

POMORSKIE

GENERAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Pomorskie Voivodship was covered by the convergence objective in the programming period 2007-2013 and the region is categorised as less developed in the current programming period which implies substantial financial assistance under the EU's Cohesion policy (ca. €1800 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 2014-2020 period) was expended as part of the regional operational programme 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 specialisations) at the expense of expenditure on technical infrastructure, (b) higher selectivity and concentration, (c) broader inclusion of social issues (as result of combining the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund (ESF) in the regional operational programme), and (d) Integrated Territorial Investments (functional urban areas of the capital city).

In the period 2007-2013, the implementation of Cohesion policy funds in the Podkarpackie Voivodship, expressed by the scale of absorption of the funds, was very effective – in 2014, about 73% of the allocated funds had been committed. In addition, due to the considerable scale of financing coupled with its broad thematic scope, the European funds allocated to the Pomorskie Voivodship influenced practically all the spheres of socio-economic life.

The stakeholders positively viewed the implementation of Cohesion policy at the local and regional level. Moreover, the respondents agreed with the statement that the programme adequately addressed the regional needs. Consequently, the stakeholders' opinions on the positive impact of Cohesion policy on people's perception of the European Union were the strongest of all the analysed case studies.



Communication activities undertaken within the regional operational programme for Pomorskir Voivodship for the years 2007 – 2013 and 2014-2020 were intensive and multifaceted. Communication strategies for both periods strictly followed national strategies. It is visible that lessons from 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 applied. 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 materials). Most of the interviewed stakeholders agreed that the communication of the regional operational programme in Pomorskie was designed to invite beneficiaries to apply for funds and to increase the recognition of the programme and EU Funds. In addition, the overall communication approach is strictly aligned to the implementation stage. Most of the respondents agreed that the overall communication activities within the Pomorskie regional operational programme are at a satisfactory level and no significant changes are required.

To sum up: communication activities in the Pomorskie regional operational programme Pomorskie were efficient (in terms of delivering what was planned) and had a positive impact on the level of awareness of EU Funds in the region.

The inhabitants of Pomorskie had a good knowledge of EU-financed projects – almost nine out of ten respondents (twice the average) had heard about EU funding for infrastructure, business development and training allocated to regions and cities. Pomorskie is the most Euro-enthusiastic region of all the regions participating in the COHESIFY study: 82% of the respondents admitted that Poland benefited from EU membership, 72% shared the opinion that the region would perform worse without the EU funds, while less than 10% believed that it would perform the same.

Of the sceptical observations and challenges related to the use of EU funds one should mention the following: 1) an awareness of the challenges associated with ill-judged investments that might result in the growth of debt in the local government budgets; 2) concerns about the future challenges related to the diminishing amount of funds which will be made available for Poland in the future, and the rising responsibility for other obligations related to EU membership, such as reception of immigrants; 3) a limited knowledge about the process and rules of the regional allocation of funds .

The European identity and enthusiasm towards EU integration are observably high in Pomorskie. A popular sense of European identity went in line with EU identity, as the respondents felt almost equally strongly attached to Europe and the EU. The Euro-enthusiastic attitude of Pomorskie's inhabitants compared to other regions under the COHESIFY study (also Podkarpackie region in Poland) was confirmed also by the fact that 71% of respondents were in favour of integration, while both groups: neutral and opposing, exceeded the low level of 14%.



POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lessons learned and policy recommendations for both Polish case study 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 the name of the regional operational programme ROP should only be communicated to audiences engaged in its 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 activities 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 a unified planning framework, single corporate design elements (e.g. the same website structure for all programmes) and on-going work meetings 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 has to be done to build beneficiaries’ capacity to act as EU Funds advocates. They should be more active in informing a broader public about their projects.

To sum up the communication policy at regional level, it is important to show that the Cohesion policy implementation system is carefully planned, efficient and reflects the interests of regional and local communities. This does not mean that it is and will be free of errors, but it should be emphasised that it is not built on the basis of discretionary decisions of unknown actors.

