

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES IN ROMANIA: INFOMEDIARY, LINK BETWEEN GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS AND THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

In many fields of activity of the national economy, the legislative basis is one that is constantly changing, being numerous situations in which the impact of legislative initiatives is unfavorable for business environment, and not only that. In this context, the representatives of the business environment, directly affected, can express their opinion by participating in public debates, thus appearing, in their case and for others, the real need for correct, complete, and real-time information in relation to the various events/debates organized by the various public bodies. At this stage, infomediaries intervene providing monitoring, collection, analysis, and synthesis services of data of interest, from different fields of activity, from multiple formal and informal sources found in the virtual environment, offering real support in the involvement of interested parties in the public decision-making process. The article wants, starting from the existing theoretical support in the literature, to highlight the particularities of the specific market in Romania, the emphasis being on identifying the attractiveness of this field of activity and, implicitly, the competitiveness of the active units of the profile.

Keywords

infomediary; informational content; public affairs; interested parties; transparency and accessibility of information; influencing the decision

JEL Classification

M41

Concept

The category of infomediary that is the subject of this article is represented by legal entities from the private sector in Romania, which offer monitoring, collection, analysis, systematization, and dissemination of informational content from the virtual environment, from various fields of activity, with an emphasis on initiatives amendment of the legislation in the EU space, respectively in Romania. These are infomediary that provide integrated services (the provision of informational content - legislative initiatives, media monitoring, stakeholder monitoring, etc., transmitted in real time, through personalized communication - alert sent by email, respectively the provision of reports on fields of interest of the client and specialized consultancy) to different market segments, formed by private legal entities from various sectors of activity of the national economy.

Literature review

The concept of infomediary was introduced by Hagel and Rayport (1997) to describe the activity of a broker or agent that supports users in the management of a vast volume of information regarding the market, offering the targeted entities, at the same time, protection regarding their own data.

Later the concept was used in specialized literature invoking the traditional library activity; it was considered that the infomediary can be assimilated to an intermediary that helps readers in the search for books of interest (Cronin, 1998).

In 2006, Yang and Wong considered that the role of infomediaries is to collect and organize the information of interest, representing the link between the representations of information demand and their providers. In the same direction of conceptualizing the notion, the work of Fisher (2010) can also be mentioned, who considers that the infomediary are those intermediaries who facilitate access to aggregated information, collected from multiple sources, which they provide to interested parties. From the point of view of this author, the information intermediaries represent a bridge between the information pool and the different categories of interested parties. This idea was also mentioned in 2004 by Knauf and David who emphasize the role of intermediaries in the creation and development of sustainable relationships with different categories of stakeholders, on the one hand, and with information providers, on the other.

The rapid development of the Internet in the 21st century favored the replacement of traditional intermediaries with information intermediaries, the latter taking many forms: web portals, such as business directories, virtual communities, search engines, social media platforms, etc. (Song and Zahedi, 2002).

Called infomediaries or cyber journal providers (Sarkar, Butler and Steinfield, 1995), this category of intermediaries represents the interface between users and information providers. The best example in this situation is represented by the Amazon platform, a meta market that virtually connects sellers and buyers around the world (Meck, 2001). Even if the appearance of the concept is mainly related to commercial activity, with infomediary having the role of collecting information about the market and creating profiles on the specific targets, which they later market to representatives of the business environment, the notion covers a wider area of action. For example, the operationalization of the concept can also be found in the social-humanitarian sphere, with infomediaries acting as collaborators or organizers within aid networks. Such a situation was recorded in the case of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal when certain private associations acted as intermediaries in crisis management, developing collaboration platforms with volunteers from the digital environment, humanitarian agencies, the Nepalese army, government agencies, doctors, etc. . (Thapa et al, 2017).

Because information intermediaries are, in fact, service providers (Sein and Furuholt, 2009), they are found in many spheres of action, managing, monitoring and providing information from the public and private spheres.

The present work is focused on highlighting the role of infomediaries in monitoring, collecting, managing and providing information from the public sector, with reference to the profile market in Romania.

In recent years, public institutions around the world, including those in Romania, have focused their attention on increasing the transparency of their own activities, as a premise in developing sustainable relationships with interested parties (the business environment, citizens, private associations, NGOs etc.), on the one hand, respectively as a driving factor in economic, social and political development, on the other hand.

It must be specified, however, that despite the large-scale provision of informational content by public sector institutions, with minimal restrictions, in order to increase transparency, it is extremely difficult to use in the decision-making process, for multiple reasons: they have a format specific, with specialized, technical terms, which refer to broad areas of activity, markets or time horizons, difficult to understand and analyze by stakeholders (Conradie and Choenni, 2014; Sieber and Johnson, 2015; Janssen and Dwivedi, 2015); in certain situations the information content is incomplete or completely missing in electronic format, generating a certain level of inequality of access to information (Castor, 2014; Gurstein, 2011); in certain states, on certain public

sector activities, access to information, even if it is available in digital format, is hampered by the bureaucratic phenomenon or is restricted for reasons of national interests and security (Boyera and Iglesias, 2014; Davies et al., 2013); another barrier in the use of information from the public sector, by the different categories of interested parties, is represented by the quality of the information and the relevance for practitioners, which suffer from the perspective of accuracy, collection procedures and aggregation methods, analysis periods, etc. (O'Hara, 2012; Heeks, 2006); the low level of technical skills and IT infrastructure at the level of different categories of stakeholders is another factor that mitigates the impact of information content in the decision-making process (Gurstein, 2011; Warschauer, 2002).

The transformation of public data into useful information, which can contribute substantially to the individual or collective decision-making process, with added value, involves, as previously stated, a third component in the value chain, namely information intermediaries.

In this situation, infomediary are generally private legal entities that monitor, collect, process and provide public sector data. The transformation of data into accessible, useful and adapted information by activity sector, market or sub-market involves analysis approaches, compilation of data from different information sources, aggregation of information, etc. (Janssen and Zuiderwijk, 2014).

Obviously, in the specialized literature and practice, there are numerous categories of infomediaries that access and process data from the public sector, each of these categories having different objectives and targets. According to the authors Johnson and Greene, the infomediaries that provide informational content from the public sector are: government agencies/state institutions, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, interest groups and virtual communities, academia and researchers, media representatives.

In the category of government infomediaries there are information providers at the level of different central or local departments that process primary data and provide information with added value (Jassen and Ziuderwijk, 2014; Jetzek, Avital and Bjorn-Andersen, 2013). These structures process primary data and carry out aggregate analyses, the added value consisting precisely in the accessible and adapted content according to the profile of the different interested parties (Fumega, 2014; Graves and Hendler, 2013). Examples of content provided by these structures are: interactive maps, graphs, tables and applications, databases, sector/market/niche studies, etc.

The private sector is considered, from the perspective of the infomediary model, the most important representative of data demand in relation to state institutions, on the one hand, and the pillar of information content supply in relation to the various categories of stakeholders, citizens or legal entities.

In the category of information intermediaries coming from the private environment, you can find both private legal entities and people who, using existing data sources in the online and offline environment, create informational content adapted to the specific targets. The informational content provided by this category of infomediary differs depending on the targets – citizens, natural persons in their capacity as buyers, representatives of the business environment from various sectors of activity, representatives of the commercial sector, etc. For example, informational content for citizens consists of mobile applications for different areas of interest, web platforms such as business directories that provide real-time information, databases, applications for GPS carpooling, interactive maps, etc. On the other hand, in the case of business representatives from different sectors of activity, the informational content offered by infomediaries can take the form of: economic/statistical databases, etc., sectoral/market/niche studies, market segments and customer profiles. customers,

market behaviors and their dynamics, monitoring and information on legislative initiatives in the field, etc.

Unlike the first two categories, NGO-type infomediaries are focused on providing informational content in areas such as education, health and other social fields (Grave and Hendler, 2013). It should be noted that, as the literature and practice reveals (Gray and Darbshire, 2011, Davies, 2014), this category enjoys a preferential collaboration with state institutions, on the one hand, and a high level of trust from stakeholders, on the other hand. Even though this category usually includes small groups of news media, their importance comes from the thematic content of information covering domestic priorities and issues (Davies, 2014). These include data analysis, reports and studies on health and education, interactive maps and mobile applications for identifying points of interest for citizens, etc.

Research infomediaries are academics and consultants who use data sources provided by public institutions for the purpose of creating academic/research papers and reports on various areas of interest. Unlike the previous categories, the purpose of the analysis of this grouping is to offer, based on the data provided by public institutions, solutions for improving the actions and services offered by the public sector. It should also be mentioned that in the case of this category, primary research attracts secondary analysis steps thus generating a high value of the informational content, through the permanent accumulation of new information.

Media representatives, generally journalists, are the infomediary who access data from the public sector for the purpose of informing citizens, offering syntheses accessible to extremely different age and education segments. The rapid development of social media platforms had an extremely favorable impact in the process of distributing information to citizens, their high accessibility favoring the involvement of citizens in online debates on various topics (Davies, 2010). In the specialized literature (Mejabi et al., 2014; Roy, 2014; Sapoka, 2014; Fumega, 2014), there is even a subcategory of this group, namely data journalists, who process data provided by public institutions and distribute summaries of interest to citizens.

Beyond this classification, each of the mentioned categories performs a series of functions in the value chain, as follows: facilitates access to information from different sources, supports interested parties in understanding and applying the information content, supports the use of knowledge in the decision-making process, supports the innovation process in different areas of interest, etc. In some situations, the tendency of infomediaries to influence the decision-making process in the public sector is even observed, requesting the creation and provision of new databases, according to their own needs. Practically, as mentioned in the specialized literature (Davies et al. 2013, Davies 2014), the role of certain infomediaries is not only limited to the use of data from the public system and the provision of informational content, but also extends to the decision-making sphere. This is the case of the private media, which provide an extremely wide range of services, known in practice as public affairs: the collection of a high volume of information disseminated over a wide period of time; compiling information from multiple sources; collecting and systematizing public events in a field of interest; labeling of information by negative, positive, neutral categories; identifying the subject of a news item from a fixed list of subject areas; generation of specific reports; anticipating the user's interest in certain information, depending on his previous search/request behavior; the operationalization of a virtual assistant – charboot; assistance and specialist advice, etc.

The context of action of infomediary in Romania

In many areas of activity of the national economy, the legislative environment is one that is constantly changing, being numerous situations in which the impact of legislative initiatives is unfavorable for the business environment, and not only that.

In this context, the representatives of the business environment, directly affected, can express their opinion by participating in public debates, thus showing the real need for accurate, complete, and real-time information in relation to the various events/debates organized by the various public bodies. At this stage, infomediaries intervene providing monitoring, collection, analysis and synthesis services of information of interest, from different fields of activity, from multiple formal and informal sources found in the virtual environment, offering real support in the involvement of interested parties in the public decision-making process.

The democratization of the functioning of State institutions has made possible the access to the decision-making process of a wide range of interested factors, regardless of their legal status or the interest they represent. Democratization favored the operationalization of some political and institutionalized mechanisms – consultations, petitions, memos, hearings, etc. - through which private institutions, economic agencies, business associations, non-governmental organizations, etc. - they can address the decision-makers, to convey their position on a certain issue.

Against this background and in this general context, the political decision is subject to continuous, organized and concerted pressures, aspects that allow, in the end, that the decision on a text of law or an administrative act no longer belongs fully and exclusively to the decision-maker in the system public, but also to an interest expressed by other parties in the private environment. Thus, the decision-making process is subject to multiple influences: some come from other State institutions, in the form of opinions or points of view, while others can come from any private person, who does everything in his power, for example, to convince the decision-maker from the potential adverse effects of his decisions.

In the context of integration into the European Union, Romania has aligned itself with the policies and requirements of the single market, adopting rules that favor both the transparency of the decision-making process and the increase in the degree of involvement of civil society in the decision-making process in the sphere of public policies, by asserting and supporting its own interest, at the level of the two major national decision-making systems, namely the Parliament and the Executive, as follows:

At the Parliament level:

- ✓ transparency: both the plenary sessions and the sessions of the two chambers, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, are public, any person having the right to attend and follow the debates and the vote. The entire legislative process is public, on the website of the two bodies the entire process of adopting the law can be followed in detail, starting with the form of the initiator, the related documentation and various opinions or reports of the specialized commissions or of some institutions involved, the Council Legislature, Competition Council, etc. and ending with the form sent for promulgation to the President of Romania. Practically, there is no stage or decision taken or point of view expressed (the services in the structure of the two chambers are obliged to make available to those interested the transcripts of the meetings, and the websites of the two chambers include video recordings) in the adoption process of a law that is not accessible to those interested.
- ✓ Influence of the decision: the possibility of the interested parties to influence the public decision at the level of the Romanian Parliament is guaranteed not only by the constitutional right to the petition, art. 51 of the Constitution, but especially by the regulations of the two Chambers of the Parliament of Romania, regulations that not only recognize the legitimacy of the representation of personal or group interests in the process of adopting the

laws, but also establish the mechanisms by which those interested can assert their legitimate interests. . Thus, according to art. 55 para. 2 of the Regulation of the Chamber of Deputies and art. 60 para. 3 of the Regulation of the Senate of Romania, in the works of the commissions, different interested parties (representatives of non-governmental organizations and professional associations, specialists and representatives of the business environment, etc.) can participate.

At the level of central and local administration:

- ✓ transparency: ensuring and guaranteeing the transparency of the decision-making act through: Law 52/2003 on decision-making transparency in public administration; Law 544/2003 on free access to information of public interest; Government Ordinance no. 27/2002 regarding petition resolution activities; Law 62/2011 on social dialogue.
- ✓ influencing the decision: Law 544/2003 on free access to information of public interest;

In this context, the steps taken in the self-regulation process of advocacy and public affairs activities should also be mentioned: the creation of a Code of Ethics for practitioners in advocacy and public affairs activities; development of a Transparency Register of advocacy and public affairs activities; establishment of a Supervisory Commission of the Transparency Register.

The components of the specific action market of infomediaries – the demand and supply of information from the public environment

In order to highlight the size of the analyzed market, an analysis of the two components related to a market is absolutely necessary: supply and demand.

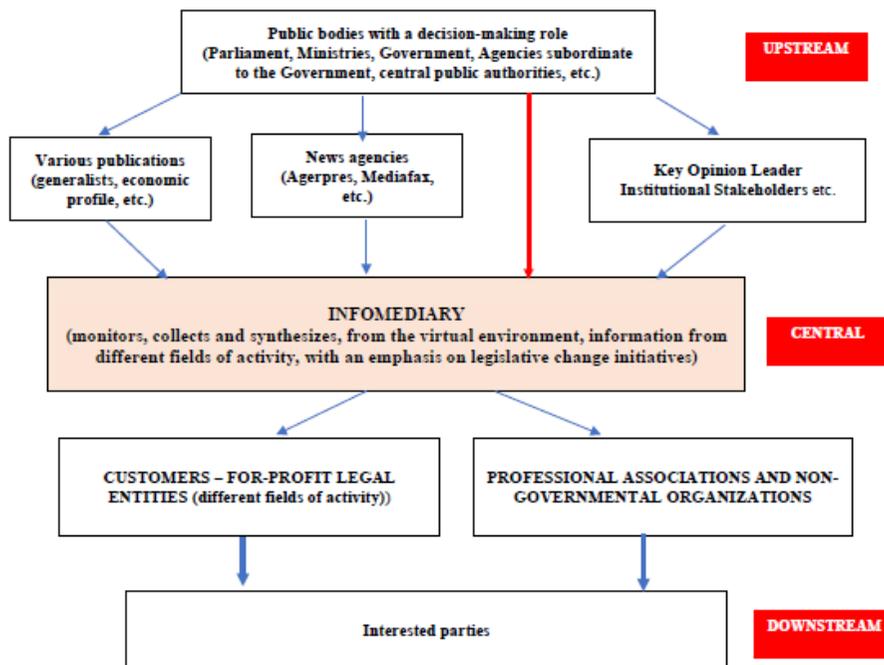


Figure 1 The components of the relationship system specific to the infomediaries action market

Source: own model

The offer, in the case of the analyzed market, is represented by all legal entities that monitor, collect, analyze and systematize existing data in the virtual environment, respectively offer personalized informational content (CAEN 6311 Data processing, web page management and related activities), while the analysis of the request will reveal the broad coordinates of the market (for-profit legal entities from multiple fields of activity of the national economy, respectively non-governmental organizations and professional associations).

The starting point for easy understanding of this market, and identification of the binding position of infomediaries, will be the chain, as can be seen in figure no. 1.

The supply analysis (the size and dynamics of the supply, respectively the short-term and medium-term evolution tendencies)

According to the latest data available in Tempo online and in various business directories, the analyzed market (specific market for CAEN class 6311 - Data processing, web page management and related activities) reached, at the national level, at the end of 2021, the ceiling of 3 billions lei .

In the dynamics, according to figure number 2, it can be seen that the analyzed market is one that is continuously growing. Compared to the reference year - 2010, in 2021 the turnover related to the profile market increased more than 4 times. The average growth rate of the market in the period 2010-2021 reveals the same trend of annual increase of the indicator (+13.9%). Also, compared to 2020, in 2021 the turnover within the CAEN 6311 class increased by 17.8%.

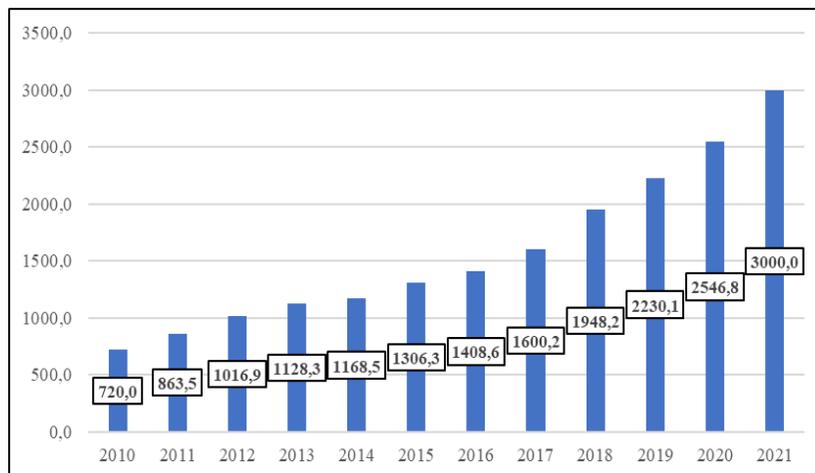


Figure 2 Turnover, in dynamics, related to the national market specific to CAEN class 6311 Data processing, web page management and related activities, millions of lei

Source: processed data taken from Tempo online

At the level of the year 2021, the indicator number of active units within the national profile market (CAEN class 6311 data processing, web pages and related activities) reached the ceiling of 3956 legal entities¹.

¹ idem

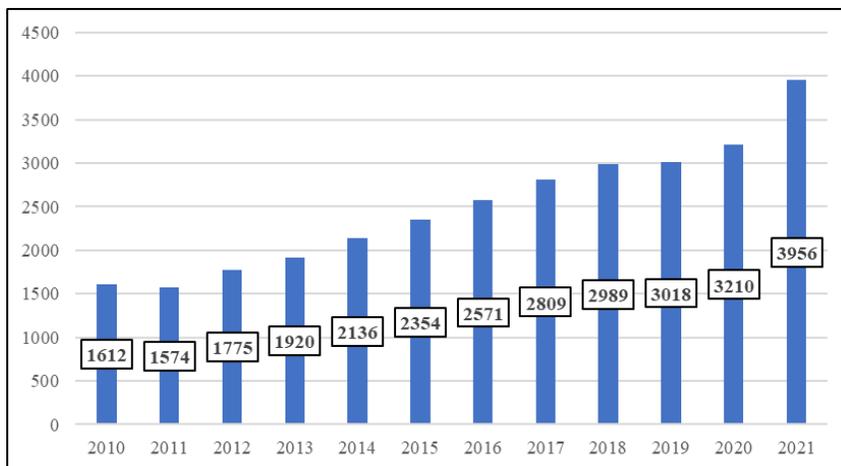


Figure 3 The number of active units, in dynamics, within the national market specific to CAEN class 6311 Data processing, web page management and related activities

Source: processed data taken from Tempo online

In dynamic - figure number 3, and at the level of the actual indicator of active units, the same upward trend is observed. The average growth rate between 2010-2021 was +8.5%, while, compared to the reference year-2010, in 2021 the indicator increased approximately 2.5 times. Compared to the previous year, in 2021, the number of active profile units increased by 23.3%. The annual increase of the number of profile units argues the attractiveness of the analyzed market., Taking the certainty of manifesting the request from the targets.

Distribution of units related to the CAEN class 6311 Data processing, web pages and related activities, by size categories from the perspective of the staff (Figure 4), reveals the domination of the micro-enterprises (between 0-9 employees), the field of activity analyzed by this time of size.

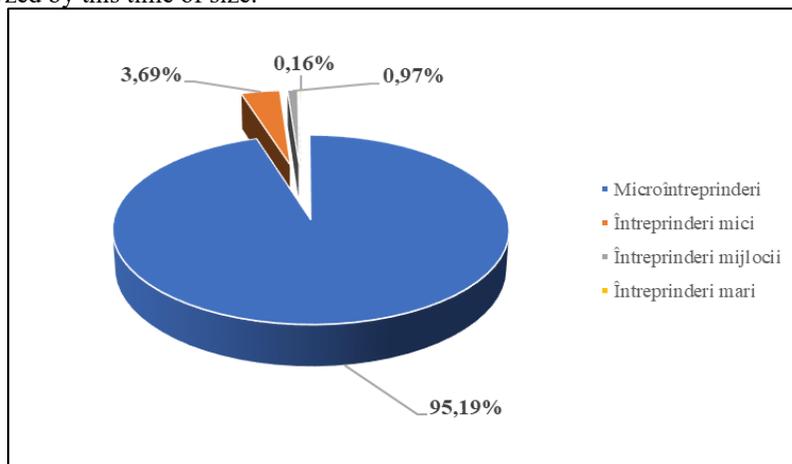


Figure 4 Distribution, by size categories, of the units related to the CAEN class 6311 data processing, web pages and related activities, 2020

Source: processed data taken from Tempo online

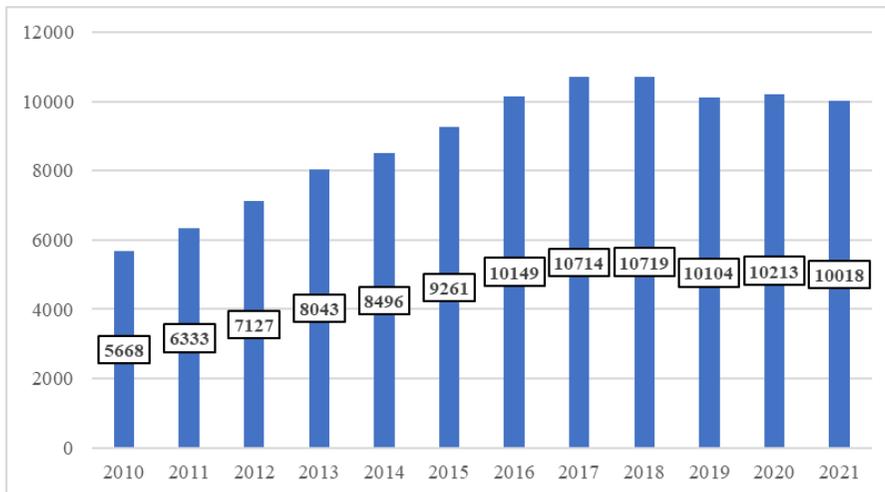


Figure 5 The average number of employees, in dynamic, within the national market specific to the CAEN 6311 data processing, the administration of web pages and related activities

Source: processed data taken from Tempo online

The attractiveness of the analyzed field is also argued by the size of the average number of employees employed at the level of specialized units. Thus, at the level of 2021, the average number of employees employed in the analyzed field reached the ceiling of 10,018 people, in a slight decrease compared to the previous year (-2%). The average growth rate of the indicator in the period 2010-2021 was +5.31%.

In the context of the analysis presented above, the following mention must be made: the CAEN class analyzed (6311 Data processing, web page administration and related activities) covers several activities, in which context it is observed that, of the total number of active national units per class, less of 1% are specialized in mediating informational content between state institutions and the business environment.

In fact, an analysis of the most important direct competitors, without wanting to be exhaustive, reveals the existence of a total of 20 legal entities profiled strictly on public affairs services, most of them being transnational companies.

Obviously, we cannot appreciate that the analyzed niche is not an attractive one from the perspective of absorption potential, but we identify a series of barriers to its penetration, as follows:

- ✓ the investment required to develop a business in the field of public affairs activities, based on the existence of an online platform, amounts to 100,000 - 120,000 euros. From this perspective we appreciate that the market entry barriers are high.
- ✓ the effect of experience: it is usually the prerogative of companies with tradition in the profile market, which have clearly defined outlets and created over time. Moreover, as previously specified, most of the operators active on the Romanian market are transnational companies, which enjoy high know-how and notoriety. From this perspective, we appreciate that the market entry barriers are relatively high.
- ✓ the correspondence, in the case of the analyzed companies, between the length of time in the market and the market share at the level of 2021 reveals the tendency for the dominance of the profile market by operators with experience in the sector (66.7% of the profile market operators have between 10 and 20 years of

experience in the sector, the share of those with less than 10 years of experience being 22.3%).

- ✓ another factor that can brake the development of the analyzed niche is also represented by substitutable service bidders. In general, this category, although it does not offer integrated services, covers the request for information content on certain levels (media monitoring, social networks, etc.).
- ✓ given the level of innovation that defines the services traded within the profile market, respectively the relative reluctance of potential customers regarding their utility, we appreciate that another factor that brakes the rapid penetration of the analyzed niche is represented by the power exercised by the potentials customers.

Beyond these potential barriers, we appreciate that the analyzed market has a significant potential for growth, the arguments supporting this information being presented previously.

Demand analysis (size and dynamics of demand, sectors likely to become users of public affairs services)

Analyzing the client portfolios of the most important profile operators, we identify, as representatives of the demand for public affairs services, the following market segments: profit-making legal entities from the private, national and transnational environment, predominantly from the category of large enterprises; non-governmental organizations; professional associations.

In general, the for-profit legal entity clients are representatives of the highly regulated fields of activity, namely: the pharmaceutical market, the financial-banking market, the insurance market, the tobacco and alcoholic beverages market, the packaging market, the energy market, the telecommunications market, the IT, the market for private health services, etc. The market potential in this segment is huge if the reluctance to newness found in the business environment can be overcome in a global manner.

Thus, we identify, in broad terms, the broad limits in which the demand for public affairs services can be manifested, at the national level (the data are related to the year 2020):

- ✓ food producers (CAEN division 10 Food industry) – 85 legal entities;
- ✓ producers of alcoholic beverages (CAEN division 11 Manufacture of beverages) – 19 legal entities;
- ✓ manufacturers of tobacco products (CAEN division 12 Manufacture of tobacco products) – 3 legal entities;
- ✓ packaging manufacturers (CAEN group 172 Manufacture of paper and cardboard articles);
- ✓ manufacturers of pharmaceutical products (CAEN division 21 Manufacture of basic pharmaceutical products and pharmaceutical preparations) - 14 legal entities;
- ✓ producers and suppliers of electricity and thermal energy (division 35 Production and supply of electricity and thermal energy, gas, hot water and air conditioning) – 58 legal entities;
- ✓ telecommunications service providers (division 61 Telecommunications) – 29 legal entities;
- ✓ IT service providers (division 62 Service activities in information technology) – 81 legal entities;
- ✓ financial-banking service providers (division 64 Financial intermediaries) – 4 legal entities;
- ✓ insurance service providers (division 66 Activities auxiliary to financial intermediation, insurance activities and pension funds) – 2 legal entities;

- ✓ private health service providers (division 86 Activities related to human health) – 21 legal entities.

An important component of the market for public affairs services is represented by non-governmental organizations and professional associations.

In Romania, currently, approximately 270 non-governmental organizations operate in various fields: economic and social development, representation of business and professional interests, international cooperation, education, health, culture, etc². Also, approximately 50 professional associations from different fields of activity of the national economy are currently active³.

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² http://www.cdep.ro/informatii_publice/ong2015.chest_aprobate

³ <https://www.roaliment.ro/lista-asociatii-profesionale/>

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