

THURINGIA

GENERAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A **general assessment** of Cohesion policy's **effectiveness** and **implementation** for Thuringia would be that the ESIF have certainly contributed to the region's development since the 1990s, including the last (2007-2013) and the current (2014-2020) funding period. While until 2013, the programmes had focused on economic development, infrastructure and wastewater (less developed 'convergence' region) the current period (2014-2020) acknowledges the changed socio-economic development (transition region). There are now other challenges like shortages in qualified workforce, low Research&Development investments in companies (often S&M), and a lack of innovation capacity that the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) programmes focus on (European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), but also European Social Fund (ESF). Therefore, a general **recommendation** would be that ESIFs' programmes remain important in transition regions with their specific needs and their differing challenges. Thus, funding should **continue** for those regions. At the same time, **shifts in funding** were **appropriate**.

However, **handling Cohesion policy** in terms of **all legal provisions**, and especially of **compliance rules**, is generally perceived as burdening or even strangling, often hindering an effective and efficient use of the funds. Almost all stakeholders bemoan that the goal to reduce bureaucratic burdens that had been proclaimed for the current funding period 2014-2020, has NOT been achieved. Hence, considering a **general reform** of **Cohesion policy** resulting in **lower bureaucratic requirements** (especially in terms of control), **reduced duties to collect and report data and statistical information**, and an overall less formalised general approach is **highly recommended**.

Communication of Cohesion policy's role in the region and its **contribution to the region's development** to the **general public** remains a **problem** as two main challenges exist. First, Cohesion policy is seen as a too cumbersome topic, something excessively abstract to get people interested in. A second overall challenge is that the general public is mostly interested



in that 'things are getting done' or that 'problems are solved', rather than– in plain language – 'who paid for all this'. Consequently, citizens are not well-informed about Cohesion policy. It is **unlikely** that (enormous) **improvements for Cohesion policy's communication impact** could be **achieved in the future**, despite the ongoing process of expansion and professionalisation of all communication activities, which involves an increased use of social media and which should continue. However, tools applied here remain limited.

One **policy implication** here would be to consider **changes on the toolkit of current Cohesion policy's communication**. This would especially refer to **more appropriate and detailed messages** (e.g. on EU billboards), but to also **less detailed and simpler messages elsewhere** (e.g. using pictures in the media, both online and social media). However, given that there is a real interest to be clearly and explicitly (i.e., better!) informed about what the EU does in or for one's region (as expressed in focus groups, i.e. by people), a much more **fundamental change of Cohesion policy's communication** should be **considered**.

This would imply **to not just focus on the role of Cohesion policy** in a narrower sense, but **instead to emphasise the positive impacts of the EU and citizens' lives in general**; e.g., achievements such as the common market, the 'four freedoms in general', and consumer interest (like, single mobile phone rates across Europe). In the end, this would mean a **more intensive and perhaps also more professional public relations** work (or public relations campaign) by the **EU itself**, that focuses on **simple or core messages** to be conveyed to citizens. For that purpose, an increased presence of the EU in Member States would be necessary, e.g. by establishing regional representation offices in ALL regional capitals. In addition, **less detailed prescriptions for publication requirements** within current Cohesion policy's communication would also be useful and could be **recommended**.

Furthermore, a **focus on transnational projects** would be very convenient for making the EU's role more tangible and could be, thus, further **recommended**. Strengthening this part of Cohesion policy in general (e.g. by expanding INTERREG programmes, but also beyond this) could be considered a **promising way to improve visibility**, especially of the **positive impact** of ESIF within and across the region. In that sense, this would create a real '**European added value**'.

Finally, **changes in policy fields outside of Cohesion policy** should be taken into account. As stressed especially by the participants of the focus groups (i.e., "ordinary" citizens), there are other European policies that are seen as much more important when it comes to implanting the idea of European integration and of the EU into the 'hearts and minds' of its citizens, based on the notion that personal contact with other Europeans matter as well as personal experiences in other European countries. Thus, **strengthening and expanding programmes** such as **ERASMUS** or **ERASMUS+** (with a considerable expansion of the latter, e.g. to make it accessible for persons in vocational training) as means of improving communication of the EU's role in general, is also **highly recommended**.



POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For Thuringia region (state or *Land* in German), ESIF are of considerable importance given that the region belongs to the 'new' German *Länder* that had been part of the former state-socialist German Democratic Republic until 1990. These East German regions suffered from economic, environmental and social burdens that had resulted from the planned economic system, but also from the largely unavoidable conditions that came along with the rather quick German reunification in 1990 (e.g. migration of younger persons to the Western *Länder* due to lacking employment opportunities). Although quite remarkable improvements across the entire scale have been achieved in the region since then, also with the help of co-financing from ESIF, Thuringia only recently passed the 75% of average GDP threshold. Hence, the region now belongs to the so-called **transition regions** in the current funding period, i.e., 2014-2020. Looking at EFRD exemplifies this: In the period 2007-2013, the fund distributed about 1,478 billion EUR, while in the period 2014-2020 about 1,165 billion EUR will be distributed in the region. In 2016, Thuringia's GDP per capita was 68,8 billion EUR. As also stressed by stakeholders, 'regional policy in Eastern Germany is [still] impossible without Cohesion policy'.

Given these facts, one would expect rather favourable conditions for communicating the role and impact of Cohesion policy in the region to the general public. However, this is not the case. Although when generally asked about the existence of ESIF (in the region) or more concretely about 'Cohesion policy', more than 40% of survey participants confirm that they have heard of it. This figure, however, drops to less than 10% when asked about concrete projects that have been co-financed by ESIF in their region. Related to this, EU signs and billboards indicating ESIF financial contributions are certainly noticed by people (a stakeholder opinion confirmed this in a focus group), but most often 'that's it'. On the other hand, the situation is much better when communicating the role of Cohesion Policy to policy addressees. Therefore, a general need for raising more awareness amongst the general public on what 'the EU does for the people in the region with its funds' becomes obvious.

However, as especially stressed by stakeholders, this has always been and still remains challenging, and two main factors contribute. First, Cohesion policy is seen as a topic too cumbersome, something too abstract to get people really interested in. As a result, bringing European stories (in particular stories about the ESIF's role for realising specific projects or achieving certain general goals) into the 'classical' news media (press, radio, TV) is difficult. Second, a general problem in Germany is that the broader population is mostly interested in that 'things are getting done' or improved (e.g., in terms of infrastructure, economic investments or employment opportunities) or that 'problems are solved', but not in the financial aspects here, i.e., who contributed to it financially or – in plain language – 'who paid for all this' in order to make it possible (as also frequently stressed by stakeholders). This is also mirrored in the media, where the latter is hardly mentioned even when journalists are explicitly encouraged to name the – European – funding source of projects or investments.

Given all that, a realistic assessment – especially when considering potential strategies and tactics for changes – is that the prospects for achieving major improvements in terms of the



impact of Cohesion policy's communication (raising awareness of it) with respect to the general population in the near future are rather meager, especially with employing Cohesion policy's toolkit for this (such as shifts in the role of certain instruments, e.g. an increasing use of new media channels, which is also seen rather sceptical by stakeholders).

Despite this, Cohesion policy in Thuringia experienced an ongoing process of professionalisation and an extension of communication activities in recent years. For example, many stakeholders and focus group participants agree that communicating the role of Cohesion policy role to the general public is also very important. Furthermore, a general recommendation in terms of major shifts within Cohesion policy's communication or within the instruments applied, would not be appropriate. This corresponds to stakeholders' assessment that all existing communication channels remain relevant. However, although social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, will certainly become more important within that scope, it seems unlikely that they will increase the communication's impact considerably. Overall, with current policy characteristics, one could and should strive for improvements, but one should also be aware that the communication instruments' impact remains limited.

Nonetheless, at least three main and concrete recommendations for improving Cohesion policy communication's success in Thuringia could be made: First, one promising approach to raise the impact of communication within or with the help of general news media, could be to make the issue more tangible by using pictures rather than overwhelming texts or graphs. One example could be to present pictures that show maps of how cities or rural locations would look like today without the ESIFs' contributions during the last two funding periods or so, i.e., what would be missing or what would look completely different. Pictures showing such maps could be prepared by persons involved in the implementation of Cohesion policy, and be distributed to journalists.

Second, there are considerable improvement options in terms of existing instruments, like the application of Cohesion Policy's signs (plates). Here, those signs could become much more explicit and more pronounced in terms of the role of ESIF's co-financing. This could also be used to indicate the exact amount of money that was contributed from EU's sources, and to clearly mention that the project would not have been realised without it. This proposal stems from one stakeholder.

