



**European Committee
of the Regions**

COTER-VI/053

136th plenary session, 7-9 October 2019

OPINION

Better Communication for Cohesion Policy

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- stresses that communication of cohesion policy is not solely the European Commission's responsibility, but is rather the responsibility of all actors that benefit from cohesion policy, including Member States and local authorities;
- notes that increasing the visibility of ESI funds can contribute to improving perceptions of the European Union and to restoring public confidence in European policies;
- takes the view that cohesion policy needs to be communicated differently, which includes a need to target wider audiences and not only stakeholders. The general public should be the focus of targeted communication, and this communication needs to resonate with people;
- highlights that managing authorities of operational programmes funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) must communicate the goals, funding opportunities and results of cohesion policy programmes and projects;
- welcomes the proposal put forward in the new cohesion policy legislative package to appoint national communication officers to manage, in an integrated manner, the visibility of activities relating to the Funds;
- finds it regrettable, however, that the communication initiatives developed under the Common Agricultural Policy targeted at rural areas and farmers will not be integrated into the same national communication strategies;
- calls for the definition of performance indicators to be improved, as there is currently considerable variability in indicators, which are not adapted to communication activities;
- welcomes the recent Communication of the European Commission highlighting the need to address Europe's unique communication challenge in times of fragmentation and disinformation and suggests that cohesion policy plays a pivotal role in making EU communication a joint effort across levels of government and EU institutions.

Rapporteur

Adrian Ovidiu Teban (RO/EPP), Mayor of Cugir

Reference document

N/A

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Better Communication for Cohesion Policy

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General considerations:

1. points out that cohesion policy represents about a third of the EU's budget, at EUR 351 billion over the programming period 2014-2020. This provides a long-term investment framework for regions and Member States and offers more reliable planning, compared to national annual or biannual budgets;
2. notes that an increase in the visibility of ESI funds can contribute to improving perceptions about the effectiveness of cohesion policy and to strengthening citizens' confidence in the European project; however, a coherent communication channel is essential, not only from the top down with regard to the concrete results of ESI funds, but also from the bottom up in order to make local authorities and stakeholders aware of funding opportunities, with the bonus of increasing public participation in implementation processes;
3. in principle, communication should be an integral part of policy-making and implementation. Awareness of local EU-funded projects amongst beneficiaries and civil society is crucial, despite different funding amounts in specific regions, and can only be the result of a common effort of all levels of government involved. The multi-level governance model and the partnership principle, both based on enhanced coordination among public authorities, economic and social partners and civil society, can contribute to a more efficient communication of EU policy objectives and results;
4. highlights that managing authorities of operational programmes funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) must communicate the goals, funding opportunities and results of cohesion policy programmes and projects; this is therefore a key task for managing authorities and beneficiaries in the Member States – to address questions such as what investment opportunities exist, or how a beneficiary can go about tackling publicity issues, or who is being funded and for what purpose;
5. notes that EU cohesion policy and the interventions by its funds are accompanied by information and publicity requirements, which mean that the national and regional authorities tasked with implementation, as well as the final beneficiaries, are legally required to carry out communication activities. These requirements have developed over the past three decades from simple information measures such as commemorative plaques to more sophisticated communication strategies including multi-annual strategies, annual plans, minimal requirements and evaluations to be carried out for each operational programme;
6. stresses that informing potential beneficiaries about funding opportunities is a crucial part of programme management. In order to ensure that cohesion policy invests in the most relevant

and innovative projects, the widest possible audience of potential beneficiaries needs to be informed; this can be achieved not only by highlighting the investment opportunities, but also by showcasing the results achieved and best practices;

7. points out that EU cohesion policy has proved to have a positive impact both on the economy and on citizens' lives, but regrets that the results have not always been well communicated and that awareness of its positive effects remains consistently low over the last decade, as according to a Flash Eurobarometer survey in 2017, only 35% of EU citizens have heard about EU co-financed projects in the area in which they live. However, people who have heard about these projects say that the impact on the development of their regions has been positive (78%);
8. observes that, according to the same Eurobarometer, European cohesion policies are still poorly communicated and information sources tend not to be very diverse. Generally, digital communication should be much more put forward over the next programming period beyond 2020;
9. underlines the uneven progress recorded across Member States in streamlining administrative procedures in terms of broader mobilisation and involvement of regional and local partners, including economic and social partners as well as representatives of civil society, and highlights the importance of public participation and social dialogue. It is noteworthy that the highest perceived priority is to invest in regions with high unemployment. Most important areas for EU regional policy investments should be focused on education, health or social infrastructures, which are regarded as more important areas for investment. Furthermore, "cohesion policy is the main EU investment instrument for regions and cities to implement the Sustainable Development Goals"; such an approach would be a pre-requisite to extending the "localisation" of SDGs and boost their implementation via cohesion policy¹, paving the way from linear to circular economy²;
10. points out that both the perception of the cohesion policy and support for the EU may vary between population groups and between regions. However, more evidence is required to reach clear-cut conclusions in this regard. For this purpose, information on representative samples of individuals will be required for all EU regions. Therefore, when any Eurobarometer is planned to be representative in all EU regions (NUTS 2 or equivalent), proposes to include questions reporting on the perception of the cohesion policy and the citizens' support to the European project;
11. highlights the need to improve knowledge about the impact of citizens' perception of the EU cohesion policy on their support for the European building process. This is crucial for the a priori evaluation of the effectiveness of specific communication policies aiming at fostering positive attitudes towards the cohesion policy and the EU overall. Consequently, suggests the inclusion of specific questions on support for the EU and perception of the EU cohesion policy within the same standard Eurobarometer surveys;

¹ <https://cor.europa.eu/en/events/Pages/ECON-sc-follow-up-UN-SDGs.aspx>

² REFLECTION PAPER TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE EUROPE BY 2030, European Commission COM(2019)22 of 30 January 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/rp_sustainable_europe_30-01_en_web.pdf

12. stresses that it is not only economic factors that can generate awareness. Various strands of analysis have identified groups of citizens whose awareness of EU (cohesion) policies seems to be connected directly to their identification with the European Union as a political entity. There also seems to be a positive relationship between the levels of awareness of certain EU policies, including cohesion policy, and the level of participation in the European elections. Inversely, it also seems true that when identification with the European Union and with a common European history and culture is high, the public are more aware of European (cohesion) policies. For these reasons, it is important to improve and intensify the communication about the results of EU cohesion policy in order to strengthen the political legitimacy of the European Union and the feeling of belonging to a common project among its citizens;
13. also stresses that communication of cohesion policy is not solely the European Commission's responsibility, but is rather the responsibility of all actors that benefit from Cohesion policy, including Member states and local authorities;
14. takes the view that cohesion policy needs to be communicated differently, which includes a need to target wider audiences and not only stakeholders. The general public should be the focus of targeted communication, and this communication needs to resonate with people: it has to tell stories about impacts on local citizens, and not just spread numbers or charts about faraway job markets or remote infrastructure issues and peoples, it should focus on the role played by the EU as level of government in people's lives, not on informing the public on its variety of different funds and projects. Crucially, the importance of trust in the messenger is at least as important as the message. And public trust in local and regional authorities is higher than in national governments or the EU. Regional and local politicians therefore have a potentially decisive role to play, and CoR members in particular, as "ambassadors of Europe in the regions, cities and municipalities" should set an example;
15. underlines the need for targeted communication. The tone of the targeted communication must focus on the "neighbourhood"; it needs emotion, as statistical data does not move people. A multilevel governance approach should be followed in the interests of better communication. 55% of the respondents in the last Eurobarometer think that decisions should be taken at subnational levels, with close to a third (30%) opting for the regional level and a quarter (25%) favouring the local level, whereas almost one in five think that these decisions should be taken at a European level;
16. highlights the need to engage in a more permanent dialogue with citizens and involve them more often in decision-making, which can provide accountability and legitimacy to cohesion policy delivery. In this sense, the new overarching objective 5 for the period 2021-2027 – "A Europe closer to citizens" – should make best use of existing experiences with community-led local development and participatory budgeting at local level, as well as other methods aimed at increasing citizen participation. The involvement of CoR members, mayors and other locally elected representatives in the European Commission's communication campaigns on Cohesion policy could be a way to raise a positive awareness on the benefits of the European Union in citizens' daily lives.

The Visibility Challenge

17. notes that increasing the visibility of ESI funds can contribute to improving perceptions of the European Union and to restoring public confidence in European policies;
18. consequently points out that the increase in Euroscepticism and political parties that oppose further EU integration is also linked to the perception of economic, social and territorial inequalities. Cohesion policy is a powerful tool to promote "territorial resilience" as part of the solution in terms of policy responses, and actions to communicate the positive impact on the regions and people's lives have become vital;
19. suggests that the operational programmes should focus on people's needs and on communicating not only "to the people" but more particularly "with the people". In this connection, the Committee stresses the importance of the Partnership Agreements which foresee dialogue mechanisms with citizens in designing interventions co-funded by EU cohesion policy at all stages of preparation, implementation and evaluation of operational programmes, including recommendations that Member States involve local authorities in all phases;
20. encourages the uptake of democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting and deliberation (juries, panels and polls) in order to give local people a say and thus drastically change the way citizens engage in the communication mechanism;
21. points out that the visibility of cohesion policy investments is a shared responsibility of the European Commission and the Member States and that the competent local and regional authorities should be involved in formulating effective communication strategies;
22. calls on the European Commission to draw lessons from successful communication of small-scale and people-to-people EU-financed projects in bordering regions. Notes the high level of engagement of people participating in such projects and their contribution to effective communication of the projects' results;
23. welcomes the proposal put forward in the new cohesion policy legislative package to appoint national communication officers to manage, in an integrated manner, the visibility of activities relating to the regional ERDF, the European Social Fund and the Cohesion Fund, as well as the Asylum and Migration Fund, the Integrated Border Management Fund and the Internal Security Fund. In the same sense, best use should be made of other future EU programmes with local visibility such as Horizon Europe, InvestEU etc. as well as the Europe Direct Information Centres;
24. believes that the use of platforms based on the REFIT approach of applying simple ICT solutions to communicate with EU citizens will facilitate more effective policy-making in line with public expectations. Local authorities have considerable experience in this area and are already making use of applications to find immediate solutions to local problems. Only two-way communication needs to be further developed;

25. asks the European Commission to extend the efforts already carried out with managing authorities to political representatives from regions and cities to test new ways of communication. Local and regional authorities, as well as beneficiaries, constitute the most effective and closer interlocutors of citizens;
26. recommends that communication of Cohesion Policy focuses not only on the outcomes and results of EU-funded projects but primarily at the benefits that these projects have for everyday life of citizens. In this sense, the local and regional level seem to be most suitable for such communication (how EU helped my municipality, city or region) and the active role of Europe Direct Information Centres should be encouraged;
27. however, demands that in line with the objective of territorial cohesion, the national communication initiatives developed under the Common Agricultural and Cohesion policies should be coordinated and target in particular areas (including rural) which are lagging behind in their development and where the feeling of abandonment has fed Euroscepticism in the recent years;
28. consequently asks the Council and the European Parliament to include a specific financial envelope for communication within technical assistance and, where appropriate, to increase the number of binding publicity and information requirements for cohesion policy projects within the future Common Provisions Regulation beyond 2020;
29. suggests implementing "smart communication planning", which would involve developing integrated communication strategies, including outcome indicators with baselines, earmarked funding and specified costs;
30. calls for wider and more intensive use of digital media, with less technical language and better targeted actions, and recommends monitoring the number of people reached by communication activities (e.g. webpage hits after an event);
31. proposes that "effectiveness of projects in exploiting results" should be a selection criterion to finance projects by Cohesion policy (as in the EU programmes Horizon 2020 or COSME). However, mandatory publicity should be proportionate to the size of projects especially at the level of small projects which can constitute a large administrative burden for final beneficiaries;
32. thinks that the project selection criteria in operational programmes should at least outline communication principles, in order to facilitate reviews and comparisons at EU level;
33. suggests that the European Commission create an "evaluation accounting for communication results", which would contain: communication plans and actions, improved methods (surveys, focus groups, media monitoring), EU evaluation guidance, a learning platform providing a repository for evaluations of communications, and, finally, a database of good communication practices;
34. welcomes the European Commission's proposal to set up a single funding portal at EU level containing all the calls for proposals and a common list of operations, as well as individual

national websites providing access to information on all EU programmes and funds.; Online place-based EU portals of the different Institutions and different DGs of the Commission should be brought together under one single "EU" brand;

Media Strategy

35. suggests that the design of (social) media strategies should include references to local contexts, such as enhancing positive framing, building longer-term narratives linked to individual stories, and actively challenging – rather than ignoring – negative framing;
36. takes the view that a key aspect in increasing the impact of cohesion policy communication is further diversifying communication activities and boosting the presence in the media of all EU activities;
37. in this connection, points out that, in order to increase the EU's presence in regions and cities, communication activities should be compatible with the visibility of the European Structural and Investment Funds and programmes such as Interreg, Urbact and ESPON;
38. is in favour of stepping up social media activities in order to boost support for cohesion policy, following the example of the #Cohesionalliance campaign, which brought together political actors with a strong political message in relation to an EU policy which brings benefits to all its territories;
39. notes that the European Week of Regions and Cities is the key political event on the implementation of cohesion policy, allowing political representatives, practitioners, researchers and people to learn, exchange ideas, influence the EU and voice their particular views on regional and urban policies;
40. suggests that the European Commission include a section on this subject in the new version of the Commission Delegated Regulation on the European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds; this would be a way of increasing respect for and consideration of the partnership and multilevel partnership principles when communication activities are designed;

Improving post-2020 communication on cohesion policy

41. proposes that, within the future cohesion policy post-2020, investment in communication projects should be funded from a single well-defined cost category, given that a comparison of communication strategies shows that the budgets for these activities are difficult to aggregate and compare, as the strategies are defined at different levels with different funds, and also that cost categories and methods are not always clearly defined;
42. calls for the definition of performance indicators to be improved, as there is currently considerable variability in indicators, which are not adapted to communication activities;

43. recommends taking into account when drafting strategies for the period 2021-2027 of evidence from research carried out on the effectiveness of cohesion policy communication through EU-funded projects such as "Cohesify" and "Perceive" and to make a reference to the "geography of discontent", which has emerged in the context of populist debates about the European project;
44. underlines the need for flexible branding and visibility strategies: an EU flag should be ubiquitous in all mandatory or informal materials;
45. welcomes the recent Communication of the European Commission³ highlighting the need to address Europe's unique communication challenge in times of fragmentation and disinformation and suggests that cohesion policy plays a pivotal role in making EU communication a joint effort across levels of government and EU institutions;
46. supports the approach of simplifying communication for EU-funded projects: single branding (no reference to ESI fund or programme level); single national website providing access to information on all EU programmes and funds; special visibility for operations of strategic importance and operations above EUR 10 million; national communication coordinators to oversee all EU funds and an important role for programme communication officers; inclusion of communication strategy (in a lighter version) in the content of the programme; allowing managing authorities to apply financial corrections (up to 5%) to beneficiaries that do not comply with the communication rules; and enabling the re-use of communication materials – managing authorities will need to retain the right to re-use the communication materials produced and made available to EU institutions (upon request).

Brussels, 8 October 2019

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Karl-Heinz Lambertz

The Secretary-General ad interim
of the European Committee of the Regions

Pedro Cervilla

³ European Commission (2019): Europe in May 2019. Preparing for a stronger, more united and more democratic Union in an increasingly uncertain world, Brussels, 30 April 2019.

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Better Communication for Cohesion Policy
Reference(s)	N/A
Legal basis	Article 307 TFEU
Procedural basis	Rule 41(b)(ii) of the CoR's Rules of Procedure
Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter	N/A
Date of Bureau/President's decision	5 February 2019 (Bureau)
Commission responsible	Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget
Rapporteur	Adrian Ovidiu Teban (RO/EPP), Mayor of Cugir
Analysis	2 May 2019
Discussed in commission	26 March 2019
Date adopted by commission	10 July 2019
Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)	unanimity
Date adopted in plenary	8 October 2019
Previous Committee opinions	N/A
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	N/A