ($N = 2$), and the remaining group ($N = 18$) were employees of non-governmental organisations.

40.4% of respondents declared that they had applied for EU funds ($N = 112$), while the remaining respondents, i.e., 59.6%, declared that they had never applied for similar funds before ($N = 165$), but had, however, benefited from or utilised this form of support as project participants. In the group of people applying for EU funds, 70 people ($N = 70$) were administrative workers, 42 people ($N = 42$) were others – from outside the administration area (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows the number of applications for funding among respondents divided into type of operational programmes.

Table 1: The number of applications submitted for funding divided into type of operational programmes

Types of programmes	Number of applications submitted for funding	Percent
Human Capital Operational Programme (PO Kapitał Ludzki)	90	50.6%
Innovative Economy Operational Programme (PO Innowacyjna Gospodarka)	18	10.1%
Regional Operational Programme (Regionalny Program Operacyjny)	40	22.4%
Infrastructure and Environment Operational Programme (PO Infrastruktura i Środowisko)	11	6.2%
Development of Eastern Poland Operational Programme (PO Rozwój Polski Wschodniej)	2	1.1%
Former financial perspective 2004–2006	17	9.6%
Total	178	100.0%

Source: devised on the basis of author's own findings.

Description of Measuring Instrument

Based on an analysis of the evaluation studies devised, *inter alia*, by the Directorate General for Internal Policy of the EU (Tödting-Schönhofer et al., 2012), Statistics Poland (Trzeciński, 2018), consulting companies such as IMAPP (Ewaluacja, 2017), IBS (Antosiewicz et al., 2017), PAG Uniconsult (Zub et al., 2015) EVALU sp. z o.o. (Chojecki et al., 2017), BCC (Kwieciński, Kalamon, 2014) and reports on the second programming period 2007–2013, which were published by Managing Authorities and Intermediate Bodies (Ewaluacja, 2017), as well as the author's own observations from the perspective of over 15 years of preparing and man-

aging EU projects, a questionnaire of 25 questions has been developed to identify individual barriers. The study applied a traditional auditorium questionnaire (PAPI)¹ to identify the *barriers to accessing and utilising EU funds* (Table 2).

Table 2: Barrier categories and barriers

No.	Category/ group of barriers	Barriers
1.	Information	non-transparent website structure (e.g., no thematic archives regarding individual activities or project assessment stages) no information updates on the websites providing information that is incomplete or limited to formal documents only (e.g., a Detailed Description of Priorities document) lack of practical tools, e.g., in the form of FAQs, i.e., sets of frequently asked questions and answers lack of timely answers to inquiries lack of knowledge as regards obtaining funding and executing projects due to low quality of training organised by Managing Authorities
2.	Procedural	highly bureaucratic application process for subsidies (including excessively complex and overly detailed rules and regulations for competitions) excessively elaborate formal criteria providing relevant information as regards the competition shortly before the commencement of the process changes to the competition guidelines/criteria interpretation during the competition system instability – frequent changes to the rules of project execution insignificant credibility of means of appeal in the event of re-evaluation of an application by the same institutions

¹ PAPI's main advantages encompass: the unification of a place where the study is conducted, a high probability of filling in the questionnaire and the possibility to provide explanations by the person conducting the study in the event a question is not understood.

3.	Financial	<p>the need to make one's own contribution withholding of subsequent funding tranches while maintaining the obligation to pursue project execution long deadlines for transferring subsequent funding tranches low flexibility of project budgets causing, <i>inter alia</i>, difficulties in adjusting the project to a current situation, which subsequently requires repeated amendments to the co-financing agreement lengthy verification period of applications for payment no information provided to beneficiaries regarding the scheduled payment date in the event payments are delayed bureaucratic system of project accounting</p>
4.	Institutional	<p>low service quality of applicants and beneficiaries insufficient knowledge of some public institutions' personnel to tackle assignments related to EU funding insufficient customer-orientation lack of or non-compliance with competition schedules (time-frame for announcing application intake) changes to deadlines for submitting applications scattered information regarding available funding instruments</p>

Source: devised on the basis of the author's own findings.

The respondents' task was to provide answers to 25 statements on a four-point scale on how strong the impact of the indicated barrier is to accessing EU funds, both at the stage of submitting an application as well as project execution. The individual indexes consisted of a devised number of questions, with a fixed scale of answers from 0 to 3 points (0 – no influence; 1 – insignificant; 2 – moderate; 3 – strong).

Information Barriers

Each of the following statements (Table 3) is directly related to the decision of a future beneficiary of EU funds as regards their participation in an announced competition. Therefore, this is the stage when we assess our chances, possibilities, and threats related to the correct preparation of a grant application.

Table 3: Information barriers along with factor loading for individual determinants

No.	Barriers	Factor loading*
1.	Non-transparent website structure (e.g., no thematic archives regarding individual activities or project assessment stages)	0.341
2.	No information updates on websites	0.545
3.	Providing information that is incomplete or limited to formal documents only (e.g. Detailed Description of Priorities)	0.555
4.	Lack of practical instruments, e.g., FAQs, i.e., sets of frequently asked questions	0.469
5.	Lack of timely answers to inquiries	0.491
6.	Lack of knowledge as regards obtaining funding and executing projects due to the low quality of training organised by Managing Authorities	0.430
<p>* Factor loading is a value of how well a question correlates with a scale; how well it fills/loads it. This is vital information since it shows that a given scale of a question is a good operationalisation of the measured feature. The value of factor loadings indicates that all questions (items) constitute a good operationalisation of the measured feature. In this case, it is the information barrier. It is assumed that below 0.3, questions are removed from the scale because they are insufficiently correlated with the measured feature.</p>		

Source: devised on the basis of the author’s own findings.

In order to check how well a proposed research instrument measures, the uniformity (reliability) coefficient – *Cronbach’s Alpha* (Wieczorkowska, Wierzbiński, 2011, p. 341) is applied. Reliability can be treated as a measure of the accuracy of a measurement made by a test. The higher the reliability, the greater the accuracy and the smaller the measurement error (Brzeziński, 2005, p. 458). *Cronbach’s Alpha* adopts values from 0 to 1. Values above 0.7 are considered to be sufficiently reliable (see Churchill and Peter, 1984, pp. 360–375). The reliability of a coefficient composed of six items (Table 17) operationalised with the application of *Cronbach’s Alpha* = 0.773 is sufficient.

Procedural Barriers

The procedural barriers have been presented in Table 4. These constitute the project recipients’ most common problems as regards the application of program documentation, devised criteria, as well as the rules

and regulations of competitions related to the stage of submitting project applications and project execution.

Table 4: Procedural barriers with factor loading for individual determinants

No.	Barriers	Factor loading
1.	Highly bureaucratic application process for subsidies (including excessively complex and overly detailed rules and regulations for competitions)	0.782
2.	Excessively extensive formal criteria	0.661
3.	Providing relevant information as regards the rules of competition shortly before the commencement of the process	0.654
4.	Amendments to the competition guidelines/criteria interpretation during the competition process	0.716
5.	System instability – frequent changes to the principles of project execution	0.675
6.	Insignificant credibility of means of appeal in the event of re-evaluation of an application by the same institutions	0.536

Source: devised on the basis of the author's own findings.

An analysis of the reliability of the six items showed sufficient measurement uniformity operationalised by *Cronbach's Alpha* = 0.797. The values of factor loadings presented in Table 4 indicate that all of the barriers constitute a good operationalisation of the measured feature, in this case – the procedural barrier.

Financial Barriers

Financial barriers constitute the subsequent group of barriers (Table 5). The following statements are directly related to the possibility of co-financing project activities from the beneficiary's own funds and securing the project's financial liquidity in order to achieve the projected results. It is vital since the beneficiary guarantees that they will have the sufficient means to execute the project when signing a funding agreement.

A sufficient Alpha coefficient value of 0.775 was obtained. The values of factor loadings indicate that all of the barriers constitute a good operationalisation of the measured feature, in this case – the financial barrier.

Table 5: Financial barriers with factor loading for individual determinants

No.	Barriers	Factor loading
1.	The need to make one’s own contribution	0.428
2.	Withholding of subsequent funding tranches while maintaining the obligation to pursue project execution	0.789
3.	Long deadlines for transferring subsequent funding tranches	0.705
4.	The low flexibility of project budgets causing, <i>inter alia</i> , difficulties in adjusting a project to a current situation, which subsequently requires repeated amendments the co-financing agreement	0.540
5.	Lengthy verification period of applications for payment	0.600
6.	No information provided to beneficiaries regarding the scheduled payment date in the event payments are delayed	0.545
7.	Bureaucratic system of project accounting	0.659

Source: devised on the basis of the author’s own findings.

Institutional Barriers

The final group of barriers to accessing EU funds are institutional barriers (Table 6). The following statements apply to the cooperation between the EU funding beneficiary with the institutional system created for the service thereof e.g., the verification and ongoing updating of competences of persons employed by Intermediate and Implementing Bodies as well as the level of communication quality between project supervisors and the persons executing them.

Table 6: Institutional barriers with factor loading for individual determinants

No.	Barriers	Factor loading
1.	Low service quality of applicants and beneficiaries	0.503
2.	Insufficient knowledge of some public institutions’ personnel to tackle assignments related to European funding	0.480
3.	Insufficient customer-orientation	0.401
4.	Lack of or non-compliance with competition schedules (time-frame for announcing application intake)	0.466
5.	Changes to deadlines for submitting applications	0.541
6.	Scattered information regarding available funding instruments	0.319

Source: devised on the basis of the author’s own findings.

The reliability for this scale equals *Cronbach's Alfa* = 0.755, which means it is sufficient. As has been the case with information, financial, and procedural barriers, the obtained values of factor loadings indicate that all of the barriers constitute a good operationalisation of the measured feature.

Research Findings

According to the respondents, the greatest barrier is the *withholding of subsequent funding tranches while maintaining the obligation to pursue project execution*. This means that even though a tranche is not received on time, there is no possibility to postpone subsequent project activities. The project must be executed pursuant to the approved schedule. It is one of the most significant barriers that occur during project execution. A project recipient, on the one hand, is obligated to pursue project implementation. On the other, however, any delays may lead to a loss of financial liquidity since in such an event, the signed agreement obligates us to use our own financial means. The gravity of individual barriers as indicated by the respondents has been presented in Figure 1. Assuming that the adopted response scale range: 0 – no impact; 1– weak; 2 – moderate; 3 – strong is a continuous scale, we can compute the median for individual barriers pursuant to the number of indications and the gravity of the impact on a verified barrier.

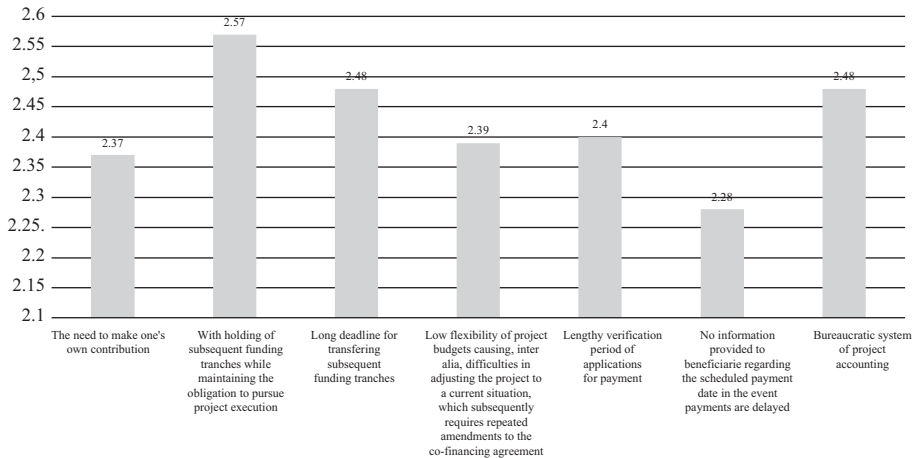


Figure 1: Median values from the financial barriers category

Source: devised on the basis of the author's own findings.

The subsequent group of barriers are procedural ones. As indicated by the respondents, the greatest barrier in this category is a *highly bureaucratic application process for subsidies (including excessively complex and overly detailed rules and regulations for competitions)*. The indicated barrier is directly related to the so-called preparation period of the project application. The time dedicated to devising a project application ranges from several to several dozen hours (depending on the size of the project), on which one cannot put an estimated price as the cost of project preparation. Therefore, the entrepreneur’s own costs are generated, but more importantly – excessively complex administrative procedures force applicants to forego the application or to transfer it to consulting or advisory companies for preparation and execution, which is directly related to additional costs of project implementation (Figure 2).

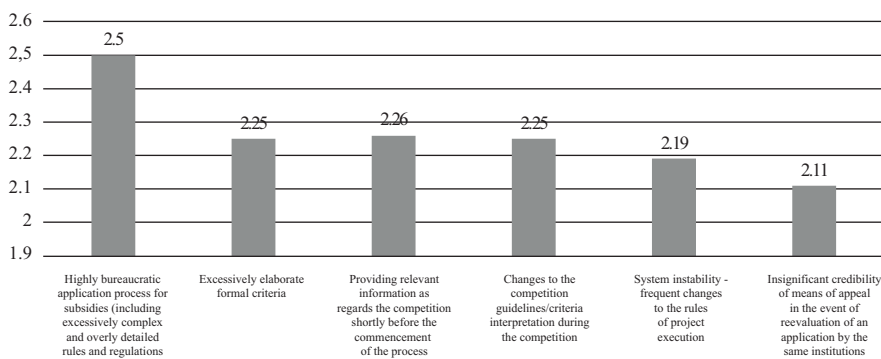


Figure 2: Median values from the procedural barriers category

Source: devised on the basis of the author’s own findings.

According to the respondents, the greatest institutional barrier is the *insufficient knowledge of some public institutions personnel to tackle assignments related to EU funding*. This type of barrier occurs both at the preparatory stage of the application for funding and during the project implementation. The protracting procedures and the lack of experts at helplines of Intermediate and Implementing Bodies constitute a specific barrier in the process of project preparation, implementation and accounting for. The efficiency of the entire institutional system is one of the main determinants of not only the high level of application of EU funds, but also the minimisation of non-eligible costs, the “burden” of which is transferred to project teams. The gravity of individual barriers as indicated by the respondents has been presented in Figure 3.

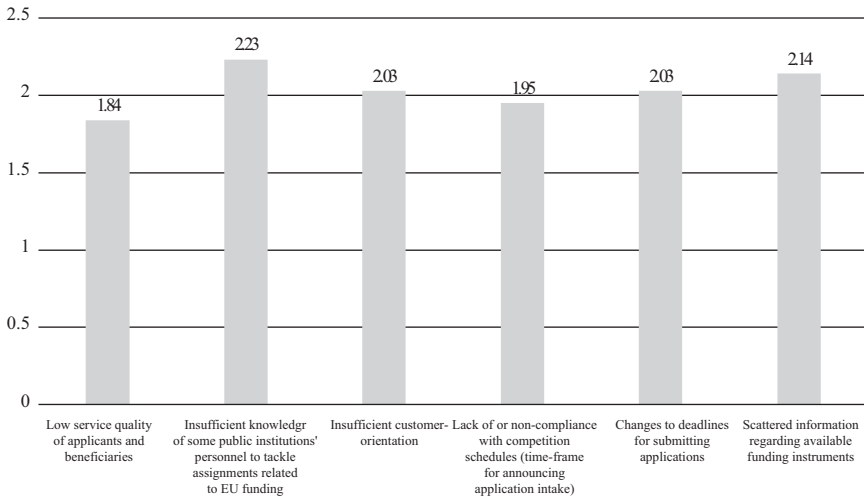


Figure 3: Median values from the institutional barriers category

Source: devised on the basis of the author's own findings.

The respondents indicated the *lack of timely answers to inquiries* as the biggest information barrier. The gravity of individual barriers as indicated by the respondents has been presented in Figure 4.

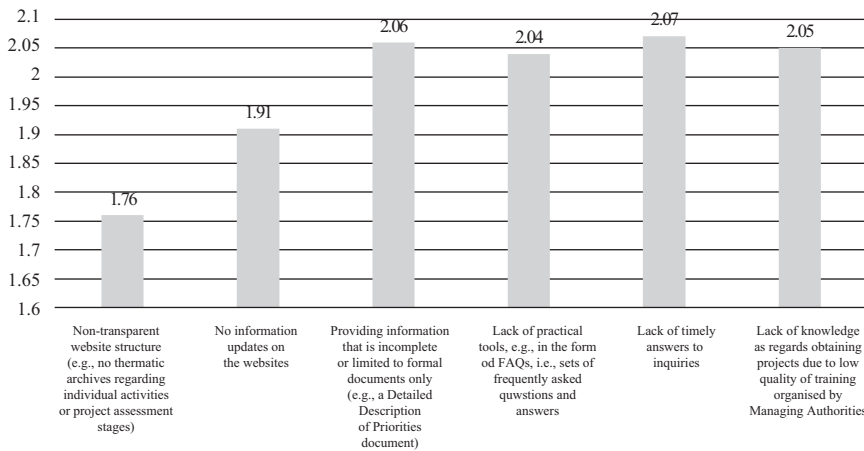


Figure 4: Median values for individual barriers from the institutional barriers category

Source: devised on the basis of the author's own findings.

The results indicate a significant information problem related not only directly to information as to *what?* and *for whom?*, but also as regards insufficient information that should be provided on an ongoing basis by the Implementing and Intermediate Bodies and project supervisors during the execution of project activities. Having up-to-date information is one of the main factors directly affecting the reduction of the scale of errors made by people executing projects.

The following have been indicated as the most significant barriers: *withholding of subsequent funding tranches while maintaining the obligation to pursue project execution and a highly bureaucratic application process for subsidies (including excessively complex and overly detailed rules and regulations for competitions), the bureaucratic system of project accounting as well as long deadlines for transferring subsequent funding tranches* (Figure 5).

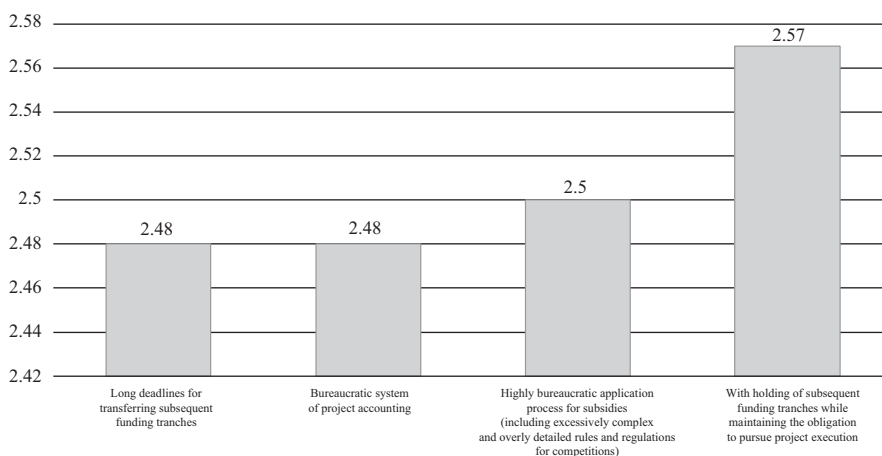


Figure 5: Median values of the greatest barriers to accessing EU funds

Source: devised on the basis of the author’s own findings.

Within the group of the greatest barriers (figure 5), three are the financial barriers, and the second most hindering – *highly bureaucratic application process for subsidies* – is a procedural barrier. An analysis of the findings confirms that the beneficiaries of EU funds are primarily concerned with the loss of financial liquidity during a project’s execution. Obtaining a subsidy in the form of “refinancing” of the incurred costs requires not only efficient project management, but also a well-functioning institutional system, in which ambiguously defined tasks and consequent competence confusion lead to the construction of a system that, instead of helping future beneficiaries of EU funds, often generates hurdles in each of the defined research areas.

Conclusions

Pursuant to the conducted research, one can conclude that the highlighted barriers translate into specific costs incurred by grant recipients. No report summarising the completed programming period hitherto has incorporated any attempts to calculate them, and yet they directly affect the financial condition of institutions and businesses applying for EU funds. Taking into account the presented barriers and their scale, one can inquire about their real impact on the decisions of future beneficiaries as regards entering announced competitions. A protracting waiting period for the assessment outcome of complex projects, an inadequate system of appeal (being overly lengthy and with no guarantee that the project will “return” to the ranking list), the obligation to conduct excessively extensive administrative activities, and the requirement to submit additional explanations for the frequently unprofessional substantive evaluation of the project not only increase the costs of the ongoing project assessment process, but also result, *inter alia*, in an applicant’s withdrawal from the project.

Taking into account the subsequent programming periods and the scale of projects connected to the current financial perspective, the incurred financial outlays directly related to the identified barriers are far too excessive and unjustified. They most frequently stem from project beneficiaries’ obligation to adapt to unreasonable financial and procedural requirements, and not from the need to improve the quality and durability of implemented activities. The highlighted research findings indicate that, despite the legal and procedural simplifications introduced following the first programming period (2004–2006), we still have to deal with a number of impediments that obscure the entire process of applying for EU funds, as well as affect the overall level of utilisation of the received funding. Exorbitant criteria that are practically impossible to meet (e.g. the criterion of project innovation at the national or world level) do not contribute to the selection of better projects for micro and small enterprises, since those businesses are unable to achieve that kind of level of innovation, and in the institutional system there are no experts who could competently assess these criteria.

One should remember that the majority of funds for social and economic development of regions are currently distributed under regional operational programmes, which means the barriers are perceived differently in various regions since it is directly related to the quality of the EU funding service system created at the level of Marshal’s offices (pl. *urzędy marszałkowskie*), which should ensure unambiguous and clear procedures

as well as effective and publicly available tools, in particular – financial instruments.

The emphasised barriers directly affect the execution and selection of activities co-financed with EU funds. In view of the foregoing, the process of project management and selection becomes crucial in order to utilise the received funding as efficiently as possible. Theoretical assumptions, procedures, good project management practices, and the findings of the qualitative research have been discussed in subsequent chapter number four.

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