

**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF PUBLIC SERVICE**  
**Doctoral School of Public Administration Sciences**

**THESIS BOOKLET**  
**e-cohesion: assessing the efficiency of fund management portals**  
**via the use of maturity model**

*Prepared by:*  
**Tamás Laposa**

*Consultant:*  
**Dr. habil Györgyi Nyikos**  
**Prof Dr. András Nemeslaki**

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## **1. Introduction, rationale and significance of dissertation theme selection**

In 2007 the European Commission launched the Action Programme on reducing administrative burden in the European Union with the objective of achieving a 25% reduction target at EU level within 5 years. The programme aimed at the elimination of redundant and excessive administrative requirements without compromising the full satisfaction of policy goals. On the commencement of the programme *the estimated size of administrative burden was rather high, amounting to 3,5% of the GDP*. Therefore, the cutting of unnecessary requirements brings about substantial savings for companies which they can spend on general business development or invest in innovation. The reduction of administrative burden lowers production costs and stimulates the business environment. The programme *envisaged* that a *reducing the administrative burdens by 25% would have a positive effect on GDP growth of 1.4 % in the European Union*.

Cohesion Policy constituted a priority area under the Action Programme on reducing administrative burden in the European Union. Although the magnitude *of administrative burden is marginal in the Cohesion Policy area*, representing 0,7% of the EU administrative costs, the expert panel of the Action Programme warned of *the high-degree of its intensity*. This **priority area is characterised by a broader range and complexity of clients affected by the administrative burden**, reduction would therefore significantly impact all these actors.

The introduction of electronic administration served as the primary intervention tool. Implementing regulations of cohesion policy lay down the overall requirements for electronic administration of the funds, these provisions have become widely referred to as *e-cohesion* in professional and scientific discourses. *The e-cohesion concept includes three basic components (the use of electronic data exchange systems, interoperability, once-only encoding principle), their realisation directly affects the reduction of administrative burden*.

The translation of the concept into practice simplifies the use of development funds markedly. This aligns with the result oriented approach reinforced in the 2014-2020 programming period, simplification helps to free up capacity of the project promoters, to reallocate human resources from administrative tasks to managing project quality management increasing value added.

Preliminary assessments by the European Commission and consultations with Member State experts confirm the reality of introducing electronic funds management portals and fulfilling the e-cohesion requirements. Maximising the opportunities these new instruments offer may reduce the administrative burden notably.

However, the EU regulations set forth the minimum requirements for E-cohesion, which guarantee the average burden reduction. Member States may extend and tailor the provision on their national rules, with a beneficial impact on the efficiency of the portal concepts. Preliminary expert analyses in the period 2011-13 presented an average degree of portal development, nevertheless various Member States indicated their ambitions for advancing their system to a higher level.

The above developments as well as the unlocked potential administrative simplification yet call for a more in-depth analysis of e-cohesion, in particular the understanding of its operation and main drivers. Consequently, the exploration of the exact nature of e-cohesion, the identification of its impact factors may greatly contribute to future portal development.

## 2. Objectives of the dissertation, problems analysed

E-cohesion stands as a relative new research topic in the discourses on cohesion policy which the dissertation aspires to widen, therefore scientific and strategic positioning of the theme constitute an important objective. Additionally, the research examines the efficiency of portals through the elaboration of distinct research problems at macro and micro levels. Working toward a response to the research questions implied the generation of eight hypotheses that can be linked to four research objectives.

### 2.1. Positioning e-cohesion (1st research problem)

**Research problem (1):** How can e-cohesion be defined in the broader environment of key EU strategies? Which disciplinary fields does its research link with?

E-cohesion is not limited to the delivery of an informatics project or the digitalisation of existing working routines. Its success largely depends on the clarification and adequate addressing of further legal, procedural and organisational issues. *E-cohesion can be defined as a conceptual framework serving as the basis for reducing administrative burden through IT solutions, re-use of public data and inter-operability of information systems.*

From this perspective, similar to e-government e-cohesion is an integrative technological-social concept. Namely, it forms part of a comprehensive public administration reform initiative. In order to promote the efficient provision of customer-oriented services for citizens, civil society organisations, private sector actors and other stakeholders, via the employment of advanced information technology and communications (ITC) instruments e-cohesion involves the reorganisation and restructuring of all internal and external workflows in the domain of public administration.

In view of its complete nature, e-cohesion goals are most likely to support markedly the implementation of EU info-communication and general growth strategies. Furthermore, its integrative character pre-supposes its links with various disciplinary fields. On the consideration of the relative novelty of the research topic and the scarce availability of relevant research projects, a thorough understanding of the essential features of e-cohesion call for the exploration of the aspects connecting it to scientific fields and strategies. Corroboration is helped by the following hypothesis and research objective.

**Hypothesis (1):** E-cohesion is an integrative concept, an interdisciplinary theme which lies at the meeting point of different long-term growth strategies and public policies.

**Research objective (1):** Correspondence of e-cohesion to strategic context and disciplinary field, positioning of the research topic. .

## 2.2. Efficiency impact of the portals (2nd research objective)

**Research problem (2):** To what extent does e-cohesion affect the efficiency of implementing procedures?

As emphasised above, relevant EU regulations only dictate the minimum requirements of e-cohesion, these provisions may be widened and extended by the Member States to achieve a greater degree of burden reduction. Therefore, the legislative environment, functionality and the magnitude of realised cost savings will differ in each Member State.

The dissertation pre-supposes that *increasing the qualitative components of the portal concept (sophistication) raises the level of the potentially achievable burden reduction and thus improves the efficiency of the implementation of the funds*. The range of qualitative components, however, requires further investigation.

As e-cohesion is an all-inclusive concept, which spans well beyond the functional development of the portals, suggest that the burden reduction impact of the portals is also influenced by other factors than functionality. The procedures which are employed for cohesion policy derive from the EU legislation directly, nevertheless, they are implemented by the Member States within distinct organisational and administrative regimes. National regulations define the spectrum of administrative tasks and the obligations related to the provision of information forming a pre-decisive element of administrative costs. The scope of these regulations may essentially define the framework for reducing administrative burden. In addition to various aspects of functionality, procedural variables may play a critical role in the shaping of the portals.

**Hypothesis (2):** Efficiency gains from portal operation are not only influenced by the satisfaction of minimum functional requirements set forth in the EU legislation but they are affected by the scope of the relevant procedural provisions.

The relevant legislation describes the mandatory range of functions a portal is expected to fulfil, no details are provided for its qualitative dimension, the user-friendliness of the platforms which I believe may significantly better portal efficiency. Moreover, the regulations lack an exhaustive account of portal functions, further functionality aspects, with a notable impact on burden reduction may exist. Corroboration is helped by the following hypothesis and research objective.

**Hypothesis (3):** Efficiency gains from portal operation are not only influenced by the satisfaction of minimum functional requirements set forth in the EU legislation but they are affected by further functionality aspects and the user-friendliness of the platform.

The above-listed components of e-cohesion allow for the description of the concept at a macro-level, however, they are not sufficient to capture the more sophisticated relationships and operationalisation of efficiency. Should the above hypotheses prove valid, further procedural and functional micro-level variables will be identified which enable the explanation of both the operation of the concept and its efficiency dynamics. The outcome of the planned research analyses helps to outline the efficiency ontology and the conceptual mapping of e-cohesion.

**Hypothesis (4):** The ordering of the recognised micro variables and the linking of these variables with higher level components of e-cohesion allows for the establishment of efficiency ontology of e-cohesion, assisting the better understanding of the different components and operationalisation of efficiency.

The expected result of the above three research hypotheses include the definition of the relevant micro variables and the design of the efficiency ontology. Corroboration is helped by the following research objective.

**Research objective (2):** Assessment of the requirements of portal concepts in order to identify the burden reducing micro variables and to establish the efficiency ontology.

Based on the survey of functionality of electronic portals in use, the European Commission in cooperation with Deloitte, set up a maturity model. This provides for measuring the burden reduction impact of portals on a five-degree maturity scale. The referred maturity model guides Member States in the design of their e-cohesion portals, nonetheless, the model focuses on the functional sophistication of the portals. In addition to functional aspects, the above hypotheses suggest a link between portal efficiency and a wide range of other functional and procedural determinants. Should these previous hypotheses be found proven, the elaboration of an alternative model is recommended to ensure a full account of relevant micro variables and the measurement of portal concept efficiency as well as burden reduction. These induce the employment of a fifth hypothesis and a new research objective.

**Hypothesis (5):** Defined functional and procedural micro variables enable the measuring of portal concept sophistication and burden reduction as well as their comparison and ordering, based on a distinct maturity model

**Research objective (3):** Elaboration of a maturity model to measure the efficiency impact of portal

concepts which, on account of the defined micro variables and efficiency ontology allows for defining the degree of sophistication and administrative burden.

### 2.3. The macro environment of portal development (3rd research problem)

**Research problem (3):** Member States may tailor the requirements for establishing an e-cohesion portal significantly. What macro-level determinants Member States take into account during their decision-making process?

E-cohesion regulations offer a high-degree of flexibility for Member States to tailor the concept to their specific needs. Consequently, as described under the hypotheses in the first sub-chapter portals may present important differences. At the same time, as the dissertation assumes e-cohesion involves certain *macro-variables that determine the expected sophistication of portal concepts and indirectly influence the degree of administrative burden.*

The *magnitude of EU funding allocation* for Member States shows great variances. A rise in the size of the financial envelope increase the potential volume of burden reduction. This may influence both micro-level variables and the definition of the general e-cohesion requirements. The importance of the role these *funds* play is strongly shaped by their *relative economic weight*. The impact of various funding levels will be different in Member States of various size and development. In addition to the absolute funding volume, the research takes account of its population and GDP proportionate values accordingly. Finance related variables are therefore recommended to be investigated with a view to their effects on portal concept sophistication. The following hypothesis will be employed.

**Hypothesis (6):** Increased funding volume and economic weight ambition Member States to establish more sophisticated portal and play a predominant role in the definition of national requirements for e-cohesion.

According to a different approach portal concept sophistication is determined by the funding volume of the portal rather than the magnitude of available funds at national level. This narrative emphasises the consideration the Member States may compare the burden reduction potential and the cost implications of each portal. This assessment determines that the importance of the different portal concepts. The significance of the size of available funds will therefore be explored alongside two distinct hypotheses.

**Hypothesis (7):** Design of the portal concept is determined by the number of projects and the volume of funds the portal will cover. This logic, however, only applies above a critical level of funding and project number.



In addition to the financial envelope, the structure of the Member State and its public administration regime as well as its technological environment (*digitalisation of public administration processes, maturity of governance capacity*) may shape the design of the portal concept. Based on the above, the eight hypothesis and the fourth research objective can be formulated as follows.

**Hypothesis (8):** The administrative and technological environment determine the attitude of Member States' toward portal concept definition and influence the establishment of portal concepts.

**Research objective (4):** Identification of macro-level (financial, portal-level, administrative and technological) variables, which influence functional and procedural variables of portals in Members, and the ordering of these macro-level determinants into an efficiency ontology.

### **3. Methodology, summary of the research, new scientific findings**

#### **3.1. Strategic and disciplinary relationships of E-cohesion (1st research objective – chapter 5 of the dissertation)**

Scientific positioning of e-cohesion implied the exploration of relevant discourses and scientific relationship analysis of e-cohesion components. The dissertation examines the intensity of publications in the various discourses and disciplinary fields for each e-cohesion component. This was undertaken on the basis of key terms characteristic to the relevant discourses and components of e-cohesion via the search of scientific databases (Scopus) which made the identification of the relevant disciplinary areas possible. *The overall aim of the examination was the formulation of a relationship matrix illustrating the correspondence of the research theme to the relevant disciplines.*

Strategic positioning of e-cohesion relied on the assessment of the objectives of relevant strategies (policy analysis). First, the objectives of the EU 2020 long-term growth strategy was scrutinised followed by the study of supporting sectoral policies. This analytical exercise aimed at the listing of those public policy areas the objectives of which the components of e-cohesion may derive from. Subsequent work concentrated on the investigation of domestic policy documents (Magyary Programme, National Public Administration and Public Service Development Strategy) and relationship analysis accordingly. *The overall aim of the examination was the formulation of an EU and national level relationship map* presenting, through the links with strategies, programmes and public policies the strategic-policy positioning of e-cohesion.

Regarding scientific categorisation, the e-cohesion concept lies at the crossing of applied technical sciences and social sciences (*public administration, law, regional studies, information technology*).

From a strategic positioning perspective, implementation of the e-cohesion concept, which contains the digitalisation of public funds management processes, supports EU level e-governance action programmes, the single digital market formation process as well as the Smart Europe dimension of the EU 2020 strategy. Besides the concept strongly aligns with the macro-level objectives of Hungary's public administration development strategy. The strategic relationship of the concept is presented in Figure 1 below.

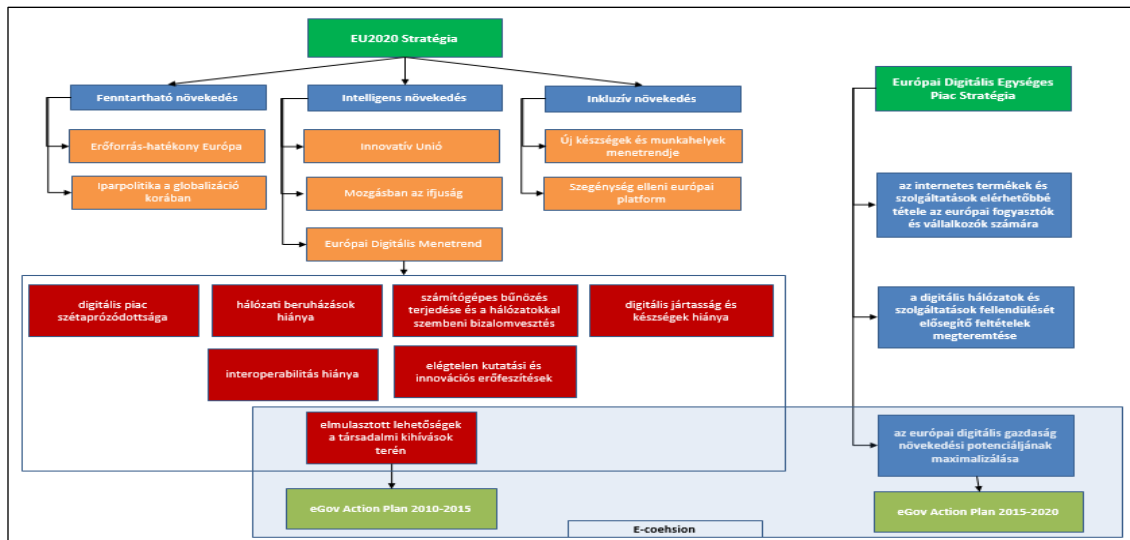


Figure 1

*Policy relationship of e-cohesion*

*On the basis of the examinations the integrative nature of e-cohesion has been reinforced, therefore the first hypothesis is proven.*

**Scientific result (1):** implementation of the first research objective involved the establishment of the scientific relationship matrix and strategic relationship map of e-cohesion. Previous scientific discourses did not generate similar analysis, the new results strengthen the assumptions described under the first hypothesis and well illustrate the integrative character of the concept.

**3.2. Identification of micro variables, efficiency ontology (2nd research objective – chapter 6 of the dissertation)**

The method of standard cost calculation, well-proven for quantifying administrative burden, was used for the examination. This method helped to assess how the assumed concept-related procedural and functional micro-level variables (independent variables) impact administrative costs (dependent variables), essentially the timeframe for and the regularity of implementing the tasks. Data collection was carried out via an on-line questionnaire generated by a research software (Evasys). The primary target group of the research comprised the authorities bearing responsibility for the implementation of the funds and entities with a track record in electronic portal development.

Data analysis relied on *descriptive and multi-variable statistical methods* and processing was based on the SPSS 23.0 version. The goal of applying *descriptive statistical methods* (average, modus, median) was to explore the composition of all data received as well as of the responses to the examined variables. *Multi-variable statistical methods* principally supported the impact assessment of the individual functional and procedural micro variables on the

burden reduction. The analysis essentially relied on the method of correlation analysis to study the relationship between all dependent and independent variables.

The outcome of the questionnaire-based survey confirmed that Member States do not limit the perception of e-cohesion to the satisfaction of minimum requirements. Despite the flexibility options in the regulation (*optional use, no mandatory functionality in the project application process*) the administrations generally attempt to maximise the opportunities offered by these systems, the use of portals is mandatory and covers the entire life-cycle of the projects in the majority of the Member States.

Nevertheless, multi-variable statistical evaluations do not substantiate the correspondence between the above regulatory specifics and the efficiency of portal concepts, the time spent on the administrative tasks or the probability of an error. Surprising research finding also includes the lack of association between the volume of data requested from project promoters and the size of administrative burden. Most probably, built-in control mechanisms and automatism in the project and funds management processes support the satisfaction of administrative duties and eliminate most of the potential errors.

Notwithstanding, the magnitude of documents project promoters are requested to submit when using the portals show a significant correlation with the level of administrative burden. These files represent non-structured data in the systems that cannot be checked by the above automatism and controls. This implies that *the volume of documents will be treated as a micro-level procedural variable of e-cohesion.*

*The second hypothesis can be overall validated, emphasising though that portal efficiency is not influenced by the totality of the procedural context but primarily reacts to the volume of non-structured substantiating documents.*

*The examination of the functional micro-level variables (broad range of portal functions, user-friendliness of platforms) allows the conclusion that a core group of micro-variables stemming from the EU regulations (inter-operability, built-in controls, automatic calculations, interactive standardised documents, warning messages) define the sophistication of the portal concepts.*

*On the consideration of the above the third hypothesis does not meet the principles of validity. The sophistication of portal functions is driven by the quality of the essential functions (among others the ones dictated by the EU regulations) rather than the complexity of the portal functions or their user-friendliness.*

The defined micro-level variables served as a basis for putting together the e-cohesion efficiency ontology, which deepens the understanding of efficiency dynamics, its factors at

various levels and their relationships. *Previous research findings, the defined micro-level variables offered an adequate grounding for the creation for the ontology, the fourth hypothesis have been found valid accordingly.*

**Scientific result (2):** the research generated the identification of the procedural and functional variables of e-cohesion, which influence the size of administrative burden. With the help of these micro variable the ontology of e-cohesion was established. This helps to understand the efficiency dynamics at an operational level and thus supports relevant decision-making in the Member State.

### **3.3. Elaboration of the maturity model (3rd research objective – chapter 7 of the dissertation)**

The elaboration of the maturity model followed the so-called bottom-up method. The mathematical and statistical analysis of the relationship of independent and dependant variables aimed at the definition of two compound attribute variables that help measuring the sophistication of the portal concepts and the size administrative burden. These attribute variables guided the cluster analysis, based on which the questionnaire data was ordered into well-defined groups allowing for the definition of the maturity levels of the model.

*The fifth hypothesis passed the validity test, incorporating the previous research findings the planned alternative model was duly elaborated.* The combination of the defined independent variables led to the creation of a *portal sophistication variable* which captures the maturity of the procedural and functional components of the portal concept.

Dependent variables make up an *administrative burden variable* which reflects the average time requirements and error rate for each portal.

Combined variables were used to form a three-level model, whereby fixed benchmark values help the assessment of the maturity of any portals. The model contrasts variables of the examined portal with data on 37 other portals and concludes its maturity level.

*Based on this progress, a methodology was composed for data collection/recording and calculations. The model shows the maturity level of an examined portal as well as the proportionated rate of modification of functional and procedural variables in order to reach the next level. The model not only illustrates the volume of necessary developments, but offers choice alternatives by variable groups and thus aids portal-related decision-making in the Member State.*

Adoption of the model is helped by the design of a dedicated application, providing for data inputting, data analysis, presentation of results and decision-making options in a user-friendly manner.

**Scientific result (3):** applying the defined micro-level variables an alternative e-cohesion maturity model was created, making comparisons with numerous other portals the tool helps to establish the maturity level of examined portals well as the adoption of decisions the achievement of the next maturity level necessitates.

### **3.4. Identification of macro-level variables (4th research objective – chapter 8 of the dissertation)**

Correlation analysis and scatter diagram methods were used for studying the variables. For this research objective independent variables comprised estimated financial, economic, technological and administration variables, dependent variables included the defined micro-level variables.

The research *has not substantiated an association between Member State level financial, economic determinants (financial envelope, GDP proportionate financial support) and the sophistication variant and they do not impact the design of the concept accordingly. The sixth and seventh hypotheses have therefore been not validated.*

*Portal level financial allocations influence the number of funded projects whereby the influence on portal sophistication has been convincingly captured.* However, the maturity level of portals does not correspond to a fixed breakeven point, sophistication rises as the number of projects grows. Supposedly, the number of projects determines the potential volume of administrative transactions enabling the quantification of the estimated and planned administrative burden. These calculations form important inputs to the decision-making process for selecting portal concepts.

*The impact of administrative and technological determinants, as described under the eight hypothesis can be partially validated. Namely, not all examined cases backed up a direct or close association between the determinants and the sophistication level,* nonetheless certain characteristics have been evidenced. Technological factors (*spread of e-governance*) do not directly affect the sophistication of portal concepts, although in parallel with a higher level of technological determinants the starting point of sophistication is found at a higher level, too.

Administration characteristics in *unitary state structures (Northern, Central and Southern Europe)* do not include a close association between state-administrative structure and portal concept sophistication. *In federative states, sophistication level is typically lower.* In these

countries wider decision-making competencies inspire the individual territorial units to tailor the portal concept more extensively. This approach brings about the mushrooming of distinct, stand-alone systems, a phenomenon coupled with a drop in project numbers counteracts sophistication.

Research evidence identifies two macro variables having a direct (*funded projects per portal*) or indirect (*portal level financial allocations*) impact on micro variables and the management decisions on the design of electronic portals. These new macro variables extend the efficiency ontology of e-cohesion (Figure 2).

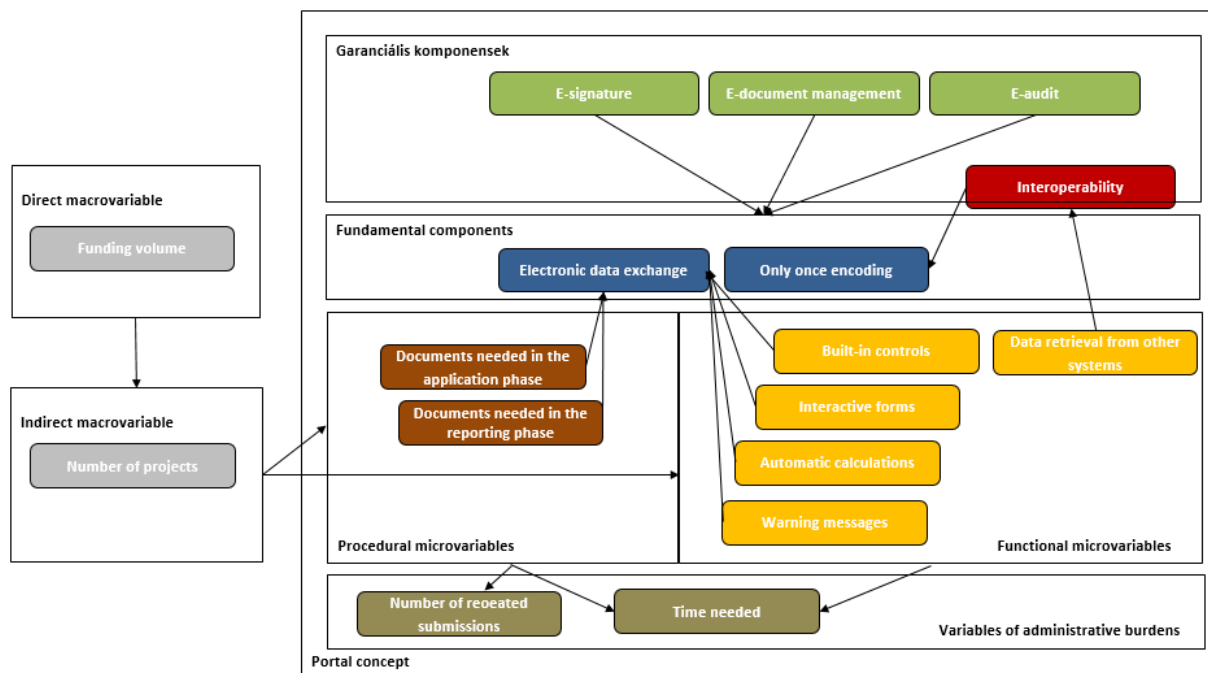


Figure 2

*The efficiency ontology of e-cohesion*

**Scientific result (4):** the identified macro variables enrich the efficiency ontology of e-cohesion which allow for the interpretation of efficiency dynamics in a wider context.

#### **4. Recommendations**

E-cohesion is a relatively new concept in the domain of development policy which can bring about a significant transformation of business procedures and the overall reduction of administrative burden. This intervention and the cost savings realized can stimulate the economy and result in a remarkable growth of the GDP. The importance of the concept is indicated by the fact that the requirements of e-cohesion are planned to be incorporated into the legislation of the next EU funding period in a more comprehensive form.

Taking into account the complexity of the concept and its burden reduction potential the application of the findings of this research has a practical relevance:

- *the realization of e-cohesion to its full potential depends on a range of country-specific decisions, the ontology elaborated helps to develop a better understanding on the national context of portals and the assessment of efficiency the factors*
- *the maturity model provides a new methodology to assess and improve the burden reduction potential of portals*
- *the ontology and the awareness of efficiency drivers can better focus future portal development*
- *the maturity model enables the elaboration of gradual portal development strategies, the planning of more focussed interventions and it makes the progress of the above measurable*
- *the proposed legislation of the new programming period extends the scope of e-cohesion to new funding schemes, these results and methodological tools can facilitate the design of new portals in the relevant policy domains*



## Publications of the author

- NYIKOS GY., HAJDU SZ., LAPOSA T.: *E-Cohesion: e-solutions in the implementation of combined financial instruments*, In: Hansen Hendrik, Müller-Török Robert, Nemeslaki András, Pichler Johannes, Prosser Alexander, Scola Dona (szerk.), CEE eDem and eGov Days 2017: Conference proceedings, Wien: Austrian Computer Society, (2017), - (ISBN:[978-3-903035-14-0](#))
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- NYIKOS GY., LAPOSA T.: *The background and realisation of e-cohesion*, 135 p., Budapest: Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem, 2018, (ISBN: 978-963-498-000-1)
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- LAPOSA T.: *The digital transformation of EU cohesion policy*, In: 25th NISPAcee Annual Conference „Innovation Governance in the Public Sector, Kazan, (2017) - (ISBN 978-80-89013-96-8 )
- LAPOSA T.: *eCohesion: how to measure the main drivers of administrative burden reduction*, In: Hansen Hendrik, Müller-Török Robert, Nemeslaki András, Prosser Alexander, Scola Dona, Szádeczky Tamás (szerk.), CEE eDem and eGov Days 2018: Conference proceedings, Wien: Facultas Verlags- und Buchhandels AG, 2018, (ISBN: 978-3-7089-1737-5)