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Communicating Cohesion in Eastern Europe. The Cases of Romania, Hungary and Slovenia



ABOUT THE PROJECT

This study was prepared in the framework of the project “**The Impact of Cohesion Policy on EU Identification - COHESIFY**” (<http://www.cohesify.eu/>). COHESIFY is a research project funded by the European Union under the Horizon 2020 Program (Grant Agreement n° 693427), running from February 2016 through April 2018. The project investigates whether the performance of the EU’s flagship development policy – Cohesion Policy - influences how people see the EU. The project compares regions in ten countries in the EU to test the importance of the visibility in spending, the extent of local control over selecting priorities and beneficiaries, the significance of political affiliations and the impact of weak performance such as the low absorption rates. The project compares the positions of insiders, such as program designers and administrators, with applicants and beneficiaries, such as local authorities, private companies and civic groups. These attitudes are compared with the views of the general public in the respective regions. These views are gathered through analysis of national and local media reports, social media discussions, and complemented with representative surveys, interviews and focus groups.

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COMMUNICATING COHESION IN EASTERN EUROPE.
THE CASES OF ROMANIA, HUNGARY AND SLOVENIA

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Introduction

In this paper we analyse how the Cohesion Policy (CP) has been communicated in three East European countries: Romania, Hungary and Slovenia. Communication is a central aspect of cohesion and a mandatory activity for all projects which receive financing through EU structural funds. Its purpose is to ensure that citizens acknowledge the contribution of the EU to local, regional, and national development as well as to make sure that potential beneficiaries have the right information about funding opportunities available through structural funds. Yet, since the responsibility to communicate about the contribution of the CP is devolved to national actors, who are responsible both for implementing and evaluating communication activities, communication takes on distinct local flavours depending on whether national policy makers consider it as potentially beneficial for the implementation of CP or as an additional obligation stemming from European Union (EU) regulations. The country case studies below show that whereas in Hungary and Romania, communication remained mostly a formal task embedded in programme design but marginal in terms of potential contribution to overall programme effectiveness, in Slovenia this was not the case.

Furthermore, the degree of centralization of communication activities seems to have an impact on the effectiveness of communication as well as on the likelihood that communication of CP would be captured by political actors. In Slovenia and Hungary, communication moved towards a highly centralized institutional structure, which, in the case of Slovenia seems to have contributed to a better tailoring of the messages and activities undertaken by the Managing Authority to programme specific conditions. By comparison, in Hungary, the centralization of communication activities, especially after 2014, contributed to downplaying the level EU contribution to local initiatives. This took place in a highly politicized context in which in 2016 the government financed an anti-EU campaign that sought to mobilize public sentiment against an alleged interference of the EU in Hungarian national affairs. Romania stands in contrast to both Hungary and Slovenia. With a highly decentralized institutional structure, communication was carried out in an uneven manner: whereas some of the Operational Programs (OPs) did use it as a tool to improve the quality of the applications for financing and emphasize the role of the EU to the development of Romania, the majority of OPs have sought only to formally fulfil the minimum communication criteria demanded by the Commission. More so, since

communication responsibilities in Romania are devolved to Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), the quality of the communication activities depended to a large extent on how much effort these actors have dedicated to implementing them.

A common trend that emerges across the three countries is that there is a growing emphasis on modern communication tools, social media and successful stories as a way to raise awareness about the availability of funds. However, it seems that CP communication is, in most of the cases, done simply in order to fulfil functional needs of the OPs (raise awareness about funding, increase the quality of the applications for funding etc.) rather than to build a common European identity. The latter seems to be a secondary concern of national and regional policy-makers (if at all) and, when not openly opposed as is the case in Hungary, is not directly pursued in communication measures.

Romania

Romania had little experience with the communication of public and European policies in 2007, when it entered the European Union. As such, the communication strategies adopted by each operational programme as well as the National Communication Strategy suffered numerous delays and were finalized as late as 2010. Furthermore, the implementation of the communication strategies also suffered major delays which impacted the effectiveness of the communication measures devised by managing authorities. One such example is the creation of the Info Centre for Structural Funds, which became operational as late as January 2012, only one year before the closing of the 2007-2013 contracting period. The impact of the Centre remained rather limited: in the first 18 months since its establishment each of its six employees processed on average 1-2 requests per day and most of the citizens did not know about its existence (Ziarul Financiar 2013).

Compared to Hungary and Slovenia, communication strategy in Romania is organized in a highly decentralized manner with the country having one national communication strategy that sets the general strategy for the programming period. The strategy is broken down by each OP and even further by each region of development. Although this extreme decentralization could in theory contribute to a better tailoring of the communication strategies to specific target groups and regional needs, in practice it contributed to creating overlapping tasks and messages. The communication strategies of the OPs follow similar templates and do not differ much in content and approach – indicating that communication is perceived as a formal task to be

fulfilled rather than a substantive interest of the actors involved. This is noticeable especially in the various target indicators set for the evaluation of communication measures of the individual OPs.

The National Communication Strategy (NCS) sets the general guidelines for the respective communication strategies developed by each OP. In the case of Romania, the NCS was developed based on a series of ex-ante quantitative (survey) and qualitative studies (focus groups), carried out by the Ministry of Public Finance in 2006, prior to the country joining the European Union (EU). The studies revealed several important aspects related to the general perception of Romanian citizens about EU structural funds. First, and not surprisingly given that the country was not yet a member of the EU, the average level of knowledge about structural funds was very low. Second, most citizens believed that the pre-accession funds such as SAPARD (Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development) and PHARE (Programme of Community Aid to the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe) were not distributed in a transparent manner and that corruption especially in the public administration impedes a fair allocation of funds. Both media and personal experiences contributed to these negative perceptions, with the Eurobarometer 66 revealing that in 2006 Romanian citizens placed more trust in the EU institutions for solving their problems than in national institutions. Third, information about structural funds was unevenly distributed: whereas non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and public administration bodies were relatively well informed about the financing opportunities provided by the OPs, the private sector or academia knew very little about structural funds. In fact, potential beneficiaries did not make a distinction between pre-accession and post accession funds and believed that EU money involved too much bureaucracy. Finally, respondents indicated that the most common sources of information about EU funds were the internet, seminars, and media (NCS 2013).

Considering the above, the NCS set three general objectives: a) to ensure the recognition of EU financing to the modernization of Romania; b) to provide complete and correct information about structural funds; c) to ensure transparency in the allocation of the funds. The target groups for the communication activities were the general population, the potential beneficiaries of the structural funds, the institutions involved in the management and implementation of programmes, stakeholders who do not directly benefit from EU structural funds but who might be impacted by them (businesses, public sector authorities, NGOs etc.), and media (written, radio and TV). The total budget allocated for communication activities was 172 million Euro for all OPs in Romania between 2007 and 2013, with around 90% of the amount coming from

EU sources (NCS 2013). Interestingly, although many of the respondents of the ex-ante analysis indicated that corruption was one of the most important conditions affecting the management and implementation of EU structural funds, the specific communication objectives set by the NCS did not specifically target this issue but focused on more general themes (increase visibility and information about structural funds). Thus, the issue of transparency set in the general communication objectives did not receive a similar level of attention in the specific objectives set by the NCS.

Although the 2007-2013 national communication strategy set several very important objectives such as to communicate about the transparency in the allocation of structural funds and to provide complete and correct information about financing opportunities, these objectives were not clearly operationalized in the OP communication strategies. Rather, the general objectives remained in the background and the OP strategies focused on fulfilling formal communication criteria. On the other hand, it is important to note that in most the communication strategies there is a disconnect between the objectives set, the indicators used for assessment, and the messages learned as a result of the evaluations undertaken in the context of each OP. In this sense, the indicators used for assessing the effectiveness of communication activities remained rather basic and did not reveal much about the actual impact of the measures which were undertaken. This problem was compounded by the fact that data on gathering on the impact of communication activities was not properly included in the communication plan. Therefore, impact evaluations carried out after the implementation of communication measures could not realistically measure their impact. At the same time, except for the Regional Operational Programme, which continuously evaluated its communication achievements through various methods, the other OPs have relied much less on independent evaluations.

Interviews with communication officers, public sector employers and beneficiaries in June – July 2017 revealed that in Romania communication remained a secondary objective to absorption. In fact, as some of the interviewees pointed out, in some instances communication was difficult since there were not many achievements to showcase. On the other hand, interviews revealed that there is significant variation in communication strategies between OPs: whereas some OPs such as the Regional Operational Programme (ROP) use communication extensively both as a tool to inform beneficiaries and a means to spread the word about calls for financing, other programs limit themselves to fulfilling formal communication criteria. In this respect, there is also between program variation in terms of communication tools: while most of the OPs use traditional communication tools such as flyers or press releases, the ROP

launched a national media campaign which comprised TV spots, used social networks and built a network of regional communicators to maximize information efforts.

These issues were noted in the 2014-2020 NCS. The 2014 NCS argued that communication about structural funds for the previous period lacked coherence and was done with interruptions (NCS 2014). This led to problems in communicating with the media and getting through the messages of different OPs. Furthermore, amongst the general public, even though more people knew about the existence of structural funds, most of them (61 percent) thought that structural funds benefited a selected few and not the entire country. Notwithstanding that the general level of knowledge about structural funds increased over years, people continued to confuse what projects can be financed through the cohesion policy and still mention: agriculture, development of villages or social protection as possible financing themes. Thus, the NCS set to increase the level of knowledge about the structural funds but also to inform citizens that they benefit the entire country and not only specific groups of individuals. Moreover, the level of trust in the institutions which manage structural funds remained low – only 19 percent of respondents declared that they trust them. Therefore, the NCS aimed to increase trust in institutions by ensuring that communication is about the transparency and correct allocation of structural funds.

Comparing the national communication strategies between the two programming periods reveals that learning has taken place, especially concerning the institutional coordination regarding the communication aspects of Cohesion funds. In this respect, it seems that the 2007-2013 period was more of a testing period in which institution building took place and various strategies of communication were implemented/tested – which yielded mixed outcomes. The main learning outcome in the case of Romania seems to be the recognition that there is a need for better coordination between the communication strategies of various managing authorities. Thus, the communication plan emphasizes the need to have a more coherent communication strategy which is synced across institutions/managing authorities. The other leaning outcome for the 2014-2020 period is the emphasis on targeted messages for various target groups and the individualization of relayed messages, depending on the environment which is used for communication. Thus, the 2014 – 2010 strategy presents a much more detailed plan regarding the messages that should be communicated to the target groups as well as the manner in which previously ignored groups (such as young people) have to be engaged with in communication. Another important aspect of learning concerns the recognition that the communication strategies employed in the previous programming period did not have the expected results.

Thus, although the general level of knowledge about structural funds in the general population has increased, the specific knowledge remained rather low, with many people still confusing the categories of projects that can be financed through the Cohesion Policy. This has led to the shifting of the communication messages for the general population towards topics that directly emphasize certain aspects of the Cohesion policy such as: European resources do not finance social policies, European money come in addition to funds allocated by the national government, everyone benefits from EU funds and people are in the center of development. Last, learning can be identified in the targeting of the negative aspects which have generated bad publicity for structural funds. Thus, the strategy sets to directly address topics such as: the low institutional capacity of the state to administer cohesion funds, the low absorption rate of funds in Romania or the overly bureaucratic procedures which are affecting structural funds management.

Hungary

While in several EU countries the communication activities of EU cohesion policy have been organized in an independent way for each operational programme, Hungary set up a uniform and largely centralized system for the governance of CP communication. This structure was first implemented for the 2007-2013 programming period (TNS Hoffmann 2012, Prime Minister's Office 2015). The reorganizations within central government after the change of government in 2010 and the start of the new programming period in 2014 further strengthened the centralized character of EU CP communication in Hungary.

In 2007-2013, the Communication Department of the National Development Agency (NDA CA) oversaw the elaboration and implementation of the communication strategy concerning the implementation of the Hungarian National Strategic Reference Framework (the New Hungary Development Plan). Managing Authorities (MAs) operated as independent departments of the National Development Agency. They participated in information and publicity tasks with respect to the entire New Hungary Development Plan and ensured compliance with the requirements of the communication strategy with respect to the operational programme(s) under their responsibility. Communication targeted at beneficiaries on the OP level were carried out jointly by the Intermediate Bodies and the NDA CD, with professional support from the Managing Authorities. Project-level communication has been carried out by beneficiaries.

For 2014-2020, the National Development Agency has been reorganized; Managing Authorities became units within line ministries, with the Ministry for the National Economy overseeing and coordinating cohesion policy implementation (Prime Minister's Office 2015). Within the Prime Minister's Office, the State Secretary for EU Development Policy was made responsible for EU cohesion policy implementation at the political level and the deputy state secretary for the communication of EU development policy. Thus, the central Communication Department has been set up within the Prime Minister's Office, it was staffed by seven officials. Its tasks remained mainly unchanged as compared to 2007-2013: it is responsible for horizontal and strategic communication activities at the level of the development strategy that has been set out in the Partnership Agreement. It runs national and regional campaigns targeted at the general population, it communicates via national and regional media outlets, uses advertisements in print and online press, organizes media partnerships and the way cohesion policy is communicated in the media (via interviews, participation in programs on the television); operates the unified website of cohesion policy implementation and organizes events. The Managing Authorities oversee OP-level communication. For the final beneficiaries, a guidance document has been prepared that provides detailed guidelines for communication, with the aim to inform the broadest range of audience of their projects. Furthermore, a supporting organization has been created from which the final beneficiaries can order the billboards and other accessories in support of their communication activities. The national requirements for final beneficiary communication have been streamlined, to reduce administrative burden on the beneficiaries, without undermining the goals of publicity (for example, for smaller projects, the obligation to hold press conferences in relation to the support received has been abandoned).

According to the formal description of the communication governance arrangements, it would seem little has changed from 2007-2013 to the 2014-2020 programming period. Yet interviews with stakeholders suggest that the role of Managing Authorities (MAs) has been constrained in important ways as the central level of communication has taken over some of their activities and central control over their work became stronger. MA leaders and MA officials were previously in touch with the media, gave interviews, and were invited to professional conferences: this is not a regular practice anymore. In some OPs, where MA and Intermediary Body officials were in direct regular informal contact with final beneficiaries in 2007-2013, this is not the usual practice anymore either. A stakeholder working in a MA in the field of physical infrastructure investment indicated that the limited involvement of MAs in communication interferes with effective policy implementation. Officials working in MAs lost valuable

opportunities to be in touch with beneficiaries on roadshows, conferences and workshops that were much more common in 2007-2013 than in 2014-2020.

Furthermore, both central government officials working in MAs and media stakeholders report that press breakfasts (events where government representatives and journalists could have a detailed exchange related to EU cohesion policy) that were common in 2007-2013 have almost fully disappeared in the 2014-2020 round. In general, EU cohesion policy implementation is more detached from the press than it was earlier. This change took place during a period when the influence of the governing party increased in all segments of the media and became dominant at the local level.

Most interviewed stakeholders described the activities of the central Communications Department as professional, well-designed and effective. Some suggest that the scale of the 2007-2013 centralized campaigns has been unprecedented in the EU and thus it was a real challenge to design and implement them, and the Department handled this challenge well. Others mentioned that the campaigns were expensive and might have created the perception of wasteful spending, spending not related to the main goals of the policy.

In fact, this view echoes a common stance towards EU Cohesion Policy communication in Hungary. Officials not directly involved in communication activities perceive them as of secondary importance, not affecting the success of policy. Many suggest that communication requirements laid down in EU legislation are perceived by most actors as obligations to meet with minimum effort as something not likely to produce results. Communication is a mandatory task, actors perceive limited room for their own innovative ideas and have no interest to implement them. Monitoring Committees rarely discuss Cohesion Policy communication in a substantive way. Most stakeholders struggled to name any innovative communication actions. Some claim that beneficiaries are also only interested in communication activities when these activities are aligned with their own business interests (such as for example when a bakery can use the opportunity offered by the EU communication requirement to advertise its new outlet) and otherwise mainly aim to meet the minimum requirements.

In some interviews, stakeholders outlined a broader narrative, perpetuated by some Hungarian politicians, on whether Hungary should put into the foreground the benefits of EU membership and the benefits of EU Cohesion Policy in its communication efforts. In this view, EU Cohesion Policy should not be considered as a present to Hungary, but rather as a part of the game of being a member state of the EU and a fair (or perhaps even less than fair) compensation to Hungary for the losses it suffered when it opened its market within the EU. The amount

Hungary receives is pictured to be the result of the successful negotiating efforts of the Hungarian government and of the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Furthermore, in one interview it was mentioned that funding comes with important strings attached and hence it might prevent the financing of activities and investments that would be the most urgent and the most beneficial for the development of Hungary. According to this stakeholder, the conditions of the funding can fuel resentment and hence undermine domestic motivation for the proper communication of the EU's role in financing the investments. If policy implementation is carried out implicitly acting on these narratives, this would cast doubt on the EU level consensus, according to which a major benefit of EU cohesion policy is that it raises awareness of the EU and the benefits of EU membership at the regional and local level.

In spring 2016, a campaign ran by the Prime Minister's Office with the slogan "Let's stop Brussels" interfered with the goals of communication of EU Cohesion Policy in Hungary. In stakeholder interviews and focus group discussions, the awkwardness of billboards with this campaign juxtaposed with billboards promoting the accomplishments of EU cohesion policy was frequently mentioned. In interviews, officials working in central government stated that they did not believe that the 'Let's stop Brussels' campaign questioned the accomplishments of EU cohesion policy, as the campaign was motivated by a migration policy disagreement between the Hungarian government and the European Commission. Yet it is a common perception among stakeholders interviewed that despite the different political origins of the campaign, it inevitably invokes associations with Cohesion Policy. Most stakeholders perceive that the current Hungarian domestic political context is not supportive of EU cohesion policy communication.

Both the 2007-2013 communication plan (as summarized in TNS Hoffmann 2012) and the 2014-2020 communication strategy (Prime Minister's Office 2015) meet the formal requirements of the EU in the field of communication on EU cohesion policy. Official evaluation requirements of communication activities are met by the Hungarian authorities. Information beyond the requirements is typically not published, although smaller evaluations are regularly conducted by the authorities and progress along the indicators of the Communication strategy is also regularly measured. In the Prime Minister's Office, the officials working on the implementation of EU cohesion policy activities work in a somewhat detached way from officials working on the evaluation of EU cohesion policy communication.

The two main evaluations publicly available are the mid-term (TNS Hoffmann 2012) and ex-post evaluations of communication (EY and Századvég 2016): both reports are of generally

good quality and as highlighted in the 2014-2020 communications strategy (Prime Minister's Office 2015), they have facilitated policy learning in general. Some weaknesses should none the less be noted. First, the 2007-2013 mid-term evaluation of regional communication activities included word for word the same paragraphs in evaluating each region. However, according to stakeholder interviews, the reason for this apparent evaluation weakness has been that the initial goal to evaluate communication in each OP separately was too ambitious, and this was realized only during the evaluation exercise. Second, some indicators on which there was not enough progress in 2007-2013 will not be followed in 2014-2020.

In 2007-2013, 65% of the communications budget was spent at the central level and 35% at the OP level. The ex post evaluation highlighted that some OPs did not use their communication budgets well, they did not absorb the funding for communication activities, mainly due to the reason that the initially allocated funding was excessive. Therefore OP-level funding of communication has been cut in 2014-2020.

In 2007-2013, the communication strategy achieved the expected progress along almost all indicators. There are two notable exceptions. First, the popularity of EU membership of Hungary and the general perception of EU cohesion policy among the general population over 18 did not improve as planned. Second, the perception of EU Cohesion Policy contributing to the development of Hungary has remained much lower among potential beneficiaries than among actual applicants for funding. Potential beneficiaries had less trust in the implementation system of Cohesion Policy than actual applicants: they were less likely to think that the system works according to the rules and that it was easy to navigate for applicants. According to the ex post evaluation, these findings reflect the fact that the communication strategy in 2007-2013 promoted the results of the policy, rather than the policy itself. Furthermore, it has also been suggested that the low outcomes on these indicators reflect the formulation of the indicators: people might have difficulty to recognize the term "Cohesion Policy". Hence, the ex-post evaluation suggested re-wording the indicators, to make their wording clearer and more relevant for the respondents, and the avoidance of technical terms.

In 2007-2013, the NSRF of Hungary was called the New Hungary Development Plan, then it was renamed in 2010 after the change of government to New Széchenyi Development Plan. The 2014-2020 cohesion policy strategy is called Széchenyi 2020 plan. The Hungarian names are commonly used by politicians and feature on the cohesion policy billboards along with the references to the ERDF, ESF and CF. In 2015, according to the 2014-2020 communication strategy indicators, a larger share of the general population knew about the New Széchenyi

Development Plan than about EU Cohesion Policy. In 2011, the mid-term evaluation suggests that 93% of the general population was aware of EU co-financed projects in their neighbourhood, while this figure drops to 42.3% for 2015 according to the 2014-2020 communication strategy. These figures suggest that Hungarian authorities did not communicate sufficiently the role of the EU in operating and financing Cohesion Policy. The focus group evidence corroborates the view that there are people who do not know that the Széchenyi 2020 plan is financed from EU Cohesion Policy. At the same time, unpublished regular measurements of progress along with indicators of EU Cohesion Policy communication currently use indicators that refer to the Széchenyi 2020 plan instead of EU Cohesion Policy. These measurements and reports thus may show that there is a growing public awareness of progress with the implementation of the Széchenyi 2020 plan, but in fact this may not mean increasing awareness of EU cohesion policy. Still, stakeholders pointed out in interviews that public support for EU membership is high in Hungary and it is not politically risky to acknowledge the support of the EU in development policy.

The 2007-2013 programming period was affected by the 2008-2009 economic and financial crisis. This has affected the results that CP communication could refer to. However, it provided an opportunity to show how EU funds could help with dealing with the crisis. However, some stakeholders argued that the results of the 2007-2013 programming period were not communicated broadly and sufficiently. In a Partnership Monitoring Committee meeting, the representative of the European Commission also highlighted the curious lack of communication on the achievements of the sixty-year-old European Social Fund within Hungary.

Many stakeholders argued that the campaigns run by the central Communication Department were organized and implemented professionally. Campaign waves were designed with different but closely linked central themes, and communication attempted to tell stories to bring communication messages closer to people. Interestingly, the views of the stakeholders are divided on whether it is easier to communicate about the large infrastructure projects or the smaller scale investments implemented from the ESF. Some claim that personalized messages are easier to send about the ESF-type projects, others claim that large infrastructure projects are highly visible and tangible and thus easy to showcase.

While these campaigns are generally perceived to have been successful, some stakeholders suggest that cohesion policy communication does not exploit all the potential of innovative communication methods and tools. This has been also raised in a Monitoring Committee meeting of the Integrated Transport OP when the 2014-2020 communication strategy has been

discussed. However, the overall communication strategy has not been modified based on the comments as this would have triggered a re-negotiation of the communication strategy in all other Monitoring Committees.

The public encounters EU cohesion policy mainly via billboards which are ubiquitous but may also be counterproductive: they show the amounts of EU support that are immense as compared to local salaries while people are not aware of the project details that drive the project budgets. Thus, some suggested that the billboards might fuel an association between cohesion policy and corruption and could also fuel resentment towards beneficiaries of the funding among the population. Some stakeholders mentioned that the billboards are standing next to the investments themselves and sometimes when projects such as roads or bicycle tracks are not maintained they undermine the messages on the boards. Others suggested that the billboards would need to be more informative or attractive; that they should communicate results and not the spending.

The messages on the billboards are countered by stories in media about wasteful spending and corruption in cohesion policy. The limited efforts by EU cohesion policy communication authorities to disseminate the results of cohesion policy, the more limited contacts with press and media are not effective in counterbalancing the public image created by reporting on these scandals. Also, some stakeholders emphasize how the media is not interested in discussing the causes of and solutions to apparent wasteful spending and corruption in the use of EU cohesion policy. All this can undermine the perception of the public of the benefits of EU membership and the general perception of the usefulness of Cohesion Policy.

Slovenia

Slovenia had some experience with Cohesion Policy and its communication from the 2004-2006 period. However, as no formal communication strategy (CS) was prepared in this period, the CS for the 2007-2013 period was the first to be prepared and implemented.

The focus of the 2007-13 CS was on two main objectives. The first objective was to inform people about existing opportunities and project calls in a bid to attract a larger number of applications. The second objective was to try to build a positive image of CP and structural funds through advertising concrete experiences with accessing funds and implementing projects. This strategy reflected central authorities' perception that citizens and possible

applicants' awareness about financing opportunities was relatively good but that this awareness was not reflected in a positive evaluation of Cohesion Policy in Slovenia (SVLR 2009).

Drawing on the negative experience of the previous programming period, when communication was decentralized and implemented on the beneficiary/project level, communication was now centralized in the hands of the Government Office for Local Self-government and Regional Policy (*Služba vlade za lokalno samoupravo in regionalno politiko – SVLR*). The SVLR was also the managing authority responsible for the implementation of CP in Slovenia.

One single communication plan was drafted for all three OPs. The measures of informing and communication were rather formal, following the requirements of the European Commission. They involved information events at the launch of the OPs, followed by yearly press conferences where accomplishments and best practices would be presented, and publication of all cohesion related information on a dedicated website. In addition to these measures, there would be advertising in media and at the site of the operation, communication officers and public relations would take care about internal and external communication, and corporate identity would be developed. Progress would be monitored through opinion polls and evaluations. Indicators were mostly effect based and quantitative, referring to outputs such as materials printed, web page visits and events. The single result indicator that was introduced required that more than 50% of the population should evaluate the cohesion policy positively (SVLR 2009).

An indicative budget of €5 million was determined for communication, based on the budget for the 2004-2006 period, and adjusted for the number of years in the new programming period.

Soon after the start of implementation of the strategy in 2008, the initial approach, still based on the practice from the previous programming period, was modernized in line with the new strategy. Formal messages were simplified, visual communication was improved, e.g. in terms of using colours for individual programmes while a new and more user-friendly web page was set up. Since 2008, the monthly e-bulletin "Cohesion e-corner" was issued and sent to those interested, bringing up to date information about calls, good practices etc. (SVLR 2010).

The global economic and financial crisis dented the implementation of CP and had a negative impact on communication as well. In consequence, the advertising campaign which introduced OP and fund-specific messages in 2009 was not implemented in 2010. Instead, the focus was shifted to making communication events more interactive in terms of taking them out of conference halls and moving them to the locations where projects were implemented.

Furthermore, communication measures shifted to giving beneficiaries and target audiences a more active role by giving the opportunity to the former to present their successful projects and offering the latter the possibility to experience the results of projects financed through cohesion programmes (previously, only public officials were typically present such the events) (SVLR 2010).

The 2010 mid-term evaluation argued that while the strategy of focusing on general information and awareness was adequate in the early years implementing CP programmes, this now became outdated with a growing need for communication to focus more on the specific objectives of individual OPs. For example, while during the 2007-2010 period, 85% of the population was aware that the EU provides funds for the development of regions, the general awareness of OPs, especially other than those related with environmental and transport infrastructure, was much lower. Also, more than 70% of respondents in the 2010 poll stated that managing authorities should do more to inform people about the policy.

Regarding the effectiveness of communication, the mid-term evaluation (SVLR 2010) argued that most of the quantitative indicators measuring communication activities were already achieved by 2010, some even by a factor of 10 (e.g. printed materials, web page visits) showing that the original targets were far from being ambitious. Furthermore, targets were met with less than €1 million, i.e. 20% of the earmarked funds, which signalled that projected expenditures were inflated during the planning phase.

Interestingly, the only outcome indicator set in the communication plan was not met. The public perception regarding the impact of CP varied significantly from 21% of respondents positively evaluating the policy in 2008 to 60% in 2009 and falling to 27% in 2010 (see Figure 1 below) (SVLR 2010). The main factor explaining this variation in individual perceptions was the impact of the economic and financial crisis, which had a negative effect on the implementation of the policy and its communication. As explained above, due to the lack of funds, the media campaign implemented in 2009 was not continued in 2010. Moreover, the decline in the positive evaluation of CP in 2010 and 2012 coincided with the two recession periods Slovenia faced in these two years.

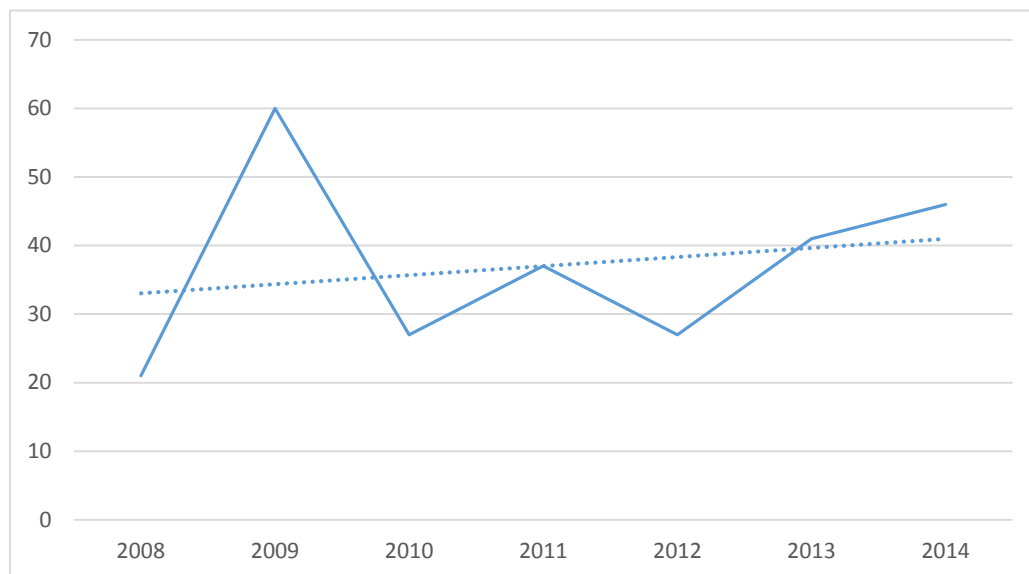


Figure 1. Share (%) of respondents positively evaluating the contribution of the Cohesion Policy to development in Slovenia. Source: SVLR 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014.

A number of innovations in communication practice as well as interviews with members of the monitoring committee, other representatives of public authorities and beneficiaries between May and July 2017 imply that the body responsible for communication was responsive and dedicated to the task. For example, 87% of the 207 e-bulletin subscribers responding to a survey considered the new web page more attractive and user friendly and the vast majority were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall communication of the OPs. Nevertheless, respondents also indicated that some broader challenges remained, such as the need to re-evaluate targets and indicators, link specific objectives with indicators, and add qualitative indicators. Also, annual plans needed to be prepared earlier during the year in order to prevent delays. There was space for further progress in terms of integrating different activities, continuing with and upgrading good practices, using various communication tools, and multipliers such as the existing events and activities (e.g. big sports events taking place at the locations where operations were funded by EU structural funds). As a follow-up to the mid-term evaluation, the managing authority planned to introduce new tools such as social media targeting of younger people. In internal communication, coordination between beneficiaries and the managing authority was also identified as needing improvements. Furthermore, it was planned that communication activities would include more informal briefings with journalists in order to reduce the number of negative reports which the managing authority considered to be explained by limited knowledge on behalf of the journalists.

Finally, the mid-term evaluation and those responsible for the implementation of the communication strategy pointed out the problem of insufficient human resources available, as many people performing communication tasks had to do these things in addition to their existing workload.

In 2012, SVLR was terminated and its tasks transferred to Ministry for Economic Development and Technology. According to interviewees, these political and institutional changes brought substantial rupture in the implementation of CP. Nonetheless, the communication plan was upgraded in line with the findings of the mid-term evaluation, with a new table introduced which better linked policy objectives with indicators. Indicators were revised and expanded, including indicators related to new tools such as social media. The financial plan was also revised to ensure better correspondence between the targets and actual costs. All these changes took place in the context of the cost savings measures passed in 2012. The managing authority continued to emphasize interactive events as its main communication strategy, using successful project examples in order to inform and raise awareness about CP.

A 2011 poll demonstrated that public attitudes towards CP improved by 10 percentage points, reaching 37%. Furthermore, two thirds of the respondents were able to name at least one of the projects co-financed through European structural funds. Among all communication-promotion activities in the given year, the one referring to a big open doors event at one of the new regional waste disposal centres was the most noticeable (67% of respondents noticed it) (SVLR 2012), demonstrating that the focus of the communication activities on the experience with the actual projects was delivering results. To a certain extent, these events also enabled the managing authority to deliver more targeted messages, especially concerning the OP and funds related to environmental and transport infrastructure. The number of subscribers to the e-bulletin also continued to grow, reaching 2,100 in 2012. However, the share of respondents who evaluated positively the contribution of structural funds to the development of Slovenia again declined to 27% in 2012, the year in which Slovenia faced the second recession as explained above. In 2013, when the situation in the economy started to stabilize and when implementation of the cohesion policy that stalled due to the reorganisation of the government in 2012 again speeded up, the proportion of positive evaluations grew to 41% and in 2014, when economic growth returned and positive trend regarding policy implementation continued, to 46% (see Figure 1 above) (SVLR 2012; 2013; 2014).

On the negative side, there was still a lot of negative feedback implying that insufficient attention was paid to educating journalists covering cohesion policy, including through informal briefings.

In the programme period 2014-2020, Slovenia was divided into two cohesion regions: Eastern and Western. This was based on the fact that while the country as a whole was catching up with the EU development levels, some of the internal differences remained. Nevertheless, the 'regionalization' was merely financial. Apart from regional allocations, there was even further centralization of the policy, which was reflected in the fact that only one OP was drafted. Communication was no exception. While the indicative budget of €3,587,027 was divided between the Eastern and Western cohesion regions, communication remained in hands of the managing authority where a team of two persons was responsible for implementing the main activities.

The programming documents highlighted the role of information and communication as an integral part of an efficient and effective policy, thus responding to problems raised in the previous period. The idea behind the new communication strategy (SVRK 2015)¹ was to build on the existing experiences and continue to make improvements, especially where these were needed – i.e. to evolve rather than revolutionize. Thus, the objective of the strategy was to inform the public about policy changes and opportunities brought by the new funding cycle. On the other hand, there was a need to promote a stronger inclusion of (potential) beneficiaries in information and communication measures, which should also contribute to an improved awareness of the policy and its positive perception amongst the general public.

The analyses reflecting upon the existing communication practice that informed the new communication strategy showed that communication could be better used in terms of possible synergies, multipliers, and tools to raise the profile of the policy (SVRK 2015). Although the managing authority had to build on past experience, it also had to develop an updated strategy built around the better use of communication events, an active use of communication networks (e.g. of research agencies and info points), an improved cooperation between different actors and especially with opinion makers, and modernize in terms of the use of information and communication technology (ICT). This would not only increase effectiveness but would also make communication more resource efficient, a goal that, as showed in the previous paragraphs, was one of the key aspects of the 2007-2013 period.

¹ The analysis is based on an informal draft version of the communication strategy for the 2014-2020 period.

According to a 2014 poll, 93% of the respondents were aware that the EU provides funds while only 46% believed that these funds had a positive impact on the development of the country. On the other hand, in the 2013 Eurobarometer survey, 60% of the respondents mentioned that they have heard about a project funded through structural funds, and out of these, 84% believed that the project contributed positively to development (SVRK 2015). Based on these data, the communication plan emphasized the need to make personal stories and individual projects the core of the communication activities in Slovenia.

Other changes introduced by the new communication strategy involved a new visual image based on 11 thematic objectives of the EU 2020 Strategy, each represented by a typographic abstract image of an animal. The colours used for each of the funds were the same as in the previous period, thus ensuring continuity as well as a more modern approach to communication. In interviews, the new visual image was highlighted as an example of a good practice.

The key messages used in communication became more specific and tailored to specific programs. The communication plan was divided into different stages corresponding to the stages of the programme period. It proposed to set up an informal cohesion network to inform target groups on calls, applications, results and effects, while also using existing beneficiary networks. Prize games and new ways of cooperating with the media would strengthen the involvement of journalists and the coverage of communication activities in the media. Furthermore, two-way communication was emphasized in order to present personal stories about policy effects. Communication had to be a shared responsibility of all stakeholders. New ICT based methods such as social media (Twitter) began to be used in communication.

There was a higher number of result oriented indicators and the baseline values were set in order to better monitor progress. There were still some problems with separating objectives, means, and indicators to be able to assess what was achieved, what worked, and how well it worked compared with other available alternatives. This demonstrated that to a certain extent requirements related with a proper planning of the communication activities were still considered a formality, i.e. as something that needed to be done for Brussels, and not as something that would enable more effective and efficient communication. Nevertheless, this was not a problem that was particular to the communication – in fact, the communication was considered by the interviewees as one of the aspects of the cohesion policy that worked well – but rather a general problem of the public administration of CP in Slovenia.

Conclusion

As the three case studies show, the communication of the Cohesion policy remains a difficult dimension to integrate into the implementation of different programs, especially in contexts where it is not perceived as a strategic dimension but as a formal requirement that adds yet another bureaucratic layer to the already complicated rules that govern European structural funds. This is compounded by problems which arise at the implementation and evaluation phases of the communication measures: communication is either implemented in a formal manner to fulfil targets set in national communication programs or even if it goes beyond formal targets, its substantive impact in terms of knowledge about funds, quality of funding applications, or attachment to the EU is difficult to measure. Impact evaluations carried out in Romania suggest that as part of the communication strategy, the EU should set more comprehensive rules for evaluation that go beyond descriptive indicators and measure programme effects. However, to do so, communication plans have to schedule this type of the evaluations already at the design stage.

Furthermore, the paper raises a question about the link between Cohesion Policy and European identity and whether CP communication does contribute to the latter in the three countries. Empirical evidence gathered through interviews and secondary data analysis seems to suggest a rather bleak picture. First, as the case of Slovenia shows, citizen's attachment to the EU can vary independently of how well Cohesion policy performs. Second, as is the case of Hungary, national political elites can capture the public debate about the EU and turn the message about a common identity upside down: rather than contributing to a common goal, the EU is framed as 'interfering' or 'imposing' its will, thus limiting national sovereignty. This is an older debate that has resurfaced in light of political changes that have taken place in many East European countries.

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