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New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption

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Authors Index

A

Aboura Enas
 Achim Luminița-Georgiana
 Albăstroiu Irina
 Albu Cristina
 Amicarelli Vera
 Anghel Panait
 Angheluță Sorin Petrică
 Anichiti Alexandru
 Antohe Radu
 Antoneac (Lungu) Andreea
 Apostu Simona-Andreea
 Arghir Denis-Cătălin
 Avram Alina Cerasela
 Avrămescu Gabriel Ioan

B

Bădescu Ruxandra
 Bădulescu Daniel
 Băiașu Daniela
 Bălu Florentina-Olivia
 Bălu Petronela-Evelina
 Barbu Cătălin Mihail
 Barbu Mihai Constantin Răzvan
 Bătae Oana Marina
 Bazavan Adrian
 Bercu Florentin
 Bertnocel Tine
 Bigea Mariana Vasilica
 Bigioi Adrian Doru
 Bigioi Cristina Elena
 Bițan Gabriela Elena
 Bobe Magdalena
 Boboc Cristina Rodica
 Boc Ruxandra Elena
 Bocean Claudiu George
 Bodislav Dumitru Alexandru
 Bogoslov Ioana Andreea
 Bojescu Irina
 Boldureanu Daniel
 Boldureanu Gabriela
 Bortea Andra-Nicoleta
 Boshnakov Petyo
 Boteanu Carmen-Mihaela
 Bothe Jörg
 Brad Laura
 Bran Florina
 Brandabur Raluca-Ecaterina
 Bratoveanu Dumitrache Bogdan

Brezeanu Petre
 Brînză Geanina
 Bucur Mihaela
 Budz Sonia
 Bujduveanu Stelian
 Bukvić Ivana Bestvina
 Bulin Daniel
 Bumbac Robert
 Bunea Mariana
 Burlacu Sorin
 Butnaru Gina Ionela
 Butu Alina
 Butu Ionela
 Butu Marian
 Bux Christian
 Buzatu Alexandru-Ilie
 Buzoianu Ovidiu Cristian
 Andrei
C
 Călin George Marian
 Capelli Sonia
 Casangiu Laetitia
 Căuțișanu Cristina
 Cazazian Maria Rafaela
 Ceaușu Ioana
 Cepoi Andrei
 Cernătescu Elena Cristina
 Chiripuci Bogdan-Cristian
 Chița Sandra Diana
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 Chițimiea Andreea
 Ciobanu Ghenadie
 Clement Claudiu
 Condrea Elena
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 Corduneanu Alexandru
 Cosman Adrian
 Coșofreț Bogdan-Dumitru
 Costoiu Mihnea
 Costovici (Mema) Denisa-Atena
 Crișmariu Oana-Diana
 Cucu Marian Cătălin
 Curteanu Adrian Bogdan
D
 Dabija Dan-Cristian
 Daia Alexandru
 Dan Mihaela Cornelia
 Dârdală Marian

Diab Bassel
 Diaconescu Dragoș Laurențiu
 Diaconescu Mihai
 Diaconescu Mirela
 Diaconescu Vlad
 Diaconu Amelia
 Diaconu Silviu
 Dima Cristina
 Dina Răzvan
 Dincă Aurel
 Dinu Vasile
 Dobrescu Tiberiu G.
 Dobrotă Carmen-Elena
 Dracea Lăcrămioara
 Drăgușin Mariana
 Dumitrache (Șerbănescu) Ana
 Maria
 Dumitrache Victor-Marian
 Dumitrescu Bianca Ioana
 Dumitrescu Mihaela-Sorina
 Dumitru Daniel
 Dumitru Mădălina
 Dumitru Valentin-Florentin
 Ďurišová Mária
E
 Enache Calcedonia
 Ene (Vasile) Cristina Mariana
 Ene Irina
F
 Felea Mihai Adrian
 Feleagă Liliana
 Filip Alina
 Florea Andrei-Mirel
 Florea Iulia Oana
 Fogoros Teodora Elena
 Foltynowicz Zenon
 Frînculeasa Mădălina Nicoleta
G
 Gavrilă-Paven Ionela
 Georgescu Bogdan
 Georgescu Radu Mircea
 Gheorghe Carmen
 Gheorghe Georgică
 Ghețu Raluca Andreea
 Ghiță Simona
 Giușcă Smaranda
 Goia (Agoston) Simona Irina
 Gole Iulian

Gorovei Alina-Alexandra
Grab Benjamin
Grigorescu Adriana
Grosu Raluca Mariana

H

Hadad Shahrazad
Harba Jacqueline-Nathalie
Haršanji Maja
Hassan Hend
Hassani Youssef
Holobiuc Ana-Maria
Holostencu Luciana-Floriana
Hrib Bogdan
Hromei Anca-Simona
Hubel (Anghel) Ștefania -
Rodica

I

Icociu Cristina Vasilica
Ilie (Troii) Silvia Mioara
Ille Casiana
Ion Tiberiu
Ionică Maria
Ionescu Bogdan-Ștefan
Ionescu Crina-Dana
Ionescu Răzvan Cristian
Ionescu-Tîrgoviște Constantin
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J

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K

Kancheva Irina
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L

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M

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N

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Nicodim Liliana
Nicolescu Michael Marian
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Nițu Maria

O

Oancea Negescu Mihaela Diana
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Olteanu Andrada
Onete Bogdan Cristian
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P

Pamfilie Rodica
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Rusescu Ciprian

S

Sabou Gabriel Cristian
Safta Adela Sorinela
Sârbu Maria-Alexandra
Sârbu Roxana
Săseanu Andreea Simona
Săveanu Tomina
Savin Mihai
Silvestru Cătălin Ionuț

Sîrbu Mirela-Octavia
Stemureanu Ion
Stanciu Silviu
Stancu Alina
Stancu Stelian
Stănculescu Simona Marilena
Stănescu Mihaela
State Olimpia
Stoica Mihai
Strătilă (Irimia) Andreea
Surugiu Ioana
Suvorov Nicolae
Șchiopu Andreea Fortuna
Ștefănescu (Lupu) Rodica
T
Tăchiciu Laurențiu
Takács Ildikó-Csilla
Tănase Mihail Ovidiu
Teiu Codrin
Tenie Iulian
Terinte Paula-Andreea
Terza Cristian G.
Toader Șerban
Tofan Ovidiu Dragoș

Tohănean Dragoș
Tohănean Ștefan
Toma Sorin George
Toma Maria-Alexandra
Tricase Caterina
Troacă Victor Adrian
Țuclea Claudia-Elena
Tudor Sorin
Tudorache Petronela
Tudoran (Niculiță) Valentina
Irena
Țală Mădălina Lavinia
Țigu Gabriela
Țițan Emilia
Țurlea Carmen
Țurlea Eugeniu
Țurlea Ioan-Codruț
U
Ulman Simona-Roxana
V
Vannoni Valeria
Vargas Vanesa Mădălina
Vârzaru Anca Antoaneta
Vasilache Petruț Cristian

Vasilcovschi Andra
Vasile Valentina
Vasilu Cristinel
Veith Cristina
Velicu Elena Rusalca
Vieriu Alina Maria
Vilcea Lucian
Viziniuc Cosmin
Vlădoi Alexandru
Vlăsceanu Carmen Florentina
Vochin Oana Alexandra
Voicu Roxana
Voinea Lelia
Vrabie Anamaria
Vrânceanu Diana-Maria
W
Weiss Pablo Valentin
Z
Zaharia Sorin Eugen
Zamfir Ionela-Cătălina
Zavera Ioana Coralia
Zgură Daniel
Zota Răzvan Daniel

CONTENTS

Culinary Habits, Between Tradition and Change. Case Study: Romanians in Parma, Italy <i>Laetitia Casangiu</i>	25
Literature Review on the Nonfinancial Reporting of the State-Owned Enterprises <i>Mădălina Dumitru, Valentin-Florentin Dumitru</i>	33
The Relationship Between Gender Equality, Women Empowerment and Sustainable Development <i>Hend Hassan</i>	41
Teaching Staff and School Population: Major Trends in Romania's Pre-University Education System <i>Monica Logofătu, Adrian Cosman, Sorin Tudor, Elena Cristina Cernătescu</i>	49
Pre-University Education System in the EU: Relevant Features of Its Teaching Staff <i>Adrian Cosman, Monica Logofătu, Gabriel Ioan Avrănescu, Sorin Tudor</i>	57
Integrative Approaches of Business Ethics, Corporate Governance and Social Responsibility <i>Michael Marian Nicolescu, Claudiu George Bocean, Anca Antoaneta Vărzaru</i>	65
Ethics and Disclosure of Accounting, Financial and Social Information Within Listed Companies. Evidence From the Bucharest Stock Exchange <i>Michael Marian Nicolescu, Anca Antoaneta Vărzaru</i>	73
Value Management Principles' Extension for Suppliers, as Major Company's Stakeholder <i>Mária Ďurišová, Dana Kušnírová, Eva Malichová</i>	81
The Relationship Between the CEO Characteristics and the Financial Performance of the Romanian Banking System <i>Mariana Bunea</i>	88
Marketing Developments in the Sharing Economy <i>Mihai Constantin Răzvan Barbu, Cătălin Mihail Barbu, Dragoș Laurențiu Diaconescu</i>	97
Initial Thoughts on the Impact of Robotic Process Automation on the Accounting Department <i>Valentin-Florentin Dumitru, Simona Marilena Stănculescu</i>	105

The Improvement of Management Accounting and Calculation Methods in Tourism and Public Alimentation Activity <i>Eugeniu Țurlea, Luminița-Georgiana Achim, Ioan-Codruț Țurlea</i>	113
Luxury Fashion Consumption among Teenagers: Attitude and Purchase Intent <i>Andreea-Ionela Puiu</i>	121
Agricultural Practices to Improve Soil Quality From the Perspective of Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions <i>Lavinia Popescu, Adela Sorinela Safta</i>	129
Perceptions of the Students in the Tourism Specialisations Regarding the Effectiveness of the Educational Process and Their Preparation for the Tourism Sector <i>Geanina Brînză, Alexandru Anichiti, Gina Ionela Butnaru</i>	137
Corporate Governance and Audit Practices, Firm Level Indicators. Evidence From Emerging Europe <i>Paula-Andreea Terinte</i>	145
What Is the Cost of Raising a Child? <i>Valeria Vannoni, Adriana Manolică, Teodora Roman, Gabriela Boldureanu</i>	152
The Profile of the Organic Food Consumer in Romania: A Review <i>Mihai Stoica</i>	160
Analysis of the Factors That Influence Patient Satisfaction in Healthcare <i>Mihai Mehedințu, Roxana Voicu, Mihai Stoica, Alina Filip</i>	168
Corruption and Its Impact on Entrepreneurship <i>Mihaela-Sorina Dumitrescu, Dorel Paraschiv, Maria Nițu, Ioan-Radu Petrariu</i> ...	175
Corporate Governance of the Largest European Banks <i>Oana Marina Bătae, Liliana Feleagă, Bogdan-Ștefan Ionescu</i>	182
Romania: Two Distinct Financial Periods and the Same Management Errors <i>Adriana Grigorescu, Denisa-Atena Costovici (Mema)</i>	190
Global Digital Economy. Blockchain Technology and Public Administrations <i>Adriana Grigorescu, Andra-Nicoleta Bortea</i>	198
Sustainable Events, the Gateway for Online Events <i>Daniel Moise, Amelia Diaconu, Svetlana Platagea Gombos, Silviu Diaconu</i>	206
The Impact of Digitization on the Labor Market Paths and Development Opportunities <i>Roxana Sârbu, Ghenadie Ciobanu, Maria Loredana Popescu, Victor Adrian Troacă</i>	214

The Sustainability Paradigm of Value and Entropic Approach of Economic Systems in the Ideas of Paul Bran <i>Carmen Valentina Rădulescu, Florina Bran, Dumitru Alexandru Bodislav, Sorin Burlacu</i>	222
Public Policy in the Areas of Environment and Energy <i>Dumitru Alexandru Bodislav, Carmen Valentina Radulescu, Florina Bran, Sorin Burlacu</i>	228
The Urbanization in the Context of Sustainable Development <i>Marius Constantin Profiroiu, Mihaela Diana Oancea Negescu, Sorin Petrică Angheluță, Petruț Cristian Vasilache</i>	236
Aspects of Waste Management in the European Union <i>Sorin Petrică Angheluță, Irina Elena Petrescu, Marcela Antoneta Niculescu, Elena Rusalca Velicu</i>	244
Globalization of Financial Systems in Emerging Countries <i>Mihaela Diana Negescu Oancea, Ovidiu Cristian Andrei Buzoianu, Valentin Lazăr, Cristina Dima</i>	252
Demographic Characteristics of Employees as Work Engagement Predictors: Case Study of Serbia <i>Ana Nešić, Slavica Mitrović Veljković, Maja Meško, Tine Bertnocel</i>	259
Determinants of Persistent Poverty in the EU Countries <i>Simona-Roxana Ulman, Cristina Căuțișanu</i>	267
Convenience Stores Targeting Alpha Generation Children as Their Important Influence in Shopping Decision <i>Andreea Strătilă (Irimia)</i>	275
Digital Development Dynamics in Russia in 2015 – 2018 <i>Sergey Petrov, Mikhail Maslov, Alexey Karpovich</i>	283
Sharing Economy and Entrepreneurship: A Case Study from Romania <i>Cristian Negruțiu, Vasile Dinu, Cristinel Vasiliu, Ruxandra Bădescu</i>	291
Product Differentiation Influence in the Cournot, Bertrand and Hierarchical Stackelberg Duopolies <i>Ciprian Ruscescu, Mihai Daniel Roman</i>	298
Machine Learning for Financial Applications – a Mini-Review <i>Claudiu Clement</i>	306
The Analysis of Rural Communities in Bucovina <i>Petronela Tudorache</i>	313
Are All Romanian Entrepreneurs Alike? Findings From the GEM 2015 Survey <i>Adrian Oțoiu</i>	321

How CSR Programs Affect Employees' Happiness. A Literature Survey <i>Alina-Alexandra Gorovei</i>	329
Mapping Uncertainty: Machine Learning to Act Humanly? <i>Alexandru Corduneanu</i>	335
Mergers as Ways of Increasing Equity for Shareholders on the Long Term <i>Anca-Simona Hromei</i>	343
Digital Trends in Audit <i>Ovidiu Dragoş Tofan</i>	349
The Particular Case of the Kirznerian Entrepreneur. A Focus on the International Market <i>Anca Elena Lungu</i>	357
Comparing E-Learning Platforms from the Perspective of Facilitating Active and Collaborative Learning <i>Ioana Andreea Bogoslov, Radu Mircea Georgescu</i>	364
The Evolution and the Impact of Corruption at the EU Level <i>Maria Nişu, Daniela Ioana Manea, Mihaela-Sorina Dumitrescu, Mihai Savin</i>	372
Review of Marketing Strategies Used by Electricity Suppliers in the Household Retail Markets <i>Alexandru Maxim</i>	380
The Integrated Reporting and Its Adoption Perspectives in the European Union <i>Bogdan-Dumitru Coşofreţ</i>	388
Aspects of Consumers' Behavior of Online Scientific Information in the Academic Environment <i>Cristina Albu</i>	395
Stakeholder Prioritization in European Companies <i>Bogdan Ştefan Ionescu, Liliana Feleagă, Oana Marina Bătae</i>	403
Managerial Current Issues in the Context of Organizational Behaviour in Tourism <i>Mădălina Lavinia Ţală, Olimpia State</i>	411
Understanding Sustainable Tourism Choices. A European Network Case Study <i>Anamaria Vrabie</i>	419
Understanding Urban Mobility Choices. A Romanian Field Study <i>Anamaria Vrabie</i>	425
Gender Typologies on European Labour Market <i>Cristina Boboc, Simona Ghiţă, Andrada Olteanu, Valentina Vasile</i>	432

The Importance of the Regional Operational Program in the Regional Development of Romania <i>Vasile-Ionel Popescu, Bogdan Georgescu, Irina Albăstroiu, Liviu-Constantin Popescu</i>	439
Investigating the Impact of Organizational Culture on Information Technology Governance <i>Ion Smeureanu, Bassel Diab</i>	447
Organizational Change Strategies for Developing Sustainable Business <i>Ildikó-Csilla Takács</i>	455
Revenue and Expenditure Budget, Instrument of Financial Management <i>Carmen Țurlea, Maria Rafaela Cazazian, Marian Valentin Moldoveanu</i>	463
New European Union Green Deal in Tough Times of COVID-19 Plague <i>Zenon Foltynowicz</i>	471
Extra Kilograms and Overweight as Economic Threats <i>Raluca-Ecaterina Brandabur, Daniel Moise, Bogdan Georgescu, Mihai Adrian Felea</i>	479
The Effects of the Fear of Failure on the Success in the Business Environment <i>Cristina Mariana Ene (Vasile), Cosmin Viziniuc, Mariana Vasilica Bigea</i>	487
Small and Medium Enterprises Incentives in Corporate Social Responsibility Practices Regarding Education in the North-Western Region of Romania <i>Tomina Săveanu, Casiana Ille, Daniel Bădulescu</i>	495
Economic Trends and Entrepreneurial Activity <i>Cristian G. Terza</i>	503
Drivers of the Evolution of the Corporate Social Responsibility: Country Aspect <i>Elena Matveeva</i>	510
Entrepreneurial Education, Information Technology and Communication, Innovation <i>Alina-Andreea Marin, Andreea Chițimiea</i>	517
Trends for Sustainable Agribusiness and Agrofood Consumption in Romania <i>Ioana Panait, Marian Cătălin Cucu</i>	524
Implementing Net Promoter Score in the Public Sector Organizations <i>Oana Alexandra Vochin, Maria-Alexandra Sârbu, Silviu Stanciu, Jiries Mansour</i> ...	532
Hosting Mega-Sport Events – Costs and Benefits for Russia <i>Iuliana Pop, Daniel Bulin, Adrian Lucian Kanovici, Laura Brad</i>	540

Basic Tourism Concepts in Romania <i>Iuliana Pop, Claudia Rodica Popescu, Luciana-Floriana Holostencu, Delia Popescu</i>	548
Crossing the Chasm From Divergence to Convergence in an Enlarged European Union <i>Dumitru Miron, Ana-Maria Holobiuc</i>	556
Sustainable Cross – Cultural Business Between Romania & Japan in the Automotive Industry <i>Cristina Veith</i>	563
Rethinking the Impact of Crowdfunders on Economic Success of Companies <i>Peter Konhäusner</i>	571
Digital Innovation in the Health Sector – a Determinant of Health Status. Records in the EU <i>Mihaela Mihai, Emilia Țițan, Daniela-Ioana Manea, Crina-Dana Ionescu</i>	579
Airlines Sustainable Business Models <i>Casandra Venera Pietreanu, Sorin Eugen Zaharia, Adina Petruța Pavel</i>	587
Risk Assessment of Chemical Residues in Food Determined by the Use of Pesticides in Agriculture <i>Alina Stancu, Radu Antohe, Martin Dorin, Denisa Rădulescu</i>	595
Challenges for Entrepreneurs Amidst the COVID-19 <i>Mihaela Cornelia Dan, Simona Irina Goia (Agoston)</i>	602
Comparative Preliminary Study Regarding the Quantification of Fiscal Pressure at the Level of VAT on the Example of Some European Countries <i>Raluca Andreea Ghețu, Ionela Butu, Adriana Elena Porumboiu, Petre Brezeanu</i>	610
Determining International Competitiveness Through Comparative Advantage at Regional Level – Instrument in Designing Regional Strategy. Study Case: Central Region, Romania <i>Ionela Gavrilă-Paven</i>	618
Best Practices of Nongovernmental Organisations in Combatting COVID-19 <i>Marcela-Sefora Nemțeanu, Dan-Cristian Dabija</i>	626
Assessment of the Environmental Reporting Practices of the Companies Indexed in the GRI Database <i>Alexandra-Oana Marinescu</i>	634
Early Childhood Education for Sustainability Entrepreneurship <i>Ioana Marin, Maria Ioncică, Andreea Marin-Pantelescu</i>	642
IMO 2020: Enviromental and Economic Impact <i>Adrian Istrate Scrădeanu, Andrei Cepoi, Enas Aboura, Mihaela Bucur</i>	649

Couple Roles in Wine Purchase Decisions - A Study of Bulgarian Residents <i>Petyo Boshnakov, Georgi Marinov, Irina Kancheva.....</i>	655
New Technologies in the 21st Century - Adoption, Acceptance and Impact on Business Models <i>Dragoş Tohănean, Ioana Ceauşu, Laurenţiu Tăchiciu, Ştefan Tohănean.....</i>	661
Clustering Analysis on News From Health OSINT Data Regarding Coronavirus-Covid 19 <i>Alexandru Daia, Stelian Stancu, Alexandru Vlodoi, Constantin Ionescu-Tîrgovişte....</i>	669
The Relationship Between E-Learning and Sustainability. The Blog as a Future E-Learning Tool <i>Bogdan Cristian Onete, Sonia Budz, Vanesa Mădălina Vargas, Sandra Diana Chiţa.....</i>	675
Econometric Modeling of Intelligent Reporting <i>Rodica Pripoaie, Riana Iren Radu, Andrei-Mirela Florea, Oana Daniela Lupoe.....</i>	683
Does the Network Affect Firms' Performance? The Case of Italian Agri-Food Sector <i>Valeria Vannoni, Gabriela Boldureanu, Teodora Roman, Daniel Boldureanu.....</i>	691
Determinants of Green Product Buying Decision Among Romanian Consumers <i>Mirela Diaconescu, Mihaela Constantinescu, Claudia-Elena Ţuclea, Mihai Diaconescu.....</i>	699
Challenges of Transition From a Compliance-Based Logic to One Based on Proactivity. The Contribution of New Trade Balances at the Level of Romania Generating Prosperity <i>Dumitru Miron, Ioana Coralia Zavera.....</i>	707
How Attractive Can a Job in Sales Be? A Business Students' Evaluation <i>Diana-Maria Vrânceanu, Mirela Diaconescu, Mihai Diaconescu, Vlad Diaconescu..</i>	715
A Neuroscientific Approach on the Impact of Information Overload on Consumers' Attention <i>Corina Pelău, Ruxandra Bădescu, Cristian Negruţiu.....</i>	723
Consumer's Perception Towards the Characteristics of Artificial Intelligence <i>Irina Ene, Irina Bojescu.....</i>	730
Consumers' Perception on Data Storage and Browsing History Depending on Their Demographic Characteristics <i>Mihaela Stănescu, Miruna Niculescu.....</i>	738
The Influence of the Internal Managerial Control on the Corporate Governance Within the Public Entities <i>Silvia Mioara Ilie (Troi), Aurel Dincă.....</i>	746

Major Trends in the Development of Airports From Central and Eastern Europe and Baltic Countries <i>Sorin Eugen Zaharia, Casandra Venera Pietreanu, Adina Petruța Pavel, Ruxandra Elena Boc</i>	753
Social Media as a Tool for Increasing Business Competitiveness <i>Răzvan Dina, Lelia Voinea, Dorin Vicențiu Popescu, Teodor Mihai Negrea</i>	761
Physicians' Migration From Romania. Recent Evidence From Administrative Data <i>Simona-Andreea Apostu, Monica Roman, Valentina Vasile</i>	768
Skills and Competences Pyramid V. Study Programs <i>Cristina Vasilica Icociu, Nicolae Postăvaru, Mihnea Costoiu, Tiberiu G. Dobrescu, Cătălin Ionuț Silvestru</i>	775
The Evolution of Agricultural Cooperatives in Romania <i>Andrei-Mirel Florea, Florentin Bercu, Riana Iren Radu, Oana Iuliana Mihai</i>	783
Case Study on the Connection Between the Structure of the Management Systems and the Performance of the Banking Entities in Romania <i>Cristina Elena Bigioi, Adrian Doru Bigioi</i>	791
Quality Management in the Tourism Sector in Transylvania <i>Corina Aurora Marin (Barbu), Valentina Irena Tudoran (Niculiță), Elena Condrea</i>	799
Entrepreneurial Competences in the Training of Future Technicians in Economic Activities <i>Victor-Marian Dumitrache, Iulian Gole, Petronela-Evelina Bălu, Florentina-Olivia Bălu</i>	807
Transition to a Circular Economy - Strategies and Progress <i>Gabriela Iuliana (Ganea) Paraschiv, Ștefania - Rodica (Anghel) Hubel, Ana Maria Dumitrache (Șerbănescu)</i>	815
Urban Agglomerations in the Perspective of Sustainable Tourism Development - Strategy and Financing Possibilities <i>Ștefania - Rodica (Anghel) Hubel, Gabriela Iuliana (Ganea) Paraschiv, Panait Anghel</i>	822
Risks and Opportunities of Digital Platforms for Scaling Business Models <i>Pablo Valentin Weiss, Benjamin Grab</i>	829
Email Subject Lines Analysis for High Open Rate in Email Marketing <i>Codrin Teiu</i>	835
Personal Branding vs. National Identity <i>Mihai Ioan Roșca, Angela Madan</i>	841

The Use of Hashtags to Promote Sustainability <i>Bogdan Cristian Onete, Sandra Diana Chița, Doru Alexandru Pleșea, Vanesa Mădălina Vargas.....</i>	848
Interconnection of Information and Communication Technologies as a RIS3 Key Priority and Innovation <i>Ivana Bestvina Bukvić, Ivo Mijoč, Maja Haršanji.....</i>	856
Two Years Analysis of Romanian Counties From Agricultural Activities and GDP per Capita Point of View <i>Ionela-Cătălina Zamfir.....</i>	864
Strategies for Using Nitrates to Improve Soil Performance and Soil C Sequestration <i>Lavinia Popescu, Adela Sorinela Safta.....</i>	871
Monitoring Transformation of Bioeconomy Entrepreneurship in Romania <i>Steliana Rodino, Alina Butu, Carmen Gheorghe, Marian Butu.....</i>	879
How to Apply Self-Management Principles in the Context of Digital Transformation <i>Benjamin Grab, Marieta Olaru, Mihaela Maftai, Ioana Surugiu.....</i>	886
The Beer Market in Romania. Situation and Outlook <i>Dumitrache Bogdan Bratoveanu, Marius Daniel Nicula, Roxana Sârbu, Silvius Stanciu.....</i>	894
China's Transition to a Knowledge Economy Institutional Mechanisms, Public Policies and Private Investment <i>Adrian Bazavan.....</i>	902
Sustainable Businesses Enhanced Through Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence in the Context of Industry 4.0 <i>Bianca Ioana Dumitrescu, Alexandru-Ilie Buzatu.....</i>	910
Leadership Changes in Organizations During Crisis Sars-Cov-2 2020 Case <i>Andrei Cepoi, Adrian Istrate Scărădeanu, Cristinel Vasiliu.....</i>	918
Eco-Friendly Pest Control Alternatives to Synthetic/Chemical Pesticides <i>Alina Stancu, Nicolae Suvorov, Lăcrămioara Dracea, Daniela Mărăcine.....</i>	926
Value Transformation: From Internal Capabilities to Blockchain-Based Business Models <i>Luciana-Floriana Holostencu.....</i>	934
Study on Information Security Management System and Business Continuity Management in the Context of the Global Crisis <i>Georg Sven Lampe, Mihaela Maftai, Ioana Surugiu, Răzvan Cristian Ionescu.....</i>	942

A Study on Factors Influencing Sustainable Entrepreneurship in European Union Countries <i>Teodora Elena Fogoros, Dorin Maier, Adrian Iordache, Gabriela Elena Bițan.....</i>	950
A Study on Information Security Impact on the Delivery of IT Managed Services <i>Răzvan Cristian Ionescu, Marieta Olaru, Georg Sven Lampe, Teodora Elena Fogoros.....</i>	958
Possibilities for Improving of Supply Chain Performance in the Context of Sustainable Development <i>Youssef Hassani, Gabriela Elena Bițan, Rodica Ștefănescu (Lupu).....</i>	966
Agricultural Market in the Republic of Moldova. Challenges and Development Perspectives <i>Mihaela Munteanu Pila.....</i>	974
Senior Entrepreneurship in Romania: A Quantitative Approach <i>Raluca Mariana Grosu, Mariana Drăgușin.....</i>	981
Towards a Romania With Low Carbon Emissions <i>George Marian Călin, Andreea Antoneac (Lungu).....</i>	989
Digital Teaching in Romania During COVID 19 <i>Cristina Veith.....</i>	997
Feminine Leadership in Science and Education <i>Andreea Simona Săseanu, Simona Ioana Ghiță, Sorin George Toma, Cristina Rodica Boboc.....</i>	1004
Food Waste in the Hospitality Industry in Italian and Romanian Experience <i>Vera Amicarelli, Alina Cerasela Avram, Christian Bux, Giovanni Lagioia, Rodica Pamfilie.....</i>	1012
Food Security and Food Waste during Covid-19 Pandemic <i>Vera Amicarelli, Christian Bux.....</i>	1020
Eye-Tracking Experiment Regarding Visual and Textual Stimuli for Celebrity Endorsement <i>Laura Lazăr, Adriana Opriș.....</i>	1028
Consumers' Perception on Fake News <i>Corina Pelău, Mihai Ionuț Pop.....</i>	1035
Books in Time of Pandemia: Romania, One Way Again – From Paper to Internet? <i>Bogdan Hrib.....</i>	1042
Would Smart Solutions Lead to Sustainability Within University? <i>Irina Maiorescu, Gabriel Cristian Sabou, Răzvan Daniel Zota.....</i>	1049

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Informal Sector Entrepreneurship vs Employment	
<i>Cristian Marinescu</i>	1056
Connectedness of Stock Markets in Eastern and Central Europe	
<i>Alexandru Vlădoi, Alexandru Daia</i>	1063
Increasing the Competitiveness of the Fishing Sector in Moldova. Research on New Fish Feeding Schemes	
<i>Mihaela Munteanu Pila</i>	1070
Industrial Heritage Touristic Capitalization in a Historical Town	
<i>Mădălina Nicoleta Frînculeasa, Răzvan Ion Chițescu</i>	1077
Scientific Information and the Internet in the Modern Educational Context	
<i>Răzvan Ion Chițescu, Mădălina Nicoleta Frînculeasa, Daniela Băiașu</i>	1085
Case Study on Healthcare Reporting	
<i>Iulia Oana Florea, Liliana Nicodim</i>	1093
Financing the Organic Farming Sector in the European Union - the Challenge of the Common Agricultural Policy	
<i>Carmen-Elena Dobrotă, Carmen-Mihaela Boteanu, Elena-Daniela Rebegea</i>	1101
Cruising Industry: Sustainability Performance and Social Responsibility	
<i>Carmen Florentina Vlăsceanu, Gabriela Țigu</i>	1109
Competitiveness in Global Hospitality and Cruising Industry	
<i>Carmen Florentina Vlăsceanu, Gabriela Țigu</i>	1117
The Food Supplements Market is Evolving: What are the Issues in Romania?	
<i>Magdalena Bobe, Roxana Procopie, Maria Alexandra Toma</i>	1125
Tourism - History, Statistics and Reality	
<i>Puiu Nistoreanu, Shahrazad Hadad</i>	1133
Innovation in the Food Sector: Modeling the Future of Food Security	
<i>Magdalena Bobe, Maria-Alexandra Toma, Robert Bumbac, Alexandru Jurconi</i>	1140
Top-Management Impact Factors Preventing Turnaround Processes	
<i>Jörg Bothe, Dorin Maier, Robert Bumbac</i>	1148
Slow Tourism in the View of the Researchers	
<i>Georgică Gheorghe, Andreea Marin-Pantelescu</i>	1156
An Insight Into Green Practices and Eco-Labels in the Hotel Industry	
<i>Maria-Cristina Iorgulescu</i>	1164
Perception on a Career in Tourism: The Case of Business and Tourism Students	
<i>Maria-Cristina Iorgulescu, Olimpia State, Mihail Ovidiu Tănase</i>	1172

Statistical Techniques for Analyzing the Impact of the Macroeconomic Determinants of Foreign Tourism Demands in Romania <i>Calcedonia Enache, Sonia Budz, Mirela-Octavia Sîrbu, Daniel Zgură</i>	1180
Is There Any More Space for the Cooperatives Into the Romanian Market? <i>Alina-Elena Iosif, Sonia Capelli, Mirela Octavia Sîrbu</i>	1187
The Telemedicine and ICT as Tool to Improve the Local Healthcare <i>Matteo Rivezzi, Caterina Tricase, Roberto Leonardo Rana</i>	1195
Analysis of the Labour Force in the Most Two Inhabited Regions from Romania – South-Muntenia and North-East <i>Maria-Floriana Popescu, Bogdan-Cristian Chiripuci</i>	1203
Coronavirus Pandemic – Leverage for Cybercrime <i>Daniel Dumitru, Tiberiu Ion</i>	1211
Detecting Plant Diseases Using Deep Learning Architectures <i>Lucian Vilcea, Marian Dârdală</i>	1218
Mining Social Media to Identify the Immediate Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Romanian Retailers: Early Findings <i>Adriana Reveiu, Denis-Cătălin Arghir</i>	1225
Chocolate, a Global Business <i>Sorin-George Toma, Andreea Simona Săseanu</i>	1233
Money Laundering Measurement. Microeconomic And Macroeconomic Approaches <i>Iulia Oana Florea</i>	1241
From Growth, to Chaos, to Uncertainty: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on European Tourism <i>Jacqueline-Nathalie Harba, Mihaela Parteca, Stelian Bujduveanu</i>	1249
A Case Study of Business Model Innovation: Building Value Through Gamification <i>Rodica Pamfilie, Roxana Procopie, Smaranda Giușcă, Andra Vasilcovschi</i>	1257
The Food-Loop: Tackling Sustainability Issues Through a Normative Approach. A Breakfast-Buffer Case Study <i>Alina Maria Vieriu, Andreea Fortuna Șchiopu</i>	1263
A New Clients’ Paradigm in Professional Auditing Services Firms. Can the Auditor – Auditee Relationship Survive? <i>Șerban Toader</i>	1271
Tourism fiscal and monetary policies adjustments during COVID-19 pandemic <i>Oana-Diana Crișmariu, Ionela Butu, Adrian Bogdan Curteanu, Iulian Tenie</i>	1279



Possible Use of ICT in Agriculture for a Sustainable Development

Georgeta-Mădălina Meghișan-Toma, Vasile Cosmin Nicula..... 1287

INTERCONNECTION OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AS A RIS3 KEY PRIORITY AND INNOVATION

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Abstract

Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) concept is incorporated in EU policies almost a decade ago with the aim of more effective and stronger support to national and regional strategic priorities and fields in which countries and regions can develop a potential competitive advantage. Information and communication technologies (ICT), although a priority area themselves, interconnect and complement all other priority areas which makes them even more important. In analyzing S3 concept implementation researchers found numerous issues that limit its application in desired scope. This paper aims to analyze the S3 implementation and inclusion of ICT as one of the key priorities of National Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3). This paper is giving the answers on following research questions: “Are digital technologies in the focus of less developed or lower level innovation countries, as of their existing potential to become future economic growth drivers?” and “What is the impact of *Europe 2020 Strategy*, measured in GDP per capita percentage change, in the period before and after the *Europe 2020 Strategy* presentation?”.

It was found that the lower-level innovation countries are more often choosing the ICT as RIS3 priority. These and other findings stated in this paper can be of use for policy-makers on the EU and national level in a future revising of the RIS3.

Keywords

Information & communication technologies, GDP per capita growth, Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation

JEL Classification:

O52, O20

Introduction

As of European Union (EU) endeavours to reduce gaps in the development of its Member States and to achieve balanced economic growth, numerous policies have been adopted and activities carried out. „Since 2000, the financial instruments of the European programs have been more focused on making innovation policies more effective and in line with business needs, in particular by encouraging greater cooperation between business and other economic actors.” (Pacheco et al., 2020, p.14) “Investment plan for Europe” was adopted in 2014 with the aim “to boost investment, to increase competitiveness and to support long-term economic growth in the EU” (European Council, 2020, p.1). The Smart Specialisation concept on the level of EU was developed in the frame of *Europe 2020: a European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth* proposed by the European Commission in 2010. The regions and Member States have been developing their own national and regional *Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation* (RIS3) for the financial period 2014-2020, intending to identify the key priorities which can be supported from the EU funds, primary European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) (Jurlin et al., 2018) The special value of the Smart specialisation concept was that it was „expected to create more diversity among regions than a regime in which each region tries to create more or less the same by imitation.” (Foray et al., n.d.) Smart Specialisation in this context means „countries should identify strategic “domains” of existing and/or potential competitive advantage, where they can specialize and create capabilities in a different way compared to other countries and regions” (Asheim, 2018, pp. 2-3) „Smart Specialisation policy targets industrial restructuring and economic growth, therefore understanding the economic effects of S3 is crucial for policy design and evaluation.” (Varga et. al, 2020, p. 17) The concept of sustainable and smart growth was spread over the EU borders. In 2015 UN Member States, adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Out of 17 goals, 3 are directly connected to the macroeconomic aspect of growth; *Reduce inequality within and among countries* (10), *Industry innovation and infrastructure* (9) and *Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth full of productive employment and decent work for all* (8). By analyzing the achievements of all member countries it was found that EU countries are among the top 20 worldwide in achieving the SDGs. At, the other hand the European Commission (EC) gave an overview of progress towards the SDGs in an EU context where it was emphasized that the macroeconomic directed goals 9 and 10 are the lowest-ranked, while the 8 is placed in the middle of the moderate progress rank (European Union, 2019). Following the previous S3 concept „in the new programming period 2021-2027, according to the European Commission proposal (2018), the governance of the national or regional strategy for smart Specialisation is the only enabling condition (a precondition for effective and efficient implementation) for Cohesion Policy Objective 1: “A smarter Europe, promoting smart and innovative economic transformation”. (Pacheco et al., 2020, p. 10) Landesmann and Stöllinger (2020) are seeing S3 supported by the major EU fund (ERDF) as a way of improving the effectiveness of the EU’s cohesion. In this process digital transformation, key technologies and ICT are seen as development drivers (Bestvina and Đurđević Babić, 2019). In Slovakia, as a result of technology-oriented national Smart Specialisation strategies almost EUR 400 million was invested in science parks and capacity building incubators specializing in ICT or biotechnology (Balog, 2020:114) to raise the level of digital and technical innovation capacities. Nevertheless, the significant differences in absorption power and the capacity to implement the RIS3 between Member States are arising. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the ongoing discussion and better understanding of an S3 concept and analysis of the level of inclusion of ICT as one of the RIS3 key priorities which will be determining Europe’s future global competitiveness and a concept that can contribute to fostering of economic growth of less developed or countries positioned on a lower level of Innovation Scoreboard. The authors are expecting to get the answers on the

following research questions: “Are new technologies in the focus of less developed or less innovative countries as possible future economic growth drivers?” and “What is the impact of *Europe 2020 Strategy*, measured in GDP per capita percentage change, in the period before and after the Strategy presentation?”.

The paper is giving the analyses of data published by Eurostat and EU of the presence of the ICT in the national RIS3 by the level of country innovation performance and analysis of annual GDP per capita percentage change trends (observing the periods before and after the presentation of the *Europe 2020 Strategy*, i.e. 2000-2009 and 2010-2018) for 28 European countries (EU Member States and United Kingdom (UK)).

Smart Specialisation implementation challenges

Although S3 is a progressive concept set on the level of EU policies and strategic documents its implementation faced numerous obstacles. Many factors are influencing the S3 success and furthermore, even its applicability to less-developed countries and regions has been questioned (Hassink and Gong, 2019; Trippl et al., 2020, Murzyn, 2019; Kiel, 2019). It was found that there are open question starting from the efforts of local policy to develop models for its implementation and development of institutional support, the absorptive capacity of regions and companies, R&D organization inclusion into development processes, funding capacities, etc. It seems that after the S3 devising, the development of a supporting environment for its implementation should become a priority. (Trippl et al., 2020) But the differences in absorption are not only coming from the challenges on the national level but on the regional and local levels (Keil, 2019, Hassink and Gong, 2019; Trippl et al., 2020, Murzyn, 2019). Pavone et al. (2019) are searching for regional differences to find complementarities and synergies among the EU regions that could be of use in designing and implementation of innovative programs within the regions, where regions should conduct more focused than generic analyses and learn from other more successful regions (Balland et al., 2018; Varga et al., 2020). The models of improving connectivity between regional stakeholders should be developed, as low connectivity is slowing down the S3 implementation (Mäenpää, 2020). But, at the same time „even when regional capabilities and inter-regional linkages are in place, a weak institutional structure might still prevent a successful diversification process in regions.” (Balland, Boschma, 2019) Papamichail, Rosiello and Wield (2019) have argued that there are three Capacity-building barriers are preventing S3 practices fulfilling its goals which include the lack of collaboration especially between the companies and universities and absence of trusted-based relationships based on Quadruple Helix model that lead towards a different understanding of strategic networking and lack of quality science-business projects (Papamichail et al., 2019) Keil (2019) analyzed how the S3 affected policy-making and how it was adopted in an existing institutional environment in Poland and Lithuania, both moderate innovators. She found that both countries struggled with adopting the innovation concept, especially in the business sector, trying to find a solution with low absorption capacities and possible low cooperation level between business, government and universities with a consequence of a relatively low application success rate in some priority field where business should be involved (Keil, 2019). This is in line with the findings of other authors (Trippl et al., 2020; Papamichail et al., 2019; Asheim, 2018). For those reasons the researchers are questioning the ways of the S3 model implementation and setting models of measurement of the Smart Specialisation effects (Hassink and Gong, 2019; Varga et al. (2020). Hassink and Gong (2019) state that the measurements are important to assess the potential of the regional economy to set and carry out the strategy and to evaluate the results of carried measures according to the strategic plan. This could be of valuable help to policy-makers to set up new or conduct a revision of existing S3 priorities (Varga et al. 2019). Future Smart Specialisation development measures need to impact on „research and

innovation, education (training and skills development), and digital society (using IT and communication technologies)” (Murzyn, 201, p.4)

Research methodology

The study was conducted through the following steps:

- 1) Review of EU policies, EU strategies and studies on S3 concept implementation which were given by previous chapters for the purpose of research question development;
- 2) Design of the research questions and identification of data sources;
- 3) Data processing, analysis and conclusions:
 - a) Determination of the relation between the level of innovation and ICT as a key priority in RIS3 on the level of the Member States and the UK;
 - b) Statistical analysis: comparison of differences in a GDP per capita percentage change, before and after the *Europe 2020* proposal based on country innovation level and comparison of differences in a GDP per capita percentage change of countries that defined ICT as RIS3 key priority.

Through the literature review, the following research questions were set: “Are the new technologies in the focus of less developed or less innovative countries as possible future growth drivers?” and, “What is the impact of *Europe 2020 Strategy*, measured by GDP per capita percentage change in the period before and after the *Europe 2020 Strategy* presentation?”

This study presents the analysis of data published by Eurostat and EU institutions where quantitative analysis applies on two periods: 2000 to 2009 and 2010 to 2008 (before and after the presentation of the *Europe 2020 Strategy* respectively). As of the small sample (28 countries composed of EU Member States and the UK as a former member that was still having a membership status in 2018) the for the purpose of analysis and confirmation of research claims authors used descriptive statistics and non-parametric (Mann-Whitney test). For the same reason the EU Member States were divided by innovation level on two groups: the Lower level innovators (modest and moderate innovators) and the Upper-level innovators (strong innovators and innovation leaders) by 2019 Innovation Scoreboard (Hollanders et al. 2019). Following this paper presents research limitations as follows: small sample size (all EU countries) and mixed distributions (tested by Shapiro-Wilk test) which were the reasons why a non-parametric test was used in statistical analysis. Additionally, the analysis was conducted on the national level where there could be differences depending on the level of regional development and absorption power. This paper is not indicating the reasons for success or a less satisfying S3 implementation results, but it is only presenting the conclusion regarding the existence of differences for the two observed groups during different periods. As well, this research was not analyzing macroeconomic circumstances that could affect the GDP. Global changes are more or less having an impact on all open economies but there are macroeconomic changes on the national level that are as well, out of reach of this survey.

Results and discussion

Through the first step of this research the identification of the connection of innovation level and ICT as a key priority in RIS3 on the level of the Member States and the UK was carried out. Table 1 provides a comparative analysis of the presence of ICT in the national S3 of the Member States and the United Kingdom, by the level of country innovation performance. It can be seen that the presence of the ICT as a Smart Specialisation priority area is more frequent in the modest and moderate level innovator group (69%) than in the upper level innovator countries (42%) where they could be hoping that new digital technologies and development of the society of knowledge will foster their economic growth and mitigate the difference in development to highly developed countries.

Table no. 1 Comparative analysis of the presence of the ICT as a RIS3 priority of EU Member States and the UK by the level of country innovation performance

Upper-level innovators		Lower-level innovators	
Innovation Leader	Strong Innovator	Moderate Innovator	Modest Innovator
FINLAND*	IRELAND*	ESTONIA*	BULGARIA*
SWEEDEN*	AUSTRIA*	HUNGARY*	ROMANIA*
GERMANY*	FRANCE	POLAND*	
UK (former EU member)	LUXEMBOURG	ITALIA*	
NETHERLANDS	SLOVENIA	LATVIA*	
DENMARK		SPAIN*	
BELGIUM		CZECH REPUBLIC*	
		SLOVAKIA*	
		MALTA*	
		CROATIA	
		PORTUGAL	
		LITHUANIA	
		GREECE	
		CYPRUS	
% of countries with ICT as a RIS3 key priority in the innovation group			
43%	40%	60%	100%

*Note: EU Member countries with ICT as a RIS3 key priority.

Source: author's work according to the Data published by the European Commission (2017), Publications Smart Specialisation - Strengthening Innovation (for all member countries and UK) and European Innovation Scoreboard report (Hollanders et al. 2019).

The quantitative research was based on analysis of differences of annual GDP per capita percentage change of the Member States and the UK, before and after the *Europe 2020* proposal through the following:

a) Comparison of a difference between the average annual GDP per capita percentage change in two periods (2000-2009 / 2010-2018). The countries were divided into two categories based on their innovation performance; therefore, the grouping variable was Innovation level where countries were divided on Upper and Lower level innovation countries (by Innovation Scoreboard 2019).

b) Comparison of a difference between the average annual GDP per capita percentage change in two periods (2000-2009 / 2010-2018) by the existence of ICT as RIS3 key priority (grouping variable).

A non-parametric Mann–Whitney test was used to analyze statistical differences on the sample of 28 countries, EU Member States and the UK. The results are following:

a) Grouping Variable: Innovation level (Upper and Lower level innovators) :

Difference of average annual GDP per capita percentage change of two observed periods for Upper level innovators (Mdn = -1.561) significantly differ the same indicator for Lower level innovators (Mdn = -1.112). (Mann-Whitney U = 45.00, z = -2.368, p < .05 (Exact Sig. (2-tailed)), r(Hedges' g) = 0.885. The effect size is large by benchmarks set by Jacob Cohen (1988).

By analysis of an annual GDP per capita percentage change between two observed periods, it was found that after the *Europe 2020 Strategy* proposal as of macroeconomic environment all countries faced decrease (from average annual growth of 2.55% to 1.94% comparing two observed periods) where the Lower level innovators faced a larger decrease of an average annual GDP per capita percentage growth (from 3.41% to 2.24%) than Upper-level innovators (1.54% to 1.40%), although all countries in average continued to achieve a positive annual GDP per capita percentage growth in a period following 2010 this increase was more modest.

b) Grouping Variable: ICT as RIS3 priority : By analysis of the differences between observed countries by criteria of the ICT as a key priority in RIS3 it was found that average annual GDP per capita percentage growth in both observed periods significantly differ between the countries that have not chosen ICT as a key priority in RIS3 ($Mdn_0_{2010-2018} = 1.4450$; $Mdn_0 = 0.9556$) in comparison to those that have chosen it ($Mdn_1_{2000-2009} = 2.2500$; $Mdn_1_{2010-2018} = 2.9111$). Following the results for both periods are given:

Results for the average change of average annual GDP per capita percentage growth in the period 2000-2009 (Grouping variable: ICT as RIS3 priority): (Mann-Whitney $U = 66.00$, $z = -1.393$, $p < .05$ (Exact Sig. (2-tailed)), $r(\text{Hedges' } g) = 0.517619$. The effect size is medium (Cohen, 1988).

Results for the average change of GDP per capita in the period 2010-2018 (Grouping Variable: ICT as RIS3 priority): (Mann-Whitney $U = 51.50$, $z = -2.066$, $p < .05$ (Exact Sig. (2-tailed)), $r(\text{Hedges' } g) = 1.00238$. The effect size is large (Cohen, 1988).

Through this analysis, it was found that both innovation groups that have chosen ICT as their RIS3 key priority have had larger growth of the observed indicator than the countries from the same group that has chosen other priorities (a group of countries with ICT as RIS3 key priority: Upper = 2.15%; Lower = 2.77; countries without ICT as RIS3 key priority Upper = 1.10%; Lower = 1.06).

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to contribute to the ongoing discussion and better understanding of an S3 concept and to give the results of the analysis of the level of inclusion of ICT as one of the RIS3 key priorities as digital technologies are the ones that are considered as drivers of Europe's future global competitiveness and a concept that can contribute to fostering of economic growth of less developed countries. The question of a lack of institutional capacities and differences in the economic development and innovation level between countries and regions is being raised as an obstacle to a more efficient S3 implementation. The positive impact of implementation *Europe 2020 Strategy* was not found as both groups have faced the decline of the annual GDP per capita percentage growth as of macroeconomic circumstances whose analysis is out of the scope of this research. Nevertheless, it was found that most countries from the Lower level innovators (modest and medium innovators by Innovation Scoreboard 2019) have ICT as a key priority of their RIS3 strategies where this priority is more frequent in the Lower level innovators group than in the Upper-level innovators group of countries. In a group of Lower-level innovators, on average the countries with ICT as a key priority in RIS3 had a larger annual GDP per capita percentage growth than the comparable ones that didn't define ICT as a key priority. As of the limitations of the research stated in the previous chapter these conclusions are indicative but can be of use for policy-makers on regional, national and EU level as they point to the fact that the countries that are focused on digital technologies are achieving higher and stable growth.

Future research should analyze the implementation of RIS3 priorities on a regional level for the purpose of identifying the existing problems and actual benefits. As well, it would be important to assess the expediency of strengthening the ICT sector and assess its impact on the rest of the economy including the spatial spillovers. (Billon, 2016)

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