

# ECOHESION: HOW TO MEASURE THE MAIN DRIVERS OF ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN REDUCTION

Tamás Laposa<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*This paper presents a new approach to measure the effects of e-government concepts on the reduction of administrative burdens, in the domain of European fund management.*

*The topic may receive considerable interest since the present European legislation specifies that Member States shall provide online portal services and offer paperless fund management possibilities for beneficiaries in order to reduce the administrative burdens of cohesion policy. This concept is marked with the term “eCohesion” in the scientific discourse. Based on former studies, the concept has several micro- and macro-level attributes that leverage its effectiveness and impact on burden reduction. Nevertheless the level of their influence has not been underpinned by evidence based research yet. Consequently this paper outlines a research design for the measurability and impact assessment of the above attributes.*

*The development of the research design is based on the Standard Cost Model, the widely-used methodology for the measurement of administrative burdens. The present paper applies the model to the attributes of eCohesion by formulating research hypotheses in order to make them measurable and to assess their relevance. The design created paves the way for a further quantitative research and methodologically supports Member States in developing a deeper understanding of the nature of eCohesion.*

## **1. Introduction**

According to Regulation 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council the EU provides funds for EU Member States through multi-annual development programmes in order to implement the Union strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, as well as the Fund-specific objectives including economic, social and territorial cohesion. Pursuant to the legislation arrangements for the implementation and use of the funds shall take into account the overall aim of reducing the administrative burdens on beneficiaries and bodies involved in the management and control of the programmes. [4]

With regard to these provisions the Commission started the eCohesion initiative to contribute to the reduction of administrative burdens and the effective implementation of the funds. eCohesion is a set of procedural, legal, technological and organisational components to support the provision of effective e-Government services. However the maximisation of efficiency gains depends on the

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<sup>1</sup> National University of Public Service, Budapest

decisions of Member States, since the European legislation sets minimum requirements for electronic services. As proven by the study of the European Commission and Deloitte, efficiency gains can be realized at different levels and the rate of improvements can be significant. [3]

According to former studies four micro-level attributes (portal functionality, only once encoding, interoperability, one stop shop) and two macro-level attributes (procedural complexity, extent of funds) were identified which are relevant from the perspective of eCohesion efficiency. Nevertheless the level of their influence has not been underpinned by evidence based research yet. [9]

This paper has two main aims: first, to review the methodological and regulatory background of eCohesion and the reduction of administrative burdens; second, to formulate hypotheses that support the impact assessment of the above attributes of eCohesion.

## 2. The eCohesion concept

In 2007, the European Commission launched the Action Programme for Reducing Administrative Burdens in the EU to simplify administrative requirements and eliminate unnecessary administrative burdens on businesses, small businesses in particular. The Action Programme aimed at a 25% reduction of burdens by 2012. The Action Programme identifies 13 priority areas for administrative burden reduction. Cohesion policy is one of the priority areas where the calculations of experts estimated a 24% reduction of administrative costs. This amount corresponds to 0.7% of the total reduction of costs planned in the Action Programme. [1]

To reach the set targets, the Commission started an initiative (eCohesion) focused on the reduction of administrative burdens of cohesion policy and also rural development policy by streamlining the information obligations of beneficiaries and the provision of electronic data exchange services via online portals. The Commission and the experts of the Member States assessed the impacts, IT implications, specificities, costs and benefits of the proposal and established the detailed technical definitions of electronic services. eCohesion is not simply an IT issue. It also has to address a wide range of legal, procedural, organizational and Member State-specific factors. It is a framework of specific components to reduce administrative burdens via the implementation of e-Government services. The Commission drafted the legal requirements of the implementation of the concept. These requirements were included in the legal provisions of funding in the 2014-2020 period. [3]

Regulation 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council specifies the *three fundamental components of eCohesion*. The *provision of electronic data exchange services, interoperability of systems and the implementation of the only once encoding principle* ensure the reduction of administrative burdens. These components have a direct impact on the reduction of administrative burdens. The digital nature of the procedures requires specific conditions to guarantee the quality, effectiveness and the authenticity of services. For this reason the fundamental components need to be supplemented by *collateral components* such as *e-signature, e-document management and e-audit and interoperability*. These components have no influence on burden reduction but they are prerequisites of the fundamental ones.

Interoperability has a special nature as a dual component as it plays a role in both categories. *Figure 1* provides an overview of the structure of the components.

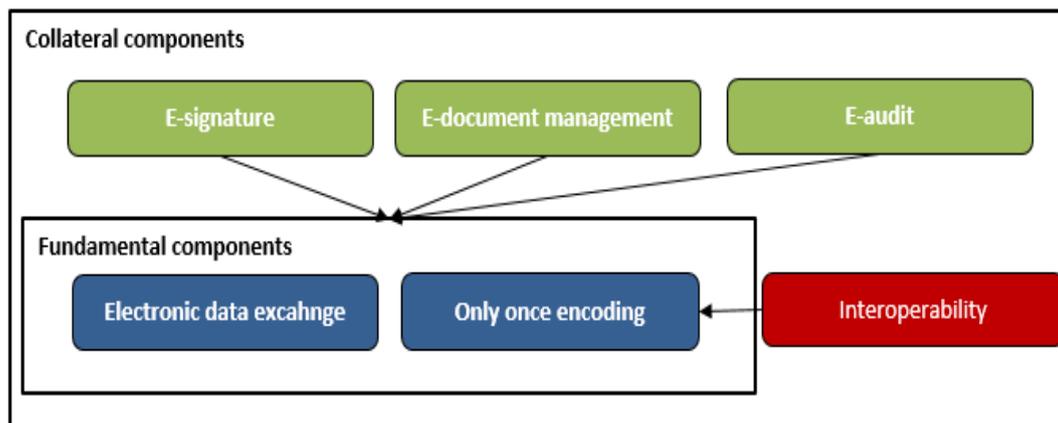


Figure 1: The framework of eCohesion

The detailed rules of the six components of eCohesion are specified by further implementing acts of the Commission (Implementing Regulation (EU) No 1011/2014; Implementing Regulation (EU) No 821/2014). These details are covered in the next sections of the article.

## 2.1. Electronic data exchange

Electronic data exchange systems are defined by the regulation as mechanisms and instruments allowing the electronic exchange of documents and data, including audio-visual media supports, scanned documents and electronic files. Member States shall ensure that all exchanges of information between beneficiaries and the relevant authorities can be carried out by means of electronic data exchange systems. The realization of electronic data exchange has a series of procedural, technological and legal requirements. The above European acts define minimum requirements that ensure the expected efficiency gains, but the requirements need to be adapted to national specificities and further particularized by national legislation.

The scope of electronic data exchange covers all exchanges of information including reporting and financial procedures as well as management verifications and audits. This ensures that reduction of administrative burdens can be realized to a full extent in case of projects with a grant agreement. That is to say that eCohesion shall be provided for beneficiaries. It depends on national decisions to extend these services to enable the submission of applications for support as well. According to the text of the regulation, eCohesion is compulsory for the Member States, but it is optional for the beneficiaries, unless the compulsory use of electronic data exchange systems is prescribed by national law. In this case, it shall be ensured that paperless procedures do not restrict access to the funds or harm equal opportunities. If a Member State applied compulsory eCohesion services in the previous programming period, this practice can be maintained without further requirements. The format of data and documents submitted electronically can be defined by national legislation and the detailed terms and conditions of electronic data exchange shall be laid down in the grant agreement concluded with the beneficiary.

Taking into consideration the full-electronic nature of procedures, the legislation sets specific technological requirements to guarantee the quality of services and the efficiency of procedures. The regulations lay down requirements on security, system availability, data integrity, data protection and privacy, methods of authentication and the minimum functionality of electronic portals.

## 2.2. The “only once encoding” principle and interoperability

Data and documents regarding a single development project shall be shared and re-used by the authorities involved in the management of the same development programme. The relevant authorities cannot ask for the same data repeatedly. This provision is without prejudice to cases when authorities need an update on erroneous or obsolete data or unreadable documents. The regulation sets the cooperation of authorities at programme level as a minimum requirement. This measure avoids multiple data requests during the life-cycle of a project, but it leaves the possibility open for Member States to manage different programmes in separate IT systems.

The pre-requisite of only once encoding is the seamless cooperation of relevant authorities and the interconnection of their information systems. For this reason the principle is strongly connected to the interoperability component of eCohesion. According to the European Interoperability Framework interoperability can be defined as “*the ability of disparate and diverse organisations to interact towards mutually beneficial and agreed common goals, involving the sharing of information and knowledge between the organisations, through the business processes they support, by means of the exchange of data between their respective ICT systems*”. [2] Interoperability is not simply a technological issue. It requires the cooperation of authorities at legal, organizational, semantic and technical levels. [1]

As interoperability is strongly interlinked with the only once encoding principle, it shall be realized at least at programme level. Nevertheless it does not exclude the extension of interoperability to other databases which can bring further efficiency gains and extend the scope of burden reduction.

## 2.3. E-signature

As electronic data exchange transactions are carried out digitally an adequate level of authentication is required to guarantee the veracity of transactions. The required level of authentication depends on national laws and requirements on verification and audit. The regulation sets internationally-accepted standards here as well and leaves the definition of adequate levels to Member States. In pursuance of the legislation transactions shall bear an electronic signature compatible with one of the three types of electronic signature defined by Regulation (EU) No 910/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market and repealing Directive 1999/93/EC. [5]

## 2.4. E-document management and electronic audit

The digitalization of procedures changes the nature of document submission and management. These procedures can bring about the desired benefits of burden reduction if they provide optimal conditions for auditors and relevant authorities as well. These changes have a series of technological implications. Since the vast majority of documents will be available in digital version only, IT systems shall be equipped with adequate document management capabilities enabling relevant authorities to process digital contents effectively.

To meet audit and verification requirements, the types of accepted data carriers and the compliance criteria of digital documents shall be laid down by national authorities on the basis of national legal requirements and audit standards. In addition, information systems shall meet accepted security standards to ensure the compliance with above legal and audit requirements. [6, 4] On the other hand, auditors cannot place paper-based obligations on beneficiaries in any case. Pursuant to the

implementing acts digital documents are reliable sources for audits and financial verification if they have been submitted via the electronic data exchange system. According to these provisions, paper-based originals cannot be required in case of every operation, only in exceptional cases based on a risk analysis.

### 3. The measurability of administrative burdens

Beneficiaries and applicants are subject to a series of legal obligations set by cohesion policy regulations. This is done to ensure the conditions of smooth and effective management of EU funds as well as to guarantee the realization of the underlying policy objectives. If the implementation of regulations impose unnecessary regulatory costs on businesses and citizens it is regarded as a socio-economic waste. It is crucial to constantly monitor and keep the balance between the benefits of regulatory requirements and their costs respectively. Administrative cost and burdens are important indicators of the business environment and their optimization can have a significant influence on overall economic competitiveness and productivity. [1, 10]

The costs of regulation can be split into three categories: *direct financial costs (financial obligations to transfer money)*, *long term structural costs (long term effects of regulations on living and business environment)* and *compliance costs (behavioural and information obligations to comply with legislation)*. Compliance costs can be divided into indirect financial costs (costs of behavioural obligations) and administrative costs (costs of information obligations)

By the definition of the Standard Cost Model manual “*administrative costs are defined as the costs incurred by enterprises, the voluntary sector, public authorities and citizens in meeting legal obligations to provide information on their action or production, either to public authorities or to private parties.*” Administrative costs are the costs of administrative activities related to the collection and provision of information. Nonetheless certain types of information would be collected by beneficiaries even in the absence of regulation. This triggers the introduction of the notion of *administrative burdens which are the administrative costs of information obligations imposed by legislation.* [7, 10]

From the perspective of regulations some of these burdens are necessary to meet the underlying policy objectives. There are some burdens however, whose removal would not jeopardise the realization of those policy objectives. Consequently, *the reduction of administrative burdens is focused on the elimination of these unnecessary administrative burdens.* [1]

The linkages between the different types of administrative costs and burdens are depicted by *Figure 2.*

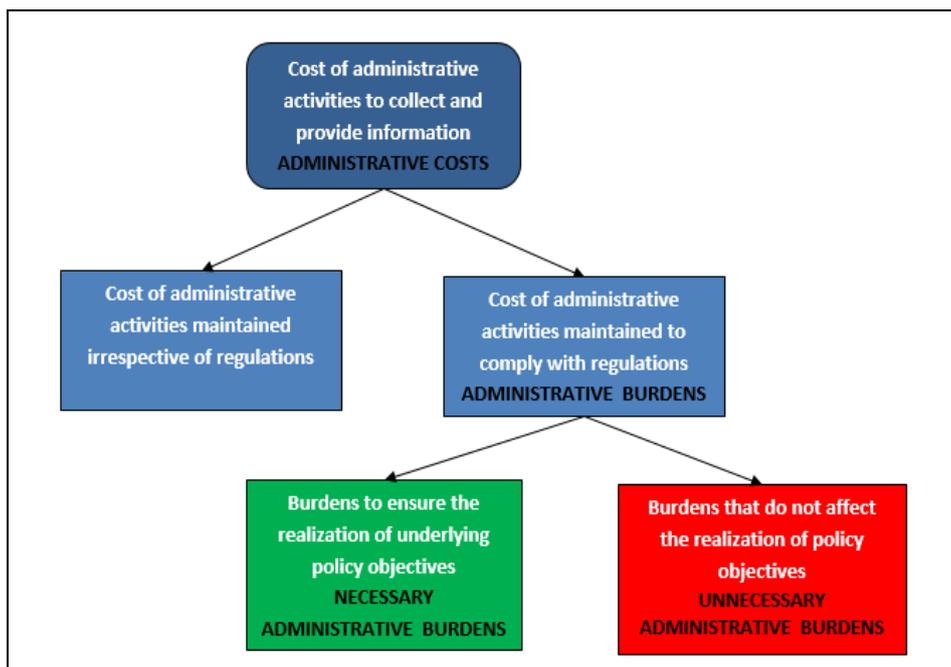


Figure 2: Types and relations of administrative costs and burdens

In order to reduce administrative burdens they need to be measured first. The Standard Cost Model is a widely-used methodology to measure the administrative costs of regulations. It has been designed to provide a clear-cut and consistent method to identify and measure administrative costs. The SCM can be utilized in different policy areas and it provides coherent and comparable estimates. The methodology is focussed on administrative activities imposed by regulation to fulfil information obligations.

The SCM makes the costs of activities measurable by breaking down regulatory requirements into manageable components. These components are the *cost parameters* (*Time, Price, Quantity, Frequency and Population*) of the relevant administrative activities. Price represents the hourly wage and overhead costs of activities. Time indicates the amount of time needed to complete the relevant activity. Quantity shows the size of the population of beneficiaries affected and the yearly frequency of the activity. The combination of these elements gives the basic SCM formula which is shown by *Figure 3*. [10]

$$\text{Cost of an administrative activity} = \text{Time} \times \text{Quantity} \times \text{Price}$$

$$\text{Quantity} = (\text{Population} \times \text{Frequency})$$

Figure 3: The SCM formula [10]

By using the above formula the costs of different administrative activities and the administrative burdens of beneficiaries can be calculated. The formula also helps decision makers to reveal the cost structure of single administrative activities. Since the above cost parameters are the basic elements of activities they can be the basis of different kinds of burden reduction. Administrative burdens can be reduced in different ways either by concentrating on single cost parameters (e.g. reducing time or frequency) or their combinations.

The Action Programme for Reducing Administrative Burdens comprises a list of burden reduction principles to guide Member States in cutting red tape in Europe. These principles and their main cost parameters are listed on *Table 1*.

<b>principles</b>	<b>Cost parameter</b>
Reduce the frequency of reporting requirements to the minimum levels necessary to meet the substantive objectives of the legislation	Frequency
Review whether the same information obligation is not requested several times through different channels and eliminate overlaps	Frequency
Require electronic and web-based reporting where paper based information gathering is presently required	Time, Price
Introduce thresholds for information requirements, limiting them for small and medium sized companies wherever possible, or rely on sampling	Time
Consider substituting information requirements on all businesses in a sector by a risk based approach	Population
Reduce or eliminate information requirements where these relate to substantive requirements that have been dropped or modified since the information requirement was adopted	Time, Frequency, Administrative activities
Provide official clarification of complex pieces of legislation that may either slow down business activities	Time

**Table 1: Principles of administrative burden reduction [1]**

#### **4. The main attributes of eCohesion**

European legislation sets the minimum requirements of eCohesion that ensure the expected level of burden reduction. These requirements need to be adapted to national specificities and further particularized by national legislation. It is the decision of each Member State to adopt the minimum framework of requirements or to go beyond them. This means that the eCohesion solution and the level of total efficiency gains may differ from country to country. [5] If a country decides to exceed the minimum requirements and develops more sophisticated portal functions they can reach higher levels of burden reduction. Thus, burden reduction has different stages that can be achieved according to the decisions of Member States. The European Commission and Deloitte elaborated a maturity model to measure the sophistication of eCohesion portal functionalities and potential efficiency gains. Based on this model *an annual 8 % of administrative burden reduction could be estimated, if the highest level of portal sophistication would be implemented in all EU Member States.* [3]

The above model provides a good roadmap for Member States to plan the development of eCohesion portals but it dominantly focuses on the functionality of e-portals. It is reasonable to assume that the success of burden reduction is influenced by a wider range of attributes, however. In the course of former studies, the concept of eCohesion was analysed to reveal its main attributes influencing the reduction of administrative burdens. Based on these studies eCohesion has the following micro and macro level attributes. [8]

As stated above, eCohesion has two types of components. The fundamental components take a direct effect on burden reduction and collateral components (*e-signature, e-document management, e-audit*) are not linked to efficiency gains but they create the essential conditions for the fundamental ones. As the interoperability component has a special nature, its role will be further discussed below.

In terms of *portal functionality* Regulation 1011/2014 prescribes that electronic data exchange systems shall be equipped with at least the following functionalities: interactive forms and/or forms prefilled by the system, automatic calculations, automatic embedded controls which reduce repeated exchanges of documents or information, system-generated alerts, online status tracking. [5] These functions are directly linked to the reduction of burdens and the issue of efficiency. The *principle of only once encoding and interoperability* are strongly interrelated. Their minimum requirements

ensure burden reduction within the limit of a single development programme. Here the efficiency of fund management can be further extended if a Member State applies these components for all development programmes. In case of interoperability, system connections to national databases and the automatic retrieval of relevant beneficiary data can further reduce burdens. The eCohesion concept does not restrict the usage of separate IT systems for the management of different programmes. This means there can be more than one eCohesion portal in a Member State. In this situation beneficiaries might need to use different portals for different types of projects which can complicate the administration of projects compared to the usage of a single e-portal for all funds. Hence the principle of *one stop shop* can improve the efficiency of eCohesion.

The above four attributes (*portal functionality, only once encoding, interoperability, one stop shop*) are labelled as *micro-level attributes of eCohesion*. These attributes contribute to the reduction of administrative burdens from a technological perspective. Nevertheless there are some further *macro-level attributes* that define the organizational and economical context of eCohesion.

The main procedural guidelines of EU fund management are set by European legislation but they need to be applied in a national administrative and organizational context. Each Member States has specific administrative structures (number of administrative levels, number of agencies, extent of territorial decentralization) which produces a different procedural complexity in each country. Procedural complexity defines the scope of administrative activities and information obligations i.e. the main building blocks of administrative burdens. Thus, *procedural complexity defines the boundaries of burden reduction*. EU funds represent different economic weight in each Member State. It is rational to assume that the extent of funds and the number of potential beneficiaries can have a definitive impact on the approach of a country to the eCohesion concept and the targeted reduction of administrative burdens. In case of a low funding budget, the potential IT budget can be rather small or funds can reach a moderate group of beneficiaries which can limit the potential scale of burden reduction. Consequently, the *magnitude of the available funds* need to be taken into account when evaluating the effects of eCohesion.

## 5. Research design development

Former studies highlighted the importance of the above micro and macro attributes but their relevance and the extent of their influence has not been underpinned by empirical research yet. This paper aims to outline a research design for the impact-assessment of these presupposed attributes. Since eCohesion is targeted at the reduction of administrative burdens, the desired research should be based on the methodological foundations of burden reduction. This article examines the relevance of the identified attributes by utilizing the methodological building blocks of the Standard Cost Model, as an internationally-accepted method for the measurement of administrative costs.

In an attempt to verify the relevance and the effects of the presupposed attributes, their relationships with the different elements of the SCM formula (*Number of administrative activities, Time, Price, Frequency, Population*) will be analysed (*Phase 1*). By identifying these potential linkages, some research hypotheses will be defined (*Phase 2*) to support the impact-assessment of the attributes (*Phase 3*). This paper encompasses Phase 1 and 2, the above impact-assessment will be realized in the framework of further studies.

## 5.1. Linkages between attributes and SCM elements

Micro-level attributes have a technological impact on the management of prescribed administrative activities. Electronic tools do not change the number of prescribed administrative activities and the scope of clients affected by them (Population) as they are defined by regulations. Nor can they change the hourly price of activities since they are influenced by economic factors. Their most significant advantage is that they can simplify procedures and decrease incorrect data processing by built in checks and warnings. It is reasonably assumed that they accelerate procedures and they can prevent repetitive and parallel data exchange. Consequently, *this study suggests that micro-level attributes have an effect on the lead times of administrative activities and the frequency of data exchanges.*

The findings of the European Commission and Deloitte justified the assumption that a higher level of portal sophistication can bring about a remarkable burden reduction. The minimum functionality set by the legislation is focused on a higher level of portal usability, the acceleration of data processing and the reduction of repeated corrective data exchanges by automatization and embedded controls. This can have a real impact on lead times and the frequency of activities.

The application of the only once encoding principle nullifies parallel information obligations by prescribing the re-use of already submitted data for all authorities implementing the same programme. This measure hinders relevant authorities to ask for the same data from beneficiaries and prevents any authority to ask for the data in different formats. Accordingly only once encoding has an undoubted influence on the frequency of data submission. The eventual extension of only once encoding across different programmes may ensure the re-use of any data or document submitted by the beneficiary. This extension provides an extraordinary opportunity to automatize data processing, having a special effect on the lead time of activities.

Pre-filled data and the re-use of already submitted data decreases the scope of data requirements. The same goal can be realized if Member States utilize public data registers for this purpose. Establishing data connections to external public databases Member States can have access to valid information without data exchange with beneficiaries. The interpretation of interoperability as a fundamental component of eCohesion and the limitation of data requirements provide an opportunity to accelerate data submission (*Time*) and further minimize the likelihood of repeated corrective exchanges (*Frequency*).

The registration of separate accounts on different portals and the knowledge of several user interfaces require more effort from beneficiaries. Tracking changes and notifications in different portals complicates administrative activities. It is conceivably hypothesized that users need to spend more time on the management of administrative activities in this case, so a single one stop shop portal could also represent a remarkable opportunity of simplification.

Macro-level attributes represent organizational, procedural and economic conditions. *This study assumes that macro-level attributes exert influence on wider scope of elements of the SCM formula.* Procedural complexity has an impact on the general setup of administrative activities. Legislation defines the range of activities (*Number of activities*), the frequency of periodic and repetitive data exchanges (*Frequency*), the scope of data requirements and electronic documents to be submitted (*Time of data processing*).

In case legislation makes eCohesion optional for beneficiaries, relevant authorities need to maintain parallel paper-based procedures. Paper-based procedures lack the main advantages of electronic applications i.e. the chance to automatize data submission and the control of correct data processing. As these characteristics can have a remarkable effect on the time and frequency of administrative activities, it is thus suggested that the optionality of eCohesion affects efficiency negatively. As seen above procedural complexity influences almost all elements of the SCM formula. The only exception here is the hourly price of activities that is defined by further factors beyond the scope of this research.

The magnitude of the available funds may define the attitude and motivations of Member states towards the issue of burden reduction realized by eCohesion. The size of the funding envelope determines its potential economic impact, and the level of funds available for the development of eCohesion portals. Therefore it is hypothesized that these conditions might have an effect on the targeted level of burden reduction.

*The above findings seem to confirm the assumptions that micro-level attributes influence the time and frequency of administrative activities and macro-level attributes impact almost the complete range of SCM elements.* The findings of the study are summarized by Table 2 below.

eCohesion attribute	SCM formula elements	Relationship
Portal functionality	Time, Frequency	Usability of user interfaces, automatization and embedded controls simplify data processing and reduce repeated corrective exchanges.
Only once encoding	Time, Frequency	The re-use of submitted data decreases parallel data submission and accelerates the completion of subsequent activities.
Interoperability	Time, Frequency	The retrieval of valid data from other databases substitutes data submission and prevents corrective exchanges.
One stop shop	Time	The usage of different accounts makes the management of activities complicated
Procedural complexity	Time, Frequency, Number of activities, Population	Procedural complexity determines the general setup of administrative activities
Magnitude of funds	Administrative burdens	The magnitude of the available funds influences the attitude to the issue of burden reduction

**Table 2: Relationships between eCohesion attributes and SCM elements**

## 5.2. Formulation of research hypotheses

The identified linkages between the presupposed attributes and the SCM formula supports the formulation of research hypotheses to assess the relevance and the extent of the single attributes. These hypotheses make the attributes measurable and paves the way for further phases of the research design. Utilizing the relationships between attributes and SCM elements the paper aims to establish at least one hypothesis for the measurement of each eCohesion attribute.

*Hypothesis 1:* Many aspects of the single micro-level attributes are connected to reduction of data requirements. Automatization of data processing, the re-use of already submitted data as well as the retrieval of valid data from public registries accelerate data processing (*Time*). It is thus hypothesized that *the reduction of number of data and documents required influences burden reduction favorably.*

*Hypothesis 2:* User-friendly portal functions facilitate the management of administrative activities. Irrespective of the number of data requirements easier navigation, quick access to frequently-used functions and user-centric interfaces can accelerate data processing (*Time*). *It is therefore suggested that higher levels of user-friendliness also have a positive effect on administrative burdens.*

*Hypothesis 3:* the consequence of the usage of multiple fund management portals is that beneficiaries need to use diverse functionalities for different project types. According to the approach of this study, usability is an important driver of efficiency. The parallel development of systems results in a heterogeneous usability of eCohesion portals and it has an influence on efficiency gains. *Hence it is argued that the parallel usage of portals requires more time from users and has a negative effect on burden reduction.*

*Hypothesis 4:* Correction of mistakes of data processing result in the repetition of administrative activities and increase the frequency of data submission. Measures preventing these repeated exchanges represent a significant resource in the simplification of administrative procedures. The above objective can be achieved either by narrowing the scope of data requirements (*automatization, re-use, retrieval*) or by embedded controls. *The paper assumes that the prevention of corrective actions provides an exceptional opportunity to reduce administrative burdens.*

*Hypothesis 5:* information technology can boost the efficiency of administrative activities by changing the gap between total (*all data needed*) and absolute (*data effectively entered*) data requirements. It is apparent that the main determinant of administrative burdens is the total number of data requirements, nevertheless. The total number of data might have a significant influence on the frequency of corrections as well. *It seems thus reasonable to hypothesize that the main driver of burden reduction is the simplification of procedures.*

*Hypothesis 6:* the economic impact of the funds can differ from Member State to Member State. Taking into account the diverse economic weight of funds governments might develop a different approach to utilize the potential of eCohesion to reduce administrative burdens. This can have a serious impact on the IT budget of the Member State and the sophistication of portal functionalities. As discussed above, functionality is linked to the Time and Frequency cost parameters, so the last hypothesis is indirectly connected to these SCM elements as well. *Therefore it is assumed that the targeted level of burden reduction is determined by the economic weight of the funds.*

Analysing the main drivers of the hypotheses it is reasonable to anticipate that the efficiency of eCohesion is centered on the number of data requirements and controls as well as the usability of portal functionalities. As already pointed out in this paper the efficiency gains of eCohesion can be realized at different levels and their maximization depends on procedural, technological decisions of Member States. It has been assumed by former articles that efficiency of this concept is influenced by the above micro- and macro-level attributes. These hypotheses can be utilized to create a questionnaire in order to collect empirical data for their impact assessment.

As supposed by former studies efficiency levels of eCohesion could be best measured by a specific maturity model. The results of the above impact assessment and the identification of the relevant attributes of eCohesion efficiency can pave the way for further research and the creation of this eCohesion specific model.

## 6. Conclusion

The concept of eCohesion is aimed at the provision of e-Government services in order to improve the efficiency of funding procedures in the area of European cohesion policy and rural development policy. These efficiency gains can realize a significant reduction of administrative burdens. In addition to the European legal provisions national regulations can further extend the level of efficiency gains.

Based on former studies four micro-level attributes (portal functionality, only once encoding, interoperability, one stop shop) and two macro-level attributes (procedural complexity, extent of funds) were identified which are relevant from the perspective of efficiency. The relevance of these attributes has not been clarified by evidence-based research yet.

In an attempt to verify the relevance and the effects of the presupposed attributes this article utilized the Standard Cost Model, an internationally-used methodology to measure administrative costs. Based on this model, this article identifies linkages between the above attributes and the measurable components of administrative activities. These linkages facilitated the formulation of the following six research hypotheses to support the impact-assessment of the attributes: *the reduction of number of data and documents required influences burden reduction favourably; the level of user-friendliness leverages burden reduction; the prevention of corrective actions has a remarkable impact on administrative burdens; the usage of multiple portals drives down efficiency; the main driver of burden reduction is the simplification of procedures; the targeted level of burden reduction is determined by the economic weight of the funds.*

These hypotheses can be utilized to conduct a questionnaire-based impact assessment on the relevance of the presupposed attributes. The results of this assessment and the identification of the relevant attributes of eCohesion efficiency can open new fields of research to create a specific model for the measurement of efficiency levels of eCohesion.

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