

PODKARPACIE

GENERAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Podkarpackie Voivodship is categorised in the group of EU regions which received the most substantial financial assistance under the Cohesion Policy of the European Union (about EUR 2000 per capita in the period 2007-2013). At the same time, about one fourth of these funds in the period 2007-2013 (and about 40% in the financing perspective 2014-2020) was expended as part of the Regional Operational Programme (ROP) implemented by the regional self-government. The majority of funds were allocated to the development of basic hard infrastructure (mainly transport and environment), at the expense of outlays spent on building an innovative business environment. However, in the current programming period greater focus has been placed on: (a) innovation (including smart specialisation), (b) higher selectivity and concentration, (c) broader inclusion of social issues, and (d) Integrated Territorial Investments.

In the period 2007-2013, the implementation of the Cohesion policy in the Podkarpackie Voivodship, expressed by the scale of absorption of the Cohesion policy funds, was very effective – in 2014, about 80% of the allocated funds were committed. In addition, due to the considerable scale of financing coupled with its broad thematic scope, the European funds allocated to the Podkarpackie Voivodship influenced practically all the spheres of socio-economic life.

The stakeholders positively viewed the implementation of the Cohesion policy at the local and regional levels. Moreover, the respondents agreed with the statement that the programme adequately addressed the regional needs. As a result, the stakeholders' opinions on the positive impact of Cohesion policy on the perception by citizens of the European Union were the strongest of all the analysed case studies except of Pomorskie region in Poland.

Communication activities undertaken within the Regional Operational Programme for the Podkarpackie Voivodship for the years 2007 – 2013 and 2014-2020 were intensive and multi-faceted. Communication strategies for both periods strictly followed national strategies. It is



visible that lessons learned from the 2007-2013 perspective were taken into account for the 2014-2020 programming period. The 'EU Funds' brand is now being promoted, instead of the specific name of the regional programme (which was highlighted in the 2007-2013 communication activities). Also, a more targeted approach is visible. The communication mix includes many different activities (local media campaigns, print communication, broad and targeted events, info-points, online activities, study tours, cooperation with local journalists, posters and information boards, promotional gadgets and accessories). Most of the interviewed stakeholders agreed that the communication of ROP Podkarpackie was designed to invite potential beneficiaries to apply for funds and to increase the recognition of the programme and EU Funds. Additionally, the overall communication approach is strictly aligned to the ROP implementation stage. Most of the respondents agreed that the overall communication activities within Podkarpackie ROP are at a satisfactory level and no significant changes are required. In addition, the close cooperation with local and regional journalist has a positive impact on the EU funds media image in the region. To sum up: communication activities in ROP Podkarpackie were efficient (in terms of delivering what was planned) and had positive impact on people's awareness of EU Funds in the region.

The majority of inhabitants in Podkarpackie are very appreciative of the use of European funds, however they usually did not associate the EU funds with Cohesion Policy instruments as such. The impact of the EU funds was visible in all spheres of life. Personal experiences, the Internet and the nationwide TV were recognised as the main sources of information about the EU funds. Moreover, in the opinion of three in four respondents, Poland benefited from being a member of the EU. 90% of the respondents were also convinced that EU membership positively influenced the development of the Podkarpackie region. The perception of European funds and EU influence in Podkarpackie was definitely more enthusiastic than in other regions that the COHESIFY project studied.

Three interrelated challenges to this generally Euro-enthusiastic view can be pointed out. First, the knowledge of the EU Funds seems to be superficial. It was proven, in the first instance, by the fact that some people did not regard Poland as a net recipient of EU funds. Second, people noticed the growth of internal disparities in regional performance, despite the positive influence of EU funds. Third, European funds were considered as a compensation for Poland as characterised by higher emigration and lower salaries in comparison to the EU core.

Approximately 68% of the respondents in Podkarpackie felt European (simultaneously to their national identity, and hardly ever exclusively so). However, it does not fully equal EU identity since more respondents felt attached to Europe than to the EU. The attitudes towards European integration showed mixed grades: 60% of respondents were in favour of integration, while almost 20% were neutral and 19% were opposed.



POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lessons learned and policy recommendations for both analysed Polish regions regarding communication policy are the following:

1. It is overly challenging to build a strong brand of the particular regional programme. Lessons from Polish regions tell that ROP detailed name should be only communicated to audiences engaged in implementation, while the more general name "European Funds" should be promoted for general audiences.

2. As a result of introducing one umbrella brand – EU Funds - there is a strong need for coordination between communication undertaken at various policy levels, e.g. between actions undertaken by national authorities (coordinating bodies), regional authorities (managing authorities) and other actors (intermediate bodies). This could be achieved through unified planning framework, single corporate design elements (e.g. the same website structure for all programmes) and on-going working meeting and good practice exchange among units involved in communication.

3. The foundations of Cohesion Policy should be more underlined in the process of policy communication including such principles as territorial and thematic concentration and partnerships in the programming process i.e. design, management, implementation, monitoring, evaluation.

4. As websites are a primary and most important source of information for beneficiaries, they need to meet a high standard of usability, i.e.: valuable content, easy to follow and information architecture, language (clarity and simplicity), design.

5. Social media could have been regarded as innovative during 2007-2013 period but nowadays they should be used as a standard communication tool. Nevertheless, creating content that is suitable for these channels demands appropriate capacities (so either external digital agencies should be engaged or institutional staff should be trained to use these channels).

6. Communication needs to be concise and targeted. It should use the mix of tools (both traditional media, events and direct engagement, as well as social media). Plain language standard should be applied to all communication tool targeting beneficiaries and broader public.

7. More have to be done to build beneficiaries capacity to act as EU Funds advocates. They should be more active in informing broader public about their projects.

Summing up, in the communication policy at the regional level, it is important to show that in the assumptions the system of cohesion policy implementation is carefully planned, efficient and reflecting the interests of regional and local communities. This does not mean that it is and will be free of errors, but it should be emphasized that it is not built on the basis of discretionary decisions of unknown actors.

