
Final Report

November 2019

Report prepared by Coffey, A Tetra Tech company
Disclaimer

This report was prepared in the context of contract No. COR/16/2019 Final Evaluation of the 2015-2020 Communication Strategy of the European Committee of the Regions under the inter-institutional framework contract Framework Contract n° PO/2016-06/01 Lot 1 on the Provision of Impact assessment, Evaluation and Evaluation-related services in the field of Communication activities between the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), Coffey, A TetraTech company and Deloitte.

The views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the CoR. Fieldwork was carried out by Coffey between September and November 2019, and the report finalised in November 2019.


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Executive summary

1.1 Introduction

The final evaluation of the 2015-2020 Communication Strategy of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) builds on a baseline evaluation carried out by the CoR in 2015 and a mid-term evaluation performed by an external contractor in 2017.

The purpose of this evaluation was to examine the impact of the CoR’s communication tools and activities between 2015-2019 against the baseline and mid-term evaluations; suggest how the CoR should position its communication in the upcoming period 2020-2025 and identify operational aspects of the CoR’s communication activities that could be enhanced to maximise the impact of the Communication Strategy.

To implement the evaluation activities between September and November 2019, the evaluation team used both qualitative and quantitative methods. The methodology included a significant desk research component, taking stock of the large amount of quantitative and qualitative existing evidence-base generated by the monitoring and evaluation system established for the Strategy. In addition, the evaluation team completed 25 semi-structured interviews to collect stakeholders’ perceptions of the Strategy, covering staff working on communication from key stakeholder categories, and analysed the responses to a large online survey of stakeholders which collected over 350 replies.

Throughout the lifetime of the CoR’s Communication Strategy, stakeholders have remained positive in their perception of the overall impact of the CoR’s communication and it is plausible that the latter years of the Strategy’s implementation have contributed to keep the ratings steady. The CoR is somewhat successful in drawing from a broad range of tools and methods to fit the various needs of its stakeholders, but the portfolio could be honed further. The communication mix operates channels and tools which are respectively suitable to the heterogeneous target groups of the CoR. Overall, it appears that outputs and outcomes of the communication channels and tools justify the costs incurred and correspond to the various needs to which the Strategy aims to cater.

The conclusions drawn from the evaluation results as well the set of recommendations provided at the strategic and operational levels are presented below to assist the CoR in the positioning of its communication in the upcoming period 2020-2025.
1.2 Conclusions

1. The **overall quality of CoR communication mostly meets audience needs and is effective** because survey responses show that high awareness of CoR communication equates with positive impressions of its impact, whereas those with negative perceptions also had low awareness. However, responses to the survey indicate that there is still scope for improvement.

2. **The Communication Strategy has been successful because the CoR’s key stakeholders have a positive perception of the institution.** The sustained, planned, effective and strategic approach to communication resulting from the Strategy’s implementation has been consistently appraised positively by stakeholders. Also, despite the relatively modest budget, the CoR implemented a **broad portfolio of tools and methods including communication campaigns**, to meet the various needs of its stakeholders, which reflects the heterogeneity of its key target groups.

![Stakeholders' perceptions on image and role of the CoR, 2015 - 2019](chart)

**Source:** How do you see the actual role of the European Committee of the Regions (1 = fully disagree, 5 = fully agree)? Stakeholder surveys 2015, 2017 and 2019

3. **Stakeholders’ awareness of the CoR’s communication campaigns has increased among key target groups of the CoR, but there is still room for improvement.** While the campaign approach adopted by the CoR is valuable from a planning and organisational perspective, specific campaigns mean little to stakeholders who struggle to recall overarching themes in CoR communication.
4. **Over the timeframe of this Strategy, the CoR had some significant communication successes.** The big hits of CoR communication are the Citizens’ Dialogues with the European Commission’s DG for Communication and the CoR’s own local dialogues, the flagship events “EuroPCom” (European Conference on Public Communication) and “European Week of Regions and Cities” and other physical / face-to-face interaction. The success of the CoR’s own local dialogues, under the campaign *Reflecting on Europe*, supports its core purpose of a **listening organisation which has managed to engage over 45,000 citizens** in a debate on the future of Europe in three years of campaign.

5. **There is a lack of clarity and some confusion about the strategic purpose of CoR communication.** The CoR needs to focus on its core mission, which is supporting the dialogue between the regions and the EU institutions, as well as show and tell the regions about this dialogue. This implies a need to amend the stated communication mission: “Reconnecting Europe with its citizens; establish a dialogue between the local and EU levels”, because the CoR has not been set up to reconnect the EU with citizens and, therefore, citizens are not the a primary CoR target group.

6. **The CoR should better integrate communication when it defines the politics and policies on which it will advise the EU institutions** and reflect about the communication potential of its works from the beginning instead of using communication tools as an afterthought or as a way to beautify CoR activities. This is in line with a more comprehensive, proactive and shared approach to communication as recently advocated by the EU institutions. An evaluation finding was the disconnect felt by internal stakeholders between the CoR’s political priorities adopted in 2015 and their potential as communication opportunities.

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1 See, for example: European Commission (2019) Europe in May 2019. Preparing for a more united, stronger and more democratic Union in an increasingly uncertain world. The European Commission’s contribution to the EU27 leaders’ meeting in Sibiu (Romania) on 9 May 2019, p 39-51
7. There is scope to reinforce communication planning by setting SMART² communication objectives in the Strategy and in the Annual Communication Plans³ and to develop detailed intervention logics. This would help the CoR to understand its communication performance at a greater level of detail and support choices about where to focus going forward.

8. With regards to the cost-efficiency of the CoR Communication Strategy, the potential reach of its tools and channels is relatively high for the costs incurred, especially concerning the website and social media, which were both in the top three of stakeholders’ recommendations for the future communication mix. The relatively low cost of local events per participant, coupled with the enthusiasm of stakeholders for this activity, also makes it a commendable communication effort.

9. There is room to improve the approach to reporting on Communication Plans and results and the way that this is linked to budgets. The difficulties encountered in relation to the cost-efficiency analysis highlight the current difficulties in carrying out a detailed analysis to allow a better understanding. This is linked to a large extent to a lack of standardisation and fragmentation of reporting on staff, communication costs, activities, outputs and target group reach by channel and tool on a year-on-year basis. In consequence, it is not possible to make detailed comparisons, which limit the evidence available to support decisions about where to focus resources.

10. There is a lack of clarity in Communication Plans as to which communication messages and content should be directed towards which of the CoR’s two target groups (group 1: regional stakeholders, group 2: EU institutions) via which multipliers, communication channels and using which budgets. Whilst some communication channels may serve both groups, in practice it is likely that certain tools are more suited to certain audiences. Channelling specific tools and / or content towards one or the other target group would help the CoR to improve its focus and make its activities even more impactful, as well as to:

   • address the stakeholders’ concerns that the CoR is too focussed on Brussels audiences and that there is a need to re-balance to ensure equal focus on the two primary target groups; and

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² **Specific**: The objective should clearly define the expected outcome and should answer questions such as who is involved what will be achieved and where. A specific objective will help define activities.

³ **Measurable**: The objective should include an indicator of progress and should answer questions such as how often or how much. This will determine whether the objective is achieved.

³ **Attainable**: The expected change defined in the objective should be realistic within the given timeframe and with the available resources.

³ **Relevant**: The objective should contribute to achieving the overall program goal. This will support developing activities that are important to the programme.

³ **Time-bound**: The objective should include a timeframe for achieving the desired change.
address a lack of clarity regarding the formal and informal channels of communication towards other institutions and calls to better exploit latent institutional synergies, including with the DGs for Communication and Regional and Urban Policy of the European Commission, the European Parliament, etc.

11. There is a need to re-define the communication role/s and information flows at regional and local levels. Evidence from this evaluation confirms the need to enhance the CoR’s approach to two-way communication, listening to and representing the voice of the regions to Brussels. This could involve:

- reviewing the platforms, channels and multipliers currently available and develop a plan to support information and communication flows from and to the regional and local level. The plan could cover infrastructure supported by other EU institutions, including Europe Direct Information Centres;
- defining the role/s that CoR Members can play to support CoR communication. This would provide greater clarity on the actual contribution made by CoR Members, which appears to be assumed and as evidence suggests is inevitably uneven. Increased clarity would also help the CoR to harness the support that is available.
- identifying the extent to which the CoR, with its modest communication resources, can provide and collect relevant insights to and from decision makers at the local level, what format these insights should take and how they should be transmitted, which may be either directly or via CoR Members.

12. The CoR’s approach to research by consulting stakeholders and making adjustments where possible in real time supports its core purpose of a listening organisation, which also follows up on what it has heard. Yet, there is scope to reinforce data collection and research to further support the implementation of the CoR’s Communication Strategy and Plans. Options could include:

- asking target groups at regional / local level to confirm which thematic areas they want the CoR to focus on in a given timeframe;
- revising the questions used in the stakeholder survey to allow more useful information to be gathered to help the CoR to improve its information as well as to assess its information approach;
- conducting a small number of focus groups to help the CoR to gather insights to better understand what stakeholders want and how they want to be represented as well as ways to communicate around this.

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4 It may be that there are several ‘possible’ roles for Member activity, which relate to the amount of engagement that Members are able to commit.
1.3 Recommendations

The recommendations are provided at the strategic and operational levels.

**Strategic recommendations**

It is recommended to:

1. **Recast the CoR’s overarching mission so that it says what the CoR does.** This would mean clearly stating that the CoR is about supporting / ensuring and / or strengthening the dialogue between regional and EU politics, for example, as well as stating the purpose and objective of the dialogue.

2. **Take steps to make communication an integral part of the CoR’s political priorities for the 2020-2025 period.** Communication needs to be viewed as a strategic function, which is professionally managed and integrated within the organisation to allow consistency in managing the relationship with stakeholders. This implies that communication goes hand-in-hand with decision-making rather than being an ‘add-on’ activity.

3. **Conduct an internal strategic exercise to confirm the key communication outcome that the CoR would like to achieve.** It is important to note that a desirable outcome for CoR communication is not to reinforce awareness of the CoR or its status as an EU advisory body. It should instead focus on outcomes which relate to the work that it does (e.g. raised awareness on certain issues, appreciation and / or trust).

4. **Develop a detailed intervention logic and set SMART communication objectives to support the CoR communication for each Annual Plan.** Communication objectives should seek to match the communication interests and needs of target groups with the CoR’s needs and interests. Consideration could be given to making use of the AMEC Integrated Evaluation Framework, which is an online interactive tool to support the development of intervention logics. Linked to this, it is recommended to define which specific indicators could be used to assess each communication channel and tool.

5. **Differentiate the approach to communication planning by target group.** This means a two-pronged approach with an intervention logic for each of the two key target groups, describing their specific needs and interests for CoR communication, as well as suitable communication objectives, messages, channels and tools and multipliers. Furthermore, the CoR should also consider segmenting each broad target audience into more specific target groups (EU institutions will, for example, include individual departments and networks and may include other Brussels stakeholders). Insights into the two target groups would best be supported through focus group research / interviews and could then be checked back with representatives to ensure that the CoR is on-track.

6. **Make dialogue supported by the CoR more visible and tangible by defining communication and multiplier role/s, developing templates to support**
communication flows, and mapping current and potential information and listening architecture and processes at local, regional and EU levels. Consideration should be given to how to activate existing communication networks and multipliers to support the work of the CoR in practice. In consequence, it may be necessary to prioritise and make choices about where to focus, which may mean deciding not to focus on certain channels / multipliers.

7. Continue to build communication partnerships and cooperation with local, regional and European organisations and communication units of the EU institutions to identify more joint activities and synergies in particular with the European Parliament and the European Commission (e.g. Citizens’ Dialogues), as well as EU representations in the Member States and relevant other bodies such as the Europe Direct Information Centres, EU agencies and networks.

8. Focus the CoR’s organisational culture on resilience and continuous learning, accepting that adjustments need to be made to the approach to communication while it is being implemented. Generating significant impact in communication is difficult on a modest budget such as the CoR’s, as communication is influenced by politics and current affairs outside the control of the CoR.

Operational recommendations

It is recommended to:

1. Build on the success of the CoR flagship events by:
   - increasing opportunities for stakeholders to “touch” and see the CoR in physical space, such as events at which stakeholders can talk to representatives and physically see evidence of the work the CoR. This can include conferences, exhibitions, symposia, and forums;
   - having “satellite” events concurrently to EuroPCom – e.g. smaller forums with local speakers and major keynotes from the main event presented digitally via video conference and then opened to the floor for discussion with a local moderator. This can extend the reach of EuroPCom and give it a localised element. Some local events could be “roadshows” and European Commission / CoR “pop-up” events in the Member States; and
   - supplementing, physical events for engagement and listening with online regional consultation websites – i.e. websites that invite ideas, comments, feedback, etc. It will be important, however, for these sites to be monitored and for acknowledgements and responses to be posted (i.e. they require moderation and management).

2. Continue the current approach to communication campaigns, which is valuable from a planning and organisational perspective, especially insofar it allows the CoR to concentrate its communication efforts in a meaningful way and avoid diluting or diverting into multiple other priorities beyond the maximum of three annual communication campaigns.
3. **Bank on the success of personal interactions with CoR staff as a way to communicate effectively with local / regional stakeholders.** CoR communication effectiveness is best achieved by increased opportunities to “touch” and see the organisation in physical space. In the context of routine travels to the regions of Europe, CoR staff should maximise the opportunities to attend events, meet with local / regional organisations and stakeholders to “put a regional face” to the CoR. Alternatively, a dedicated team of CoR staff across the organisation could be created to “carry the baton” back and forth and between Brussels and the regions and enhance the impact of communication.

4. **Enhance the collation and analysis of cost data, budgets and reach by channel and tool by developing a standard template or dashboard for on-going use by different communication units, especially in the context of assessing cost-efficiency.** This will allow greater understanding and clarity about the potential and actual reach including the type of reach achieved and cost of individual communication materials, year on year. This should guide choices about their use and help to identify best examples to be replicated. A greater level of detail is required to allow understanding of which video clips or publications achieved greatest reach, were downloaded or shared for example. The analysis would need to be cross-service. ⁵

5. **Going forward, make use of cost-benefit analysis (CBA) instead of cost-efficiency analysis (CEA).** While CEA takes results (i.e., outcomes) into account, CBA seeks to identify the value of benefits compared with costs and paints a better picture of the advantages versus the disadvantages of communication channels and tools. This is particularly important looking forward because obtaining greater benefits is likely to involve greater cost. A CBA would involve adding up the benefits, then comparing them with the costs associated, taking into account the potential payback period.

6. **Consider streamlining further the current approach to press and media, as well as the approach to publications and graphic support.** Regarding press and media, this could be done by intensifying existing discussions with journalists to specifically investigate how to further increase the effectiveness and efficiency of relations. There may also be ways to streamline the current approach to publications and graphic support which by testing materials in discussion groups at events or with the two key target groups of the CoR. This could free up operational budget and manpower to support an increased focus on direct communication via other mechanisms.

7. **Reinforce research insights by:**
   - **collecting “real-time” target group feedback** as this is much more insightful than ex-post feedback. For example, the CoR could use simple on the spot, face-to-face surveys and or mobile phone surveys, for example by using “Kahoot”, to collect target group insights at specific events. These can also be a way of testing ideas

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⁵ As, for example, for video clips it would need to take into account the cost for video production, which falls under the audiovisual service and the cost for video dissemination, which falls under social media, in order to assess the potential and actual reach achieved by specific video clips.
for the next version of the event and identifying if there is consensus for a new idea. Short Survey Monkey surveys could also be used at low cost to gather feedback on the website and or e-newsletters;

- **running a short series of focus groups** to understand CoR Member communication needs and possibilities for multiplying CoR messages and to understand if and how CoR may support local partner communication needs. These could either take place online or during routine sessions of the CoR Members. The focus here should be on which thematic priorities are most useful and interesting to allow CoR to have a better understanding of which content is required. Feedback could also be collected from National Delegations, including on specific tools such as publications and graphic support and videos to ensure that they are useful and interesting. This is particularly important for publications and graphic support given that they are the most human resource intensive communication tool used by the CoR; and

- **revising the questions in the stakeholder survey**, which should focus on collecting more specific information about which content is of most interest to different partners and how useful they found specific communication channels and tools.

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6 This is based on data provided by CoR for 2018, which suggests that a total of €837,299 was spent on publications of which €690,249 related to staff costs. However, it should also be noted that graphic support services include the services of graphic designers, who are not only working on "classic" publications such as brochures, covers, posters etc. For example, some of the publication products (such as infographic), are only used online and on social media. The CoR estimates that publications in the traditional sense take up to 25% of the capacity of graphic design and support.
1 Introduction

In September 2019, the European Committee of the Regions’ (CoR) Communication Directorate commissioned a Final Evaluation of its 2015-2020 Communications Strategy. This document is the Final Report of that evaluation. The report is the last of four deliverables prepared by Coffey on behalf of a consortium led by Deloitte and Coffey.

The overarching aim of the evaluation is to assess the achievements and limitations of the CoR’s current Communication Strategy and, based on the lessons learned, to develop recommendations to improve the CoR’s approach to communication in the period 2020-2025.

The Final Report has been produced as part of the evaluation which was contracted to Coffey under the Multiple Framework contract No PO/2016-06101 (Lot 1 on the Provision of services for Impact Assessment, Evaluation and Evaluation-related services in the field of Communication activities). The purpose of the Final Report is to present the evaluation results stemming from the analysis of the available primary and secondary data, as well as outline the conclusions and recommendations that the evaluation team has drawn from these results. This Report closes the evaluation.

We have structured the Final Report to respond to the Technical Specifications as per our offer, as shown in Table 1 below.

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<td>Briefly outlines the report’s context and content.</td>
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<td>Provides a brief overview of the CoR’s Communication Strategy 2015 – 2020, the objectives and scope of the evaluation, the evaluation questions, methodology, and the limitations of the evaluation.</td>
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<td>Chapter 3: Evaluation results</td>
<td>Provides answers to the evaluation questions by judgement criteria with boxed conclusions at the end of each evaluation question.</td>
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2 Background

This Chapter provides brief overview of the CoR’s Communication Strategy 2015 – 2020, the objectives and scope of the evaluation, the evaluation questions, the methodology and the limitations of the evaluation.

2.1 The CoR’s Communication Strategy 2015 – 2020

Since it was created, the CoR has played a key role as a consultative body in the European institutional landscape, involving the European regions and cities in the EU decision-making process. In the latter years, disconnect from European affairs and disillusionment of citizens with the EU have spread across Europe.

In a bid to regain the trust of citizens, in 2015 the CoR defined and adopted its first dedicated five-year Communication Strategy which aims to improve the way in which the CoR communicates with its main target audiences at local, regional and EU level in the years to 2020.

The ultimate objective of the CoR’s 2015-2020 Communication Strategy is to contribute to improving the way in which EU citizens perceive the European Union. This was translated into three specific objectives (or courses of action), as follows:

- **Improve the CoR’s consultative works through targeted communication with stakeholders at all governance levels**

  The Strategy seeks to put communication at the centre of the CoR’s consultative role, as well as its legislative and decision-making processes. By adopting an inclusive and strategic communication approach, which involves citizens, local and regional authorities, CoR staff, and other EU institutions (e.g. European Parliament, Council of the European Union, European Commission, etc.), the CoR looks to enhance its position in defending territorial cohesion and citizens' involvement in the EU.

- **Increase the use of decentralised communication at the local level**

  By adopting a bottom-up approach, with the CoR collecting the needs and expectations of regions and cities and transmitting these to other EU institutions, the Strategy aims to help the CoR to have a greater influence on the EU agenda. It also looks to establish ways in which the results of the CoR’s consultative works can be reported back to the local and regional levels. To achieve this, the Strategy foresees an intensive use of various communication tools, which will be defined in Annual Communication Plans throughout 2015 to 2020.

- **Strengthen the CoR’s cooperation with other EU institutions**
The Strategy aims to raise the CoR’s institutional and political profile as the assembly of EU regions and cities, both in Brussels and at the local and regional levels. For this, the CoR plans to implement joint communication initiatives with the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the rotating EU Presidencies, as well as the European Commission at the local and regional levels.

The CoR has two main target audiences:

i. the **local and regional stakeholders** (political representatives, local and regional public administrations and authorities, territorial associations and networks); and

ii. the **EU institutions** (European Parliament, Working Parties and Meetings at the Council of the European Union related to the CoR’s key areas of interest and European Commission).

The CoR Members and the organisations that form the local and regional stakeholders are particularly important as they act as intermediaries between the CoR and EU citizens. The **press and media** are strategic partners / multipliers too as they can reach and spread information quickly to the main targeted audiences.

2.2 Purpose and scope of the evaluation

According to the Technical Specifications, the evaluation’s **main objectives are three-fold**:

- examine the **impact** of the CoR’s communication tools and activities between 2015-2019 against the baseline and mid-term evaluations carried out respectively in 2015 and 2017;
- suggest how the CoR should **position** its communication in the upcoming period 2020-2025; and
- **identify** operational aspects of the CoR’s communication activities that could be enhanced to maximise the impact of the Communications Strategy.

In terms of **scope**, the evaluation covers all CoR communication activities implemented between 2015 to the summer of 2019, as described in the CoR Communication Strategy and the four Annual Communication Plans spanning from 2016 to 2019.

2.3 Overview of the evaluation questions

The evaluation questions as presented in the Technical Specifications provided the starting point of the evaluation.

Based on our understanding of the objectives of the evaluation, we reviewed the questions, as well as the judgment criteria, indicators, methods and sources proposed in the Technical
Specifications, and organised them in an Evaluation Question Matrix (EQM). The evaluation questions and related sub-questions are reproduced in Table 2 overleaf.

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<td>1.1. Did the Strategy use an appropriate mix of communication channels and tools to reach out the defined key target audiences?</td>
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<td>1.2. What was the Strategy’s impact on stakeholders’ perceptions of the CoR?</td>
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<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>2. How do different CoR communication tools and channels perform in terms of their cost-efficiency?</td>
<td>2.1. What is the cost-efficiency of the CoR’s different communication channels and tools?</td>
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<td>2.2. How cost-efficient was the Strategy as a whole?</td>
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<td>Next iteration of the CoR’s Communication Strategy</td>
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2.4 Methodology

The evaluation team developed a methodological approach revolving around three key elements:

- A cumulative perspective;
- An explanatory focus; and
- A utilisation-focused approach.

In practice, the evaluation was structured into three phases:

- **Phase 1 – Inception**: The inception phase provided the foundation for subsequent tasks, ensuring a shared understanding with the CoR of the scope and objectives of the evaluation, firming its timeline and finalising the work plan. It mainly consisted of familiarisation research activities, as well as an initial review of available documentation and data on the Strategy.

- **Phase 2 – Data collection and analysis**: This phase comprised a detailed analysis of available documentation and data, as well as primary quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The latter entailed organising and carrying out 25 semi-
structured interviews with key stakeholders of the CoR's communications efforts, as well as their subsequent analysis and write up; developing a cost-efficiency analysis and analysing an online survey of CoR stakeholders planned, promoted and rolled out by the CoR.

- **Phase 3 – Synthesis and reporting**: The final phase of the study consisted of a systematic analysis of primary and secondary data collected in the preceding phases, using appropriate quantitative and qualitative techniques. It included mapping and aggregation of secondary data against judgment criteria and indicators defined for all the evaluation questions, final analysis of primary data and triangulation of evidence, development of conclusions, and formulation of recommendations.

### 2.4.1 Methodological tools

#### Desk research

The methodology included a significant desk research component, taking stock of the large amount of quantitative and qualitative existing evidence-base generated by the monitoring and evaluation system established for the Strategy. The relevant documentation included (but was not limited to) the Annual Communication Plans and corresponding reports, data from the baseline and mid-term evaluations, administrative and cost data collected by the CoR and other public and internal CoR documentation.

The initial desk research was launched following the kick-off meeting on 4 September 2019. Based on the documentation received from the CoR at the kick-off meeting, a preliminary analysis of this first set of relevant documents was undertaken to get a clearer picture of the CoR’s Communication Strategy so far. We then mapped the existing dataset, organising it by category, providing a summary of the content, as well as defining the main themes (e.g. digital communication, stakeholder views etc.) to then link them to the relevant evaluation questions. Any new documents were added to the mapping in a continuous exercise. The initial desk research was enriched with elements gathered during the activities that took place during the inception phase of the evaluation. A further in-depth analysis of the set of relevant documents was then undertaken in the beginning of the data collection phase. An overview of the content of the full dataset analysed for the final evaluation is described in Table 3 below and organised according to the categories presented by the CoR.

#### Table 3: Overview of desk research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Document</th>
<th>Number of Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annual Communication Plans</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Reports</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline Survey</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation Reports</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents on the CEA</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Reports</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Reports</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews with stakeholders

In line with the requirements of the Technical Specifications, the evaluation team conducted **25 semi-structured interviews** to collect stakeholders’ perceptions on the CoR’s Communication Strategy. The interviews were held by our team between 25 September and 30 October 2019.

The initial sample of stakeholders was drawn from the list of candidates provided by the CoR, which was supplemented by extensive desk research to provide alternates for the candidates who remained unresponsive or declined to contribute. The final sample covered key staff working on communication from the following stakeholder categories:

- EU institutions’ communication units (5):
- Brussels-based regional offices of Member States (10);
- European local and / regional or associations (5);
- Public Relations (PR) and / or government communication agencies (1);
- News agencies (press, TV and / or online media) (2); and
- European associations in the field of communication (2).

The semi-structured interview questionnaire provided by the CoR was used and each interview lasted between 30 minutes to an hour depending on the level of knowledge of the interviewee on the CoR and their familiarity with the specific issues raised during the interview.

The interviews were structured around three overarching topics:

- The key narratives of the CoR Communication Strategy and the role of its Members;
- The perceived achievements and shortcomings of the current Strategy; and
- The future of the Strategy.

A summary report of the interview programme can be found in Annex A: Interview programme report.

Online survey with stakeholders

The online survey was planned, promoted and rolled out by the CoR between 9 September and 11 October 2019. The survey questionnaire was developed by the CoR to align with the survey carried out at the Strategy’s mid-term point.

The main topics on which stakeholders were consulted are listed as follows:

- Perceptions of the CoR’s role and core task;
• Perception of the CoR’s Communication Strategy;
• Assessment of the CoR’s communication channels and tools; and
• Views on the future of the CoR’s communication and suggestions for improvement.

The **total number of respondents was 351**, representing a response ratio of just over a third of the intended target group. This can be considered to be a good response rate and is very similar to the response year of the online survey deployed for the mid-term evaluation (which collected 369 responses of which 356 were valid).

The responses were spread among the target groups of the CoR as shown in **Table 4** below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent’s employer type</th>
<th>Number of responses to survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local or regional authority</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU institution (European Parliament; Council of the EU; European Commission or other)</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association, network or NGO</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private company</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University or research institute</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National authority</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional office in Brussels</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Committee of the Regions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>351</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A detailed survey report can be found in Annex B: Online survey report.

**Cost-efficiency analysis**

To supplement the analysis of the effectiveness of the CoR’s Communication Strategy, a **cost-efficiency analysis** (CEA) of the communications channels and tools used by the CoR to implement the communication campaigns was foreseen to establish which communications channels and tools were the most efficient for reaching the target groups and meeting the targets set in terms of engagement, impact, etc.
2.4.2 Analysis and synthesis

All primary data collected via the survey and the interviews was analysed using the appropriate data analysis techniques, which included:

- **Qualitative data analysis:** For interviews and open comments in surveys, we developed coding frameworks based on EQM indicators to identify recurrent themes in answers to the evaluation questions with the aim to highlight consensus and differences in opinions within and between the audiences consulted.

- **Quantitative data analysis:** Surveys were analysed using descriptive statistics to present and interpret numerical data.

This process was underpinned by a gap analysis throughout the duration of the study to ensure that data gathered via desk research and primary data collection addressed all the EQM indicators correctly.

In line with the Technical Specifications, we developed data collection reports for each methodological tool. Along with the summary of findings from the desk research, these reports were provided to our External Communication Expert (Jim Macnamara) who reviewed them and provided draft findings, conclusions and recommendations stemming from his interpretation of the body of available evidence, which fed into our final analysis.

During the synthesis stage, we used triangulation techniques to compare key findings from different sources and provide answers to the evaluation questions that were based on robust evidence confirmed by more than one source. For this, we undertook a systematic review and mapping of all data, which entailed structuring and mapping evidence to the relevant EQM indicators, which provided us with a series of findings that related to each evaluation question.

The synthesis of results made use of triangulation at three different levels:

1. **Triangulation of data:** Primary data from interviews, survey and CEA, as well as secondary data, such as monitoring data and documentation provided by the CoR;

2. **Triangulation of respondent groups:** EU institutions and local or regional authorities and European regions’ offices in Brussels which are the key target groups of the CoR; as well as the remaining target groups of the CoR; and

3. **Triangulation of methods:** Desk-based research, survey, interviews and CEA.

The study’s overall conclusions and recommendations emerged from the triangulated data, ensuring that the evidence from the past is translated into recommendations for the future, grounded in a relevant understanding of strategic priorities. This process is illustrated in the diagram in Figure 1 overleaf.
In line with our proposal to the CoR, we have grouped recommendations in two categories: operational and strategic.

- **Operational recommendations** include a set of suggestions on how to make the existing communication channels and tools more operationally effective. These recommendations take into consideration the views of stakeholders in terms of the relevance, usefulness and impact of communication channels and tools.

- **Strategic recommendations** examine options for adapting, improving, adding or maintaining existing communications approaches, messages, target groups, channels and tools from the 2015-2020 Strategy. The recommendations aim to make the next Strategy more streamlined and tailored to the foundational principles and objectives of the CoR, as well as to the strategic (communicational and political) approaches of other EU institutions. They are based on the critical assessment of the evidence generated in the evaluation and our experience in designing and evaluating communication initiatives.

### 2.4.3 Encountered challenges and limitations to the evaluation

We encountered several challenges and limitations during the evaluation, which are outlined below, as well as the steps we undertook to mitigate their effects in the evaluation results.

We have also made some recommendations to streamline any future evaluations of the Strategy, which broadly reprise recommendations made at the mid-term point in the evaluation report provided by the external contractors.
Timeline of the assignment

The Technical Specifications outlined a very short timeframe for this evaluation. From the Interim Report onwards, the remaining deliverables were submitted in a weekly succession, which severely limited the amount of time for analysis and identification of key findings.

The interview programme timeline was affected because it coincided with the 17th edition of the European Week of Regions and Cities held between 7 and 10 October 2019. This affected the availability and willingness to participate of a number of potential interview candidates. Initially, the sample of interview candidates was very unresponsive. As research relies on the willingness of interviewees to take part, significant additional efforts had to be made to persuade individuals to take part and allow the team to complete the 25 interviews as planned.

While the inception period comfortably spanned over a month, allowing for a robust desk-based research exercise, there was insufficient time between the completion of the interview programme and submission of the Interim Report. Data collection was completed one day before the submission of the report. As the Draft Final Report was due the following week feedback from the CoR on the Interim Report had to be implemented in parallel to the triangulation of the evidence for the final analysis and the drafting of responses to EQs, conclusions and recommendations.

Coffey and the CoR were in regular contact to mitigate the risks relating to the short and challenging timeline. Both sides demonstrated flexibility with regards to the submission of deliverables. This was particularly important for the Draft Final Report which had to be prepared concomitantly to the revisions to the Interim Report. As a result, it was agreed that the Draft Final Report would focus on presenting the evaluation team’s responses to EQs, as well as draft conclusions and recommendations. The revised data collection reports, incorporating the CoR’s feedback, will be presented in the Final Report.

Going forward, we recommend allowing a minimum of four months (but ideally six months) from the contract signature to conduct an evaluation of this scope, to allow some leeway for delays to the data collection activities. We would also recommend reviewing the timing of each report to allow sufficient time between data collection, its analysis and report writing, which are three separate and sequential activities. Reducing the time of any of these elements impacts the robustness of the evaluation.

Methodological limitations

Coffey was not involved in the design of the questionnaires for the interview programme and the online survey, which were developed independently by the CoR. There were pros and cons to this approach. Use of standard questions allowed for direct comparisons with the previous evaluations (specifically the mid-term evaluation) of the Communication Strategy. But in our view, the questions were not sufficiently insightful to generate evidence on areas for improvement.

To a certain extent, these shortcomings have been mitigated by desk-based research, which supplemented any gaps on the articulation of the Strategy in practical terms. In addition, the team has been supported by an eminent expert in the evaluation of public communication Professor Jim Macnamara.

Challenges surrounding the cost-efficiency analysis (CEA)

The CEA is one of the key areas of the evaluation relating to the cost-efficiency of the Strategy as a whole, as well as its different communication channels and tools. It the mid-term evaluation, part of this assessment considered estimates of the amount of time that reached individuals would
spend engaging with a particular channel. However, the level of estimation is such that it was decided not to follow the same approach and to base considerations more reliable evidence relating to cost, reach and target group appreciation.

This type of assessment is usually made by making comparisons between similar costs and results for example year-on-year, to allow consideration of whether performance has increased or decreased in relation to costs. However, for this exercise, it was agreed to focus on one specific year (2018) because of the difficulties in compiling comparable data; even taking into account the data presented in the mid-term evaluation, which was not identical.

Going forward, external communication expert Jim Macnamara suggested that a cost-benefit analysis (CBA) is likely to be more useful than a CEA. While CEA takes results (i.e., outcomes) into account, CBA seeks to identify the value of benefits compared with costs and paints a better picture of the advantages versus the disadvantages of communication channels and tools.

This is particularly important looking forward because obtaining greater benefits is likely to involve greater cost. A CBA would involve adding up the benefits, then comparing them with the costs associated, taking into account the potential payback period.

Limitations of the sample of consulted stakeholders

It is not possible to interview all stakeholders who might have interesting views on the CoR communication activities. Given the scope of this exercise, stakeholder interviews had to focus on a sample of individuals representing EU institutions, local and regional authorities Brussels-based regional offices of Member States, media, and government PR and communication professionals.

Furthermore, even in EU institutions, the research was largely confined to communication professionals. While these are capable of providing a professional assessment of what they have experienced and observed, and they are “partner” in communication, they do not fully reflect the ultimate target audience that the CoR needs to reach to fulfil its mission.

Nonetheless, a sample of 25 interviews provides a wealth of insights and is sufficient in number to allow salient points to emerge which can be considered as significant, so that ideas expressed should be presented to the CoR.

The online survey provided a broader perspective, reaching out to local associations, NGOs, and other regional partners.
3 Evaluation results

In this Chapter, we provide our answers to the evaluation questions underpinning the final evaluation, as outlined in the Technical Specifications. The answers have been formulated by comparing the results of baseline and mid-term surveys with the results of the final evaluation.

3.1 Effectiveness: What impact did the implementation of the 2015-2020 Strategy have on CoR communication?

Sources of evidence:
- Desk-based analysis of various CoR internal and public reports, and evaluations
- Online surveys (2015-2019)
- Stakeholder interviews (2015-2019)

To answer this question, we provide an analysis of the delivery of the Strategy from its outset in 2015 to the summer of 2019 against its objectives. As required in the Technical Specifications, we compared the results of the baseline and mid-term surveys with the results of the final evaluation using the common set of survey indicators. We highlighted the findings for the CoR’s key target groups (stakeholders from the EU institutions and local / regional authorities).

To structure our findings and make them more accessible, we answered the evaluation question by focussing on two key aspects, which are reflected in two corresponding sub-questions:

i. What was the Strategy’s impact on stakeholders’ perceptions of the CoR?
ii. Did the Strategy use an appropriate mix of communication channels and tools to reach out to target audiences?

3.1.1 What was the Strategy’s impact on stakeholders’ perceptions of the CoR?

In line with the Technical Specifications, the answer to this sub-question will be based on a comparative interpretation of the results of baseline and mid-term surveys with results of the final evaluation, providing a differentiation of results for the CoR’s two key target groups (individuals working in EU institutions and in local /regional authorities).

To structure our reasoning, below we provide evidence gathered in relation to the following judgment criteria (JC) as per our EQM:
• JC1. Stakeholders’ agreement that the Strategy had an impact on the CoR’s communication;
• JC2. Reputation of the CoR among stakeholders, evidenced by their perceptions on the image of the CoR, as well as its current and future roles; and
• JC3. Stakeholders’ suggestions / remarks for improving CoR’s communication.

Below, we also consider how the Strategy’s implementation has affected the stakeholders’ views on the target groups and role of the CoR Members in communication, and whether they consider that these aspects are being adequately dealt with by the CoR at this stage.

As per the Technical Specifications, we will partly base our judgment for the strategic and operational recommendations for the strategy’s renewal for the period 2020-2025 on the suggestions made by stakeholders with regards to the future narrative and role of the CoR, which can be found in the interview programme and online survey report in Annex to the main report.

Perceptions on the overall impact of the CoR’s communication

\[\textit{Stakeholders’ remain positive in their perception of the overall impact of the CoR’s communication.}\]

The starting point of the assessment of the impact of the Strategy’s implementation on CoR communication between 2015 and 2019 is the evidence on key stakeholders’ perceptions on the overall impact of the CoR communication activities in the given period. As the CoR communication activities rolled out between 2015 and 2019 were framed by the Communication Strategy, this assessment of perceptions will help us understand how it affected the CoR’s communication in practice.

The baseline evaluation did not include questions evaluating the overall communication of the CoR thus excluding a direct comparison on this aspect. The online survey questionnaire used in 2017 and 2019 measured the perception of impact of CoR communication in general. At mid-term, \textbf{stakeholders evaluated the CoR’s communication positively}, with a weighted average score of 3.2 out of 5, with stakeholders from EU institutions evaluating the CoR’s communication slightly less positively. The survey used for the final evaluation generated comparable results, with more than half of the respondents giving the overall CoR communication a weighted average score of 3.1 out of 5 as shown in Figure 2 overleaf.
The feedback from the interview programme addressing perceptions of impact is somewhat more difficult to interpret as most interviewees struggled expressing specific views on the CoR Communication Strategy or its impact. In this view, interviewees were asked whether to share their views on the overall CoR communication approach, rather than the exact content of the Strategy document itself.

While the CoR’s Communication Strategy is not a confidential strategic document, it is internal to the organisation and its review requires a robust understanding of the CoR’s mission, target groups and the operational aspects of the Strategy. Thus, it is not surprising that stakeholders have found it hard to provide inputs on the overarching approach but could comment on the areas where they had engaged directly. This is particularly true for stakeholders outside the EU political landscape, as stakeholders were able to comment on specific aspects of the CoR communication activities, which concern them directly, considered in more detail in the following section examining the Strategy’s communication portfolio. Interviewed stakeholders from EU institutions with a certain awareness of the Communication Strategy noted that **CoR’s institutional communication appeared to have improved** over the Communication Strategy’s lifetime, contributing to the overall visibility of the CoR among institutional stakeholders. This finding reflects the trends observed at the Strategy’s mid-term, as the evaluation hailed the visible improvements of the communication approach of the CoR.

The mid-term evaluation noted a general hesitation among respondents to evaluate the impact of CoR communication, which we would like to re-emphasise in the results of the final evaluation. It is our understanding that this hesitation could be explained by the generic character of the relevant questions in the survey and interviews.
Perceptions on the image of the CoR, as well as its current and future roles

The perceptions of stakeholders on the image of the CoR remain positive, but there is a (persistent) slight disconnect between the roles in which the CoR performs best and these considered as important by stakeholders.

The online survey directly refers to the image of the CoR by asking stakeholders whether the CoR is “a fully-fledged European institution”. As shown in Figure 3, at the Strategy’s mid-term in 2017, the evaluation results indicated that that the general perception of the CoR as an institution had increased from 3.1 to 3.5 since the baseline survey had been conducted. The final evaluation results suggest that stakeholders’ perception on the image on the CoR has remained steady, with an average rating of 3.5, as shown in the figure overleaf. In 2019, stakeholders working in local / regional authorities appear more positive in their views (average rating of 3.6) on the image of the CoR compared to the institutional stakeholders (average rating of 3.2). The mid-term evaluation found that the Strategy could plausibly have contributed to the change of perception since the inception of the Strategy by fostering visible improvements on the overall approach to communication in the CoR. Similarly, it is plausible that the subsequent years of the Strategy’s implementation have contributed to keep the ratings steady among stakeholders. It is noteworthy that, for stakeholders working in an EU institution the rating of the CoR’s image steadily increased over the years (from 2.8 in 2015 to 3.2 in 2019). This could indicate that the Communication Strategy is likely to have had an impact on the impressions of this stakeholder group over the years.

Figure 3: Stakeholders’ perceptions on image and role of the CoR, 2015 - 2019 (all respondents)

Source: “How do you see the actual role of the European Committee of the Regions (1= fully disagree; 5 = fully agree)?”. Stakeholder surveys 2015, 2017 and 2019.
Going forward, however, we doubt the added value of continuing to pose this question given that the underlying premise seems to allude to uncertainty over the status of the institution. We consider that it would be more valuable to focus research on understanding of the value of the CoR remit as a way to assess its image rather than to raise questions about the status of the CoR as an institution. This is highlighted by the quotes below.

Stakeholders participating in the interview programme were not directly asked to assess the image of the CoR from this perspective, but were rather invited to consider what should be the key narrative and message(s) of the CoR for different audiences, from the following options (which align with the roles proposed in the online survey):

- **Influencing the EU policy process from a local/regional perspective;**
- **Bringing the EU institutions closer to the local level and the citizens in the Member States;** and
- **Creating platforms for (international) meetings, conferences, exchange and cooperation.**

“There the CoR struggles both in real and communication terms to convince beyond the shadow of a doubt, what its role is in EU policy. This role is guaranteed by Treaties yet the CoR feels need to communicate so energetically on itself, perhaps as an admission that the CoR sees its role questioned or in doubt.”

EU institution staff member

There was a robust agreement across all stakeholder groups that the CoR has a place in the construction of the European project and represents important interests. However, a critical element mentioned by a significant number when speaking of the hierarchy in the CoR’s narratives was the importance of **better defining its role in the EU political landscape.** This echoes clearly the finding from the baseline evaluation that the CoR lacks a clear image.

Stakeholders’ perceptions on the **current role of the CoR** were monitored in the baseline and mid-term surveys, as well as in the context of the final evaluation by asking them to consider the three key narratives representative of the main aspects of the CoR’s mission (as shown in Figure 3 above).
The final evaluation results indicate that stakeholders’ perceptions on the current role of the CoR do not differ significantly from the Strategy’s mid-term evaluation.

The CoR is still seen as performing best in its role to create platforms for meetings, exchange and cooperation (average rating of 3.7, but considered as ancillary by a majority of interviewees from the 2019 interview programme) while its arguably more important role, influencing EU law-making from a local/regional perspective, gathers the lowest rating (average of 3.4). These average ratings are identical to the 2017 online survey. The views of the CoR’s key target groups differ on its performance of its more important roles, with stakeholders from EU institutions giving a higher rating to CoR’s performance as a relay between EU policies and institutions and the local and regional level, whereas those working in local / regional authorities denoting its better performance as influencer of EU policy-making. Interestingly, these views appear to reflect the communication needs of these two groups; i.e. EU institutions are keen to bridge the gap with the local level and those working at the local / regional level are keen to have higher influence at EU level.

In the interviews, the CoR was deemed somewhat more successful in its messaging on how it can influence the EU policy process from a regional/local perspective, considered the second most important narrative, notably through the success of the EU Cohesion Alliance (discussed in more detail in the following sections). The results from the 2019 survey show that, on average, there is broad agreement among stakeholders that the CoR performs all of its roles, at least to some extent. This indicates that the three narratives are all relevant as different facets of the CoR’s mission. However, the interview results indicate that stakeholders consider bringing the EU institutions closer to the local level and the citizens as the most important aspect of the CoR’s, role which should be reflected as the top message in the CoR’s communication. While considered important, the other two narratives were seen as less intrinsic to the CoR’s communication ethos. Taken together, these findings from the data collection suggest that there is a (persistent) slight disconnect between the areas in which the CoR performs best and these considered as important by stakeholders, which was already noted in the mid-term evaluation. This is reflected in the hierarchy of the three narratives / roles given by stakeholders for the future, as shown in Figure 4 overleaf.

With regards to the future role on which the CoR should focus its efforts, the mid-term evaluation found that the CoR was going through an “identity crisis” of sorts, evidenced by the gap in stakeholders’ perceptions on the current role and their expectations for the future. Across the three narratives, stakeholders found that the role in which the CoR currently

"The CoR should bring the EU institutions closer to the local level and the citizens by relaying the key EU messages and positions filtering from the CoR Members to the regions and cities they represent."

News agency representative

"The main role of the CoR is to bring the EU institutions closer to the local / regional level. They are successful in this mission to a certain extent but could achieve a lot more in the future. Their message currently gets lost."

EU institution staff member
performs best (creator of platforms for meetings, exchange and cooperation) while still important is the least important for the future, and vice versa. The results of the final evaluation confirm this trend, as shown in Figure 4 below. The views of the stakeholders are mostly uniform except with regards to the role of creating platforms in the future, relatively highly rated by stakeholders working in local /regional authorities but not by EU institutions staff members.

Figure 4: Stakeholders’ perceptions on the future role of the CoR, 2015 - 2019 (all respondents and key target groups)

Views on the target groups and role of the CoR Members in communication

Stakeholders consider that the balance between CoR communication activities which primarily target stakeholders in the EU institutions and others such as local / regional authorities should be equal, if not slightly biased towards the local / regional level. European citizens may be considered as an emerging target group of the CoR.

The CoR’s Communication Strategy suggested a focus on two main target audiences: local / regional authorities and EU institutions. Moreover, it envisaged that CoR Members and local and regional stakeholders would act as multipliers and connectors for communication with citizens. Both the baseline and mid-term evaluations found a certain divergence between
internal and external views on the CoR’s narrative and target groups. External stakeholders stressed the importance of targeting local / regional authorities and other decentralised audiences, reflecting the CoR’s role as intermediary between the local and regional level and the European level, whereas interviewees inside the CoR expressed the strongest interest in targeting EU institutions. The interview programme carried out for the final evaluation paints a different picture, not least because it did not include stakeholders internal to the CoR.

Two contrasting views were prevalent among interviewees across all stakeholder groups. On one side, stakeholders considered that the CoR should communicate **equally towards EU institutions and local / regional stakeholders**. Depending on topics, these interviewees thought that the CoR should address a variety of stakeholders via targeted communication for specialised audiences and more accessible messaging for the local / regional authorities and associations, the citizens etc. While this is already done by the CoR to a certain extent, stakeholders believe that there is room for improvement, for instance by providing more explicit communication messages and materials that the CoR’s communication multipliers can use to target citizens. On the other side, some interviewees thought that CoR fails to reach the citizens (mostly because its communication is considered too specialised) and thus should aim to simplify its activities and make them more accessible and understandable to the broader public. In this view, interviewees considered that the CoR needs to make a choice on the primary target audience – EU institutions / Brussels stakeholders or local / regional stakeholders – as this would give a more robust framework to their Communication Strategy.

In this regard, the predominant view among interviewees was that CoR is focusing too much on Brussels and not enough on the regions and general public. These findings highlight stakeholders’ expectations that the CoR’s outreach to local and regional stakeholders also includes outreach to the public. Yet the public is not a CoR primary target group. The findings also reflect trends already identified in the baseline and mid-term evaluations. The baseline evaluation noted that the CoR activities (and by extension, its communication content) are considered as too Brussels-oriented, rather than agenda-setting and bringing forward the needs and priorities of European regions and cities. It also highlighted the need to find the right balance between Brussels-oriented and decentralised communication. These views were identified during the Strategy’s mid-term
and are still valid at its close. However, the final evaluation results indicate that there has been a **shift towards balanced communication to the key target groups of the CoR, if not a slight bias towards the local / regional level** and the general public.

The **European citizens’** (or general public) place in the (future of the) CoR’s Communication Strategy raises questions. The Strategy is explicit that, “while the overall aim of the CoR’s Communication Strategy is to improve the way EU citizens perceive the European Union”, the CoR lacks the financial and human resources effectively concentrate its communication activities **directly** to European citizens.

In the baseline study, European citizens were not perceived as a target group for decentralised communication by any stakeholder group in particular. In the mid-term evaluation, stakeholders internal to the CoR did not see the value of amplifying communication to reach all EU citizens, yet, as highlighted above, the evaluation already showed a certain trend for **some stakeholders to see citizens as a direct target group** of the CoR.

This trend comes through even more clearly from the final evaluation results, reflected in the synopsis of the interview programme, as well as the frequency to which we find the word “citizens” in the stakeholders’ open responses on challenges and priorities for the CoR’s communication as shown in the word cloud\(^7\) in Figure 5 overleaf. However, as already stated

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\(^7\) They are visual representations of words that give greater prominence to words that appear more frequently.
in the mid-term evaluation’s findings, at this stage it is difficult to advise the CoR to consider European citizens as a direct target group given the limitations of its communication resources.

*Figure 5: Stakeholders’ views on challenges and priorities for the CoR’s communication (based on 188 open responses)*

The expectations from CoR Members as potential key players in the CoR’s communication are still high. There is room for improvement with regards to the realisation of their full potential as communication multipliers.

The Strategy puts an emphasis on CoR Members (as well as other local and regional stakeholders), to perform as the role of multipliers and connectors of the CoR’s communication, which can be leveraged to reach the European citizens, in line with the CoR’s broader goal. The added-value of the CoR Members as key partners for CoR communication was highlighted in the mid-term evaluation, but it confirmed the limitations in the role of CoR members as conduits for CoR messages, given that CoR has little control over the activities of each individual CoR Member. This implies that the role of CoR Member multiplier maybe an “assumed” role, which makes sense in strategic terms on paper, but may not be fulfilled consistently in practice, given that what such a role entails has not been

“Members are instrumental for the creation of a reverse feedback loop mechanism between Brussels and local / regional stakeholders. The CoR should empower, train, encourage its Members to “spread the gospel” (i.e. communicate on the European project and its added value).”

EU institution staff member
specifically defined to the extent that multiplication effects are likely to be “uneven” based on the communication expertise, capacity and opportunity of individual Members. (This issue is highlighted in a quote overleaf.)

The results of the final evaluation align with those findings. The majority of interviewees agree that the CoR Members have a duel communication role as both target audience and / or multiplier of the CoR’s communication depending on the topic or activity considered, or as suggested by an interviewee “key partners”. A contrasting view was that the Members of the CoR do not have a role in its Communication Strategy, but that the Communication Strategy should work for the CoR Members. In this view, the communication activities of the CoR should only help the aspirations and needs of the Members (and the cities / regions they represent) filter to EU level.

From an external perspective, this discussion highlights the need for greater specificity around communication objectives, roles and responsibilities and the channels and tools that will be used to address these objectives. Leaving this discussion “vague” weakens the potential of the CoR to improve its approach because it is more difficult to identify which parts work best and least, which is currently assessed in relation to stakeholder perceptions of effectiveness. Overall, stakeholders considered that CoR has improved in actively using its Members to spread its communication messages, especially in the last two years. This is also reflected in recent efforts to overhaul the approach to the involvement of CoR Members in communication, aiming to better harness their knowledge and expertise gained “on-the-ground” which places them favourably for developing common political positions. In this view, in the summer of 2019 the Communication Directorate of the CoR undertook an exercise to propose fresh actions to support the Members in communication activities and new ways to increase their impact on the EU decision-making machine. The underlying idea is to maximise the opportunities offered by the new CoR mandate set to begin in 2020. CoR Members are also involved in one of the CoR’s most successful initiatives – the Citizens’ Dialogues, which were organised under the aegis of the Reflecting on Europe campaign. In 2018, 75 Citizens’ Dialogues were held (97 in 2017) involving 88 CoR Members (105 in 2017), reaching out to 5,700 citizens (7,275 in 2017) in 23 Member States.

However, the difficulties outlined in the mid-term evaluation persist – the ability of CoR members to act effectivley as “ambassadors” is deeply personal and linked to factors outside of the CoR’s control, such as own communication skills as well as knowledge and interest in EU policy and its implications at the local / regional level. The feedback from stakeholders indicates that the CoR successfully provides technical support to its Members, but that more could be done to engage less active Members and realise their full potential. The CoR currently has 350 members and 350 alternates forming national delegations from all EU

“The CoR Members are both an audience and multipliers / partners in the CoR’s communication activities. Through its Members, the CoR has a golden opportunity to bridge the communication between local level and EU, notably in close cooperation with the numerous regional representation offices in Brussels.”

News agency staff member
Member States, proposed by each national government from its local and regional representatives.

It is arguable that 350 Members are too few to be multipliers of the CoR’s communication to 500 million European citizens, especially given that their intrinsic role is to be politically elected administrators rather than professional (or skilled) communicators. For the CoR, the centre of its activities (including in communication) should be the periphery of the EU rather (its regions) than its actual administrative centre, Brussels. In theory perhaps the CoR could do more to leverage this, notably by considering the whole 80,000 local / regional authorities in the EU as multipliers rather than solely focussing on its Members. Given the difficulties in doing this, on balance, a focus on Members can be judged as most relevant.

3.1.2 Did the Strategy use an appropriate mix of communication channels and tools to reach out the defined key target audiences?

In line with the Technical Specifications, the answer to this sub-question will be based on a comparative interpretation of the results of baseline and mid-term surveys with results of the final evaluation, providing a differentiation of results for the CoR’s two key target groups (individuals working in EU institutions and in local /regional authorities) where appropriate.

Prior to the presentation of our analysis of the evidence, we provide a brief overview of the monitoring data collected by the CoR for the annual reporting of communication activities which allows comparisons in terms of outreach for the main channels and tools for the period 2017-2019.

To structure our reasoning, we then provide evidence gathered in relation to the following judgment criteria (JC) as per our EQM:

- **JC 1.** Stakeholders’ (positive / negative) view of the CoR’s communications channels and tools;
- **JC 2.** Stakeholders’ agreement that the CoR’s communication channels and tools are relevant to their information needs and interests; and
- **JC 3.** Stakeholders’ awareness of the CoR’s communication campaigns

The first two are analysed together, focussing in particular on the indicators, as used in baseline and mid-term evaluations survey and interview questionnaires, pertaining to
stakeholders’ usage of the communication services and tools provided by the CoR, as well as their rating on the usefulness of the communication mix.

**Overview of metrics for the main communication channels of the CoR between the first semesters of 2018 and 2019**

*The data on the CoR’s communication output suggests that the outreach of different activities has varied between communication channels year-on-year.*

Monitoring data collected by the CoR for the annual reporting of communication activities allows comparisons in terms of outreach between the first semesters of 2018 and 2019, for the main communication channels and tools of the CoR’s portfolio: press and media relations, social media, website, events and physical visits to the CoR. A review of media and social media efforts paints a rather *mixed picture* with some performance improvements in terms of engagement, but reduced performance in relation to the reverberation of messages from media and social media.

While a decrease in the number of press releases in the first semester of 2019 (-23% compared to the first semester 2018) led to a decrease in media articles mentioning the CoR (-19% compared to the first semester 2018), this was tempered by a significant increase (+76% compared to the first semester 2018) of journalists engaging with communication activities of the CoR and a good representation of CoR Members in the media (60 to 90 were mentioned each month between January and June 2018) in the media together with the CoR.

In the first half of 2019, 1,174 social media posts contributed to 36,510 mentions of the CoR or related keywords (a decrease of 32% compared to the first semester 2018), but the number of followers on social media channels grew by 13% compared to the second half of 2018. In the beginning of the final year of the Strategy, the CoR website had 216,375 unique visitors (+16% to first semester 2018) and received about 327,400 visits (+9% to first semester 2018), reflecting the momentum around the 2019 European elections in May and the 8th European Summit of Regions and Cities in March 2019 (the CoR Summit).
In the first half of 2019, increases can be observed both in the number of participants (13,000 or +60% to first semester 2018) and in the number of own or hosted conferences and events in 2019. Of these participants, almost 8,900 (+18% to first semester 2018) came through visitor groups to the CoR.

As a caveat to the findings above, it should be noted that qualitative and quantitative findings on impacts on this type provide a starting point for an assessment of communication impact, which would typically draw on a range of data in addition to stakeholder perceptions.

Stakeholders’ views on the CoR’s communications channels and tools

Stakeholders’ preferences for certain communication tools remain the same. Ratings of communication tools have decreased across the board, but stakeholders are enthusiastic about communication activities out of the scope of the survey.

For its implementation, the CoR’s Communication Strategy sets out the main priorities in terms of resources and investment. The operational roll-out and use of the communication tools is detailed in each Annual Communication Plan, it is also specified where the different tools of the CoR’s communication portfolio are used in a coordinated way through the structured communication campaigns as a way to mutually reinforce one another. The main channels and tools used for the implementation of the Strategy, and across the different campaigns, were as follows (as summarised in the online survey):

- CoR website;
• CoR social media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.);
• CoR e-newsletters;
• CoR publications and graphic support;
• CoR conferences and events;
• Visits to the CoR; and
• Personal contacts with CoR Members or staff.

In addition, the communication mix of the CoR had a press and media relations component, focusing press activities on EU / specialised, local, regional and national media in the countries and regions of the CoR members, and making use of existing press and media relations tools, such as press releases, interviews and articles (among others).

Figure 6 below summarises the stakeholders’ use of the communication portfolio between 2015 and 2019, based on the results of the three surveys. As in 2017, the top three preferred tools to obtain information about the CoR are still the website, e-newsletters and conferences / events.

Figure 6: Stakeholders’ usage of CoR communication mix, 2015 - 2019 (all respondents)


8 The survey of stakeholders asked them to evaluate the “CoR social media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube etc.)”. The CoR also has a LinkedIn page and launched its Instagram account in September 2019.
The interview programme revealed nuances in the stakeholders’ views on the CoR’s communication portfolio. Among its key stakeholders, the CoR is best known for EuroPCom and the European Week of Regions and Cities, its flagship events. These events are extremely well regarded by most stakeholders, as well as being considered as dynamic and engaging.

This is also reflected in the survey results as shown in Figure 7 below. The top three highest-rated channels remain the same from 2017, but we observe a decrease in ratings across the board. However, there needs to be some correlation between survey respondents’ use of the different channels and tools and their rating of the channels and tools.


Figure 7: Stakeholders’ evaluation of CoR communication mix, 2015 - 2019 (all respondents and key target groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All respondents</th>
<th>EU Institutions</th>
<th>Local/regional authorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CoR conferences and events</td>
<td>3.5 3.8</td>
<td>3.7 3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal contacts with CoR Members or staff</td>
<td>3.3 3.6</td>
<td>3.3 3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoR website</td>
<td>3.3 3.4</td>
<td>3.1 3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoR publications</td>
<td>3.2 3.5</td>
<td>2.9 3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoR e-newsletters</td>
<td>3.2 3.4</td>
<td>2.8 3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits to the CoR</td>
<td>3.1 3.4</td>
<td>3.0 3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoR social media</td>
<td>3.1 3.3</td>
<td>3.0 3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: “How do you evaluate the information channels of the CoR (1 = poor; 5 = excellent)” Stakeholder survey 2017 (n=356): EU institutions (n=44), Local/ regional authorities (n=154). Stakeholder survey 2019 (n=351): EU institutions (n=48), Local/ regional authorities (n=108).
For example, in the 2015 survey 55% of respondents indicated that they had attended an event, whereas in the 2019 survey only 45% of respondents had attended events, it is plausible that this has contributed to a lower appreciation of events. This is somewhat tempered by insights on CoR communication activities not covered by the survey.

The CoR’s engagement in the Citizens’ Dialogues alongside DG for Communication of the European Commission was particularly successful and a good example of how EU institutions should work together.

The CoR’s own local dialogues, under the campaign Reflecting on Europe, were mentioned by almost half of all interviewed. Since 2016, the campaign has involved 40,000 citizens in 110 regions and 156 cities and municipalities in 30 European countries, providing them with opportunities to share their views and proposals on how the EU should evolve in the next decade. The CoR’s core purpose is to be a listening organisation and, whilst there is always scope to improve, listening is currently supported by a wide range of activities, including the Citizen Dialogues. According to the interviewed stakeholders, this was one of the top initiatives of the CoR, credible on very precise topics (e.g. regions in transition) but which can lose that credibility on wider and generalist themes. The president of the European Council pushed the Reflecting on Europe campaign further in November 2016 by asking the CoR to engage citizens in a debate on the future of Europe. The campaign culminated in 2018 with the submission of a final report on its results to the President European Council along with the formal Opinion of the CoR.

A momentous achievement for the CoR, this report summarised the results of the communication campaign so far and provided a significant boost in the CoR’s visibility vis-à-vis its two key target groups (EU institutions, local and regional actors) as well as the Member States. Putting the CoR at the centre of the discussions on getting the EU
closer to its citizens through dialogues and direct communication, *Reflecting on Europe*’s final report was also the most popular post of 2018 both on CoR’s Facebook and LinkedIn, generating nearly 6,000 engagements in total.

Stakeholders also highlighted the **Cohesion Alliance** was also an excellent initiative of the CoR, federating regions around a lobby document which resulted in a tangible deliverable to the European Commission. Also, other interviewees who mentioned that the CoR had communicated well on this initiative and successfully engaged participants. To a lesser extent, wider alliances such as the Covenant of Mayors were also noted as impactful and engaging for organisations. Finally, it is important to note the stakeholders’ enthusiasm for the **Massive Open Online Course (MOOC)**, deemed particularly successful.

As shown in Figure 8 below, in terms of stakeholders’ recommendations on the future communication mix of the CoR, the website was considered as the most useful channel for further development in the future (cited by 61% of all survey respondents), followed by the CoR e-newsletters (52%) and CoR social media (50%). The 2017 mid-term survey reflected very similar response patterns to 2019 findings.

*Figure 8: Stakeholders’ recommendations for future communication mix (2015 – 2019, all respondents)*

*Source: “In the future, which information channels would you consider most useful for getting information about the CoR and worth being further developed (multiple answers possible)? (in percentage points). Stakeholder surveys 2015, 2017 and 2019.*
Stakeholders’ awareness of the CoR’s communication campaigns

Stakeholders’ awareness of the CoR’s communication campaigns has increased significantly among the key target groups of the CoR, but there is still room for improvement.

At the outset of the Strategy, the CoR adopted a campaign approach to structure its annual communication efforts. Each year, an Annual Communication Plan was drawn up by the CoR’s Secretariat-General, which defined a limited set of thematic priorities for the CoR’s communication in the coming year along two or three major themes, based on the EU agenda and in line with local/regional demands. Each of the selected themes underpinned a specific CoR communication campaign, combining bottom-up consultation, legislative work, press and media campaigns, events, social media dialogues, etc.

The mid-term evaluation of the CoR Strategy found that, while the campaign approach adopted by the CoR was valuable from a planning and organisational perspective, CoR campaigns did not generate high awareness among stakeholders. As shown in Figure 9, in 2017, less than half of survey respondents were aware of the CoR’s communication campaigns and those least knowledgeable about the campaigns were their main target groups (local, regional and national authorities, and EU institutions).

Figure 9: Stakeholders’ awareness of CoR communication campaigns, 2017 – 2019 (all respondents and key target groups)

Source: “Are you aware of the CoR communication campaigns? Yes / No”. Stakeholder survey 2017 (n=356): EU institutions (n=44), Local/ regional authorities (n=154). Stakeholder survey 2019 (n=351): EU institutions (n=48), Local/ regional authorities (n=108).

The results from the online survey rolled out for the final evaluation suggest that, overall, stakeholders’ awareness of the CoR’s communication campaigns has increased by 10 percentage points.
The 2019 survey notes that awareness of CoR campaigns significantly increased in both key target groups of the CoR.

Among EU institutions staff members 52% report awareness, which represents an increase of 8 percentage points and among respondents working for local / regional authorities 57% reported awareness of the campaign, which is a 15 percentage points increase. It is encouraging that awareness of campaigning is increasing, and this can be considered as a positive indicator of effectiveness. However, as only slightly over than half of the consulted stakeholders (56%) were aware of CoR communication campaigns at the close of the Strategy, there is still room for improvement.

The final evaluation confirms the finding of the Strategy’s mid-term evaluation that, while stakeholders may struggle to recall specific communication campaigns, they are aware about the ideas and discourses promoted through campaigns of the CoR. The interview programme results confirmed that, in 2019, stakeholders are still struggling to describe specific communication campaigns or themes but are able to recall memorable activities without necessarily linking them to the overarching communication campaign or its message. These included the Cohesion Alliance (“the most visible campaign done by the CoR”), Bringing Europe Closer to Citizens, RegHub, Cities and Regions for Climate, Future of Europe, Reflecting on Europe and Bridging the Investment Gap.

This finding is likely to also relate to the fact that the notion of campaign reflects an internal coordination of messages and activities, target groups, however, may only be exposed to one or two aspects of a campaign and therefore are more likely to remember specific elements than a campaign as such.

“[I am familiar with the campaigns] in a broad sense. Of course, [I am] in Brussels, at events, following people on social media, so I can see what the CoR is doing in the big picture, but [I cannot] say what specific focus [the campaigns] had in 2017, for example.

EU institution staff member

First meeting of the RegHub project, 2019.
EQ1. What impact did the implementation of the 2015-2020 Strategy have on CoR communication?

Conclusions

Throughout the lifetime of the CoR’s Communication Strategy, stakeholders have remained positive in their perception of the overall impact of the CoR’s communication. The ratings of stakeholders on the image of the CoR and its role in EU law making have increased since 2015, whereas perceptions on the CoR’s other roles have remained steady throughout.

The mid-term evaluation found that the Strategy could plausibly have contributed to the change of perception by fostering visible improvements on the overall approach to communication in the CoR. Similarly, it is plausible that the subsequent years of the Strategy’s implementation have contributed to keep the ratings steady among stakeholders. The final evaluation notes a (persistent) slight disconnect between the roles in which the CoR performs best and those considered as most important by stakeholders, as their views on current and future roles of the CoR do not perfectly align.

Stakeholders consider that the balance between CoR communication activities which primarily target stakeholders in the EU institutions and others such as local / regional authorities should be equal, if not slightly biased towards the local level. European citizens may be considered as an emerging target group of the CoR. The expectations from CoR Members as potential key players in the CoR’s communication are high. There is room for improvement with regards to the realisation of their full potential as communication multipliers, notably by engaging further with less active Members.

The CoR is somewhat successful in drawing from a broad range of tools and methods to fit the various needs of its stakeholders, but the portfolio could be honed further. The communication mix operates channels and tools which are respectively suitable to the heterogenous target groups of the CoR. In this view, Stakeholders’ preferences for certain communication tools have remained stable throughout the Strategy’s implementation. Ratings of communication tools have decreased across the board, but stakeholders are enthusiastic about communication activities out of the scope of the survey in which they were directly involved. Stakeholders’ awareness of the CoR’s communication campaigns has increased significantly among the key target groups of the CoR, but there is still room for improvement, as only slightly over than half of the consulted stakeholders were aware of CoR communication campaigns at the close of the Strategy.
3.2 Efficiency: How do different CoR communication tools and channels perform in terms of their cost-efficiency?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of evidence:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desk-based analysis of costs, output and outreach data provided by CoR (including 2018 Communication Report; Report to the CoR Bureau on the 8th CoR Summit’s results (April 2019); budget execution figures and total FTE costs compiled and cleaned by the CoR for 2018 in October 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoR’s own analysis of costs, output and outreach of selected CoR communication tools and channels in 2018 (in FTEs and percentage of operational budget (OB))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online survey (2019)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To answer this question, we have compared internal data on the output and outreach of selected CoR communication tools and channels, as well as their cost in terms of FTEs and as a proportion of the operational budget, with their impact as perceived via the surveys/interviews and stakeholder ratings on the perceived usefulness of each tool to get information about the CoR in the future.

As regards the "operational budget", due to data availability, the focus of this assessment was limited to payments made in 2018\(^9\). However, the CoR acknowledged that a longer view over several years would be required to allow a more accurate assessment given that costs were not always taken into account in the corresponding activity year. The output and outreach indicators refer to data and results achieved in 2018 as described in the Communication Report for that year, as well as additional information provided by the CoR.

Figure 10 overleaf provides a graphic representation of the costs (in FTEs and the percentage of operational budget (OB)), output and outreach of these CoR communication channels and tools in 2018.

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\(^9\) Payments varied from commitments made for the year, which are effectively estimate costs. Whereas payment data was based on actual costs invoiced to the CoR. In some cases, communication activities were undertaken in 2018 but because they were not invoiced in the same year it was not possible to correlate the level outputs and outreach achieved with their actual cost.
Source: Internal calculations developed by the CoR, November 2019. Total amount representing EUR 4.69 million or 68% of total costs (staff costs for full time equivalents/FTE: EUR 3.11 million; operational budget/OB: EUR 1.58 million).
The initial objective of this assessment was to identify the most cost-efficient communication channels and tools to allow a possible prioritisation of channels and tools in the CoR’s 2020-2025 Communication Strategy. Yet our expert does not recommend using cost-efficiency to support decision-making for the following reasons:

- Channels and tools serve different purposes and can achieve different effects. This makes it virtually impossible to make performance comparisons across channels, but there is scope to compare similar channels and tools;
- Judging communication channels and tools according to their cost and “outreach” does not allow an assessment of their benefits / effectiveness. Reach is important, but it does not confirm impact, for example whether target audiences noticed the messages, understood or liked what they heard, or changed their opinion as a result of the communication;
- There is always a cost to impactful communication. This means that cutting budgets or focussing on elements that may appear to be cheaper is not an effective strategy because these cheaper activities will invariably be less effective; and
- The effectiveness of individual channels and tools relates to a number of factors including their content, the choice of messages and their resonance with target groups as well as the other issues that are in the public space at the time.

Taking this into account, and as discussed with the CoR communication team, it is usual for organisations to manage a portfolio of different and complementary channels and tools to allow messages to be reinforced in different ways to different target groups. The CoR has a communication toolbox which meets expectations for this type of organisation. Therefore, the focus of this assessment was to provide a better understanding of costs and the relationship between outreach and stakeholder appreciation by channel and tool. This does not take account the effectiveness of content and messages.

Despite the limitations of the cost-efficiency exercise, we answered the evaluation question by focussing on two key aspects:

i. What is the cost-efficiency of the CoR’s different communication channels and tools?
ii. How cost-efficient was the Strategy as a whole?

The cost-efficiency exercise concerned a comparison between the costs of different channels and tools and their outreach to target groups in terms of breadth and frequency of exposure. Ideally, this assessment would consider year-on-year whether it has been possible to increase outreach whilst maintaining the level of budget.

The CoR requested us to compare the cost-efficiency of a sample of communication channels and tools from the Communication Strategy’s portfolio. We ranked these channels by % of total communication costs. Table 5 overleaf, describes the:

- costs of the different channels and tools;
- the proportion of this cost in the overall budget;
- the outreach achieved; and
• satisfaction rating provided by stakeholders in the 2019 online survey.

It can be observed that the CoR’s communication portfolio is fairly traditional and the cost ratios also appear to be balanced across the board. It is noteworthy that press and media relations take up the largest portion of the communication budget and FTE value and have the likelihood to generate the largest indirect outreach (estimated to 10.3 million readers in 2018). While it has a relatively high value in FTE, graphic support is not limited to publications and serves other tools and channels too, such as events, the website and social media.

For the remainder of the examined channels, the potential reach is relatively high for the costs incurred, especially concerning the website and social media, which were both in the top three of stakeholders’ recommendations for the future communication mix. The relatively low cost of local events per participants, coupled with the enthusiasm of stakeholders for this activity, also makes it a commendable communication effort.

In terms of cost, press and media relations were the most expensive activity and social media were the least expensive activity. In terms of reach, social media achieved the highest potential reach, higher than traditional press and media relations and audio visual. But in terms of the appreciation by stakeholders, social media was least appreciated, and events were most appreciated.

The top three highest-rated communication channels and tools of the CoR by stakeholders were its conferences and events, personal contacts with CoR members or staff and the CoR website. Survey results are influenced by the extent that survey respondents had engaged with each channel, i.e. if a respondent had not attended an event if would be difficult to make an assessment.

As already stated, it is not possible to compare these channels using any of the indicators in Table 5 because they must be understood as mutually reinforcing. Whilst events can attract only a limited number of visitors compared with social media reach, yet their personal engagement is assumed to be much more impactful. The final evaluation’s findings align with this statement, with stakeholders consistently giving the CoR’s conferences and events the highest ratings among its communication mix, as shown in Figure 7, which reflects their enthusiasm for this type of communication activity.
**Table 5: CoR communication activities: costs and outreach in 2018**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication channel</th>
<th>total cost (€)</th>
<th>% of total CoR communication costs ranked 1 - = most expensive</th>
<th>% of total FTE value</th>
<th>Output and Outreach (Potential reach)</th>
<th>Stakeholder rating of 7 channels and tools (Average weighted score from 2019 online survey)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Press and media relations</td>
<td>1,408,416 Rank 1</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>160 press releases issued and 234 journalists attended CoR plenaries and events, resulting (together with other media relation activities) in 16,000 media articles. <strong>Estimated potential reach</strong> of 10.3 million readers.</td>
<td>Not included as an option in the survey questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publications and graphic support</td>
<td>837,229 Rank 2</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>10.0%¹⁰</td>
<td>346 projects including the development of 30 publications with 60,975 printed copies and 19 CoR opinions in 2 languages each, 850 A3 posters presented at 71 events (conferences, exhibitions). <strong>Estimated potential reach</strong>¹¹ would at least include individual readers of publications and all CoR event attendees in 2018.</td>
<td><strong>3.2/5</strong> (Rank: joint 3rd)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th European Week of Regions and Cities</td>
<td>779,685 Rank 3</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>7,000 participants (more than half of the participants coming from local, regional, national or EU administrations), 200 journalists attending, 1,000 media mentions, 13,000 posts on social media.</td>
<td><strong>3.5/5</strong> (but rated under “Conferences and events”) (Rank: 1st )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹⁰ It should be noted that graphic support services include the services of graphic designers (accounting for 4-5 FTEs), who are not only working on “classic” publications such as brochures, covers, posters etc. For example, some of the publication products (such as infographic), are only used online and on social media. The CoR estimates that publications in the traditional sense take up to 25% of the capacity of graphic design and support.

¹¹ At least 117,000 people (all CoR events together had 55,800 participants and 60,975 individual readers of printed copies of 30 publications), but not enough information available to include potential readers of CoR opinions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication channel</th>
<th>total cost (€)</th>
<th>% of total CoR communication costs ranked 1 - = most expensive</th>
<th>% of total FTE value</th>
<th>Output and Outreach (Potential reach)</th>
<th>Stakeholder rating of 7 channels and tools (Average weighted score from 2019 online survey)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local events</strong></td>
<td>668,064</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td><strong>Outreach:</strong> 5,700 citizens attending.</td>
<td><strong>3.5/5</strong> (but rated under “Conferences and events”) (Rank: 1st )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Website</strong></td>
<td>421,197</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td><strong>Outreach:</strong> 517,000 visits by 318,000 individual users.</td>
<td><strong>3.3/5</strong> (Rank: joint 2nd)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social media</strong></td>
<td>316,681</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td><strong>Total number of followers on CoR social media accounts: 74,200.</strong> 2,429 posts, 89,383 mentions, 155,912 engagements. <strong>Estimated potential reach:</strong> 399 million people.</td>
<td><strong>3.1/5</strong> (Rank: joint 7th)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audiovisual products and media relations</strong></td>
<td>260,941</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td><strong>AV products:</strong> 47 videos produced in 2018, generating 91,500 views. <strong>AV media relations with TV/radio journalists:</strong> 713 media mentions, but outreach to followers of media TV/radio emissions mentioning the CoR is not known. <strong>Estimated potential reach:</strong> at least 91,500 people directly reached and potentially many more via local, regional and national TV/radio broadcasts.</td>
<td>Not included as an option in the survey questionnaire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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12 Twitter: 32,100; Facebook: 31,400; LinkedIn: 10,700.
In 2018, the 200 visits, conferences, Brussels-based and local events (co-)organised by the CoR involved 55,800 participants, a figure, which does not take into account further word-of-mouth reach of participants to others who didn’t attend. If an assessment is made purely on the basis of reach, events do not compare favourably to social media. In 2018, the CoR’s social media activity achieved a potential reach of 399,000,000 (through 2,429 posts). If a comparison is made on the basis of costs and reach events yet again do not compare as favourably with social media. The cost per participant of the 2018 CoR Summit of Regions and Cities in Bucharest was €501, whereas the cost per person potentially reached via social media was €0.0008. As direct communication is more impactful the cost-benefit ratio and impact on each event attendee will be much more significant by several orders of magnitude than the effect generated on an individual by a social media post. Yet both channels and tools are relevant and necessary as part of the CoR communication tool box. Social media supports the amplification of messages, events support in-depth discussion on complex topics and increased understanding.

Furthermore, it is reported that the 2019 CoR Summit was attended by about 1,000 delegates, 640 of whom elected politicians, representing all 28 Member States and it can be easily assumed that they amplified the event’s potential reach through their own communication activities before, during and after the event.

It is also noteworthy that, on this occasion, the CoR made a special effort to outreach to political "heavy-weights” (elected politicians, who are not (yet) CoR members but hold important positions at sub-national level), as well as Young Elected Politicians which further supports the idea of the added-value of such communication multipliers.

Whilst it not possible to make comparisons of efficiency across different channels and tools, it is possible to:

1. Compare the cost-efficiency of similar communication channels of the CoR, for instance different types of events or different social media channels. However, in this case, the financial data provided by the CoR only allowed a comparison between:
• the different types of events organised; and
• the different campaigns.

2. Observe the extent that there has been an increase or decrease in outreach in the year under examination 2018.

These two elements are described in more detail below.

Comparison of CoR events

The cost in FTEs and operational budget, juxtaposed with the number of participants indicates the following costs per participant:

- € 500.96 for the 8th CoR Summit (FTE cost: €124,960; 1,000 participants, of which 640 elected politicians);
- € 127.42 for local events (FTE cost: €483,035; 5,700 citizens attending); and
- € 107.52 for the 16th European Week of Regions and Cities (FTE cost: €393,584; 7,000 participants attending).

This analysis suggests that the 16th European Week of Regions and Cities was the most cost-efficient event. However, the CoR’s contribution to the total cost of this event amounted to only 20%, while the rest was covered by other partners, mainly the European Commission’s DG for Regional and Urban Policy. Therefore, it is not possible to calculate the total cost per participant from the target group, as the data on target group reach is only available for events such as the European Weeks of Regions and Cities and the CoR Summits. Also, in the CoR stakeholder survey did not differentiate between different events.

Comparison of CoR campaigns

Communication campaigns were an important feature of the Communication Strategy. The below Table 6 provides an overview based on the 2018 CoR Communication Report. In 2018 the CoR implemented its communication activities through three campaigns: (i) Regions, cities and local authorities working for the future of Europe (a continuation of Reflecting on Europe), (ii) Investing in sustainable growth and jobs in all regions, cities and local authorities and (iii) EU regions, cities and local authorities as change agents.

The monitoring budget data provided by the CoR for 2018 does not facilitate the disaggregation of campaign budget by spend on press and media, social media and other specific communication channels and tools. It also does not allow for an individual assessment of each campaign or enable comparison between them in terms of cost-efficiency.

However, we can provide a joint assessment for the three campaigns. The calculation is based on the total cost of the campaign to the CoR (for instance, for the production of videos) divided by the total number of contacts generated from the campaigns.
In 2018, 62% of the CoR’s operational budget for communication\(^1\) was committed to the three communication campaigns, totalling €1.17 million, with the remainder allocated to cross-cutting activities. The (estimated)\(^2\) total contacts generated by the three campaigns in 2018 were 23,283,883. On the basis of these figures the cost per person reached of the three 2018 communication campaigns would be €0.05.

Overall, this suggests that, through the mix of communication channels and tools used, taken together the 2018 CoR’s campaigns are cost-efficient in reaching a large amount of people for relatively small individual cost.

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\(^1\) The total operational budget for 2018 was €1.88 million.

\(^2\) A margin of error should be allowed here for duplication figures, i.e. people seeing the campaigns via different mediums, which could be balanced out by the fact that reach figures for some of the campaign activities were not available, for instance on attendees in a series of high-level conferences including national governments’ top representatives from Croatia, Italy and Poland presenting the country’s position on the future cohesion policy in the context of the campaign \textit{Investing in sustainable growth and jobs in all regions, cities and local authorities}. 

\textit{Source: CoR Communication Report 2018.}
Changes in levels of outreach by channel

As discussed in section 3.1.2, the 2019 CoR Communication Report confirms an increase in outreach between the first semesters of 2018 and 2019 in the following communication channels:

- **Press and media relations**: significant increase (+76% compared to the first semester 2018) of journalists engaging with communication activities of the CoR and a good representation of CoR Members in the media (60 to 90 were mentioned each month between January and June 2018);
- **Social media**: 13% increase in followers on social media channels in the first half of 2019 compared to the first semester of 2018;
- **Website**: 16% increase in unique visitors to first semester 2018; and
- **Conferences and events**: increases can be observed both in the number of participants and in the number of own or hosted conferences and events in the first semester of 2019.

Going forward, we recommend that comparisons are made by channel on a yearly basis, as this would allow for conclusions to be drawn on the relative cost-efficiency of each tool. As the CoR has an internal communication model (it does not outsource its activities) internal resources costs make up the lion’s share of costs.

Table 5 also outlines the level of human resourcing by channel and tool, as it presents the % of total FTE value in 2018 for each of the selected communication channels and tools. Any changes to the focus of channels and tools will need to take into account the human resource cost.

As noted above, the monitoring data provided to us on costs, outputs and outreach is not fit for cross-tool comparison of the communication mix, which limits the possible findings from this aspect of the final evaluation. This issue was also encountered by the contractors in the context of the mid-term evaluation. The focus of this exercise on a specific year of the Communication Strategy (2018) also limits assessments for the effectiveness and efficiency of the same communication channels or tools year on year.
EQ2: How do different CoR communication tools and channels perform in terms of their cost-efficiency?

Conclusions

Measuring and comparing the diverse range of CoR communication channels and tools in terms of costs, both in FTE and monetary terms, versus impact is hardly possible and would not yield meaningful results. This type of assessment cannot constitute the base of any judgments on the opportunity to further develop or discontinue certain communication activities. This assessment is also challenged by the fact that the CoR has an in-house communication model, which makes it more difficult to track how inputs relate to outputs given the diversity of activities covered under each communication heading and the fact that each element is not necessarily monetarised in terms of human and financial resources as would be done by an external agency.

Based on financial and reach data per channel, the **cost of one person reached in 2018 via these channels varied from €501 for the 8th CoR Summit (for participants) to €0.0008 for social media (for person reached), but these activities served very different purposes which both have a place in the CoR’s communication portfolio.**

To a certain extent, the financial data provided by the CoR has **allowed a comparison between the different types of events organised**, which suggests that the 16th European Week of Regions and Cities was the most cost-efficient event organised in 2018 (but one should note that the CoR contributed to only 20% of costs for the organisation). Also, we calculated that the **cost per person reached of the three 2018 communication campaigns would be €0.05**. This suggests that, through the mix of communication channels and tools used, **taken together the 2018 CoR’s campaigns are cost-efficient in reaching a large amount of people for relatively small individual cost.**

Overall, it **appears that outputs and outcomes of the communication channels and tools justify the costs incurred.** The potential reach is relatively high for the costs incurred, especially concerning the website and social media, which were both in the top three of stakeholders’ recommendations for the future communication mix. The relatively low cost of local events per participant, coupled with the enthusiasm of stakeholders for this activity, also makes it a commendable communication effort. Yet even these events still imply a cost in terms of FTE.
Annex A: Interview programme report

This Chapter presents the findings of the interview programme with stakeholders.

Introduction

In line with the requirements of the Technical Specifications, the evaluation team conducted 25 semi-structured interviews between 25 September and 30 October 2019 to collect stakeholders’ perceptions on the 2015-2020 Communication Strategy. The final sample covered key staff working on communication from the following stakeholder categories:

- EU institutions’ communication units (5)\(^{15}\):
- Brussels-based regional offices of Member States (10);
- European local and/or regional associations (5);
- Public Relations (PR) and/or government communication agencies (1);
- News agencies (press, TV and/or online media) (2); and
- European associations in the field of communication (2).

The semi-structured interview questionnaire provided by the CoR was used and each interview lasted between 30 minutes to an hour depending on the level of knowledge of the interviewee on the CoR and their familiarity with the specific issues raised during the interview. The interviews were structured around three overarching topics:

- The key narratives of the CoR Communication Strategy and the role of its Members;
- The perceived achievements and shortcomings of the current Strategy; and
- The future of the Strategy.

Key narratives and role of the CoR Members

The interviewees were presented with the following suggestions in terms of key narratives and also given the option to present an alternative answer:

1. *Influencing the EU policy process from a local/regional perspective;*
2. *Bringing the EU institutions closer to the local level and the citizens in the member states;* and
3. *Creating platforms for (international) meetings, conferences, exchange and cooperation.*

Most interviewees pointed out that **bringing the EU institutions closer to the local level and the citizens should be the key message relayed by the CoR** in its communication. While

\(^{15}\) The numbers in brackets represent the number of interviews for each stakeholder category.
considered important, the other two narratives were seen as less intrinsic to the CoR’s communication ethos.

Interviewees explained the importance of this narrative as two-fold. On the one hand, it was noted that the CoR benefits from a unique position in the EU institutional landscape, acting as a relay between the administrative headquarters of the EU in Brussels and the local / regional political level (and, by extension, the citizens). In this view, the CoR’s primary aim in communication focuses on distilling messages on key aspects of EU policy and achievements, thus making the EU more accessible back in its regions and cities.

On the other hand, several respondents also mentioned that through its unique position, the CoR should aim through its communication to bring the voice of the regions closer to the EU. Five respondents from different stakeholder groups suggested that this dual role of the CoR indicates the need for a feedback loop between Brussels and the regions, translated in the (existing) bottom-up approach of the Communication Strategy.

While a majority of interviewees agreed that the CoR was attempting to fulfil this mission in its communication, six respondents were outright sceptical that this is being achieved at the moment. The overall perception of interviewees was that the CoR could do better. In this view, it was suggested that collaboration with local / regional journalists could be enhanced to distil its key narrative but also that its communication portfolio benefit from a generational renewal.

The CoR was deemed somewhat more successful in its messaging on how it can influence the EU policy process from a regional/local perspective, considered the second most important narrative. In this view, five interviewees mentioned the success of the EU Cohesion Alliance which is discussed in more detail in the following section.

Finally, while the creation of platforms for cooperation was considered the least important narrative, it was still selected by 11 interviewees as representative of one significant facet of the CoR’s mission. According to respondents, the creation of platforms is an occasion for:

- enabling discussions between the EU and the regions, as well as for regions to interact between themselves;
- better cooperation through improved networking, in order to better shape common interests and thus better influence EU policies; and
- sharing information on best practices of regional policy.
In general, these respondents thought that the CoR had been successful in this aspect of its work, citing the plethora of events and conferences organised or facilitated by CoR, such as the European Week of Regions and Cities, where regional governments and representatives are invited to exchange experiences and good practices.

A critical element when speaking of the hierarchy in the CoR’s narratives and its image was the importance of better defining its role in the EU political landscape. According to interviewees, given that its role is enshrined in the Treaties, the CoR should not feel the need to promote its position in Brussels but would gain to focus its efforts on the local / regional level where there is a communication vacuum on EU affairs.

The majority of interviewees agreed that the role of CoR Members in its communication activities is double hatted as they could be either a target audience and / or multiplier of the CoR’s communication depending on the topic or activity considered, or as suggested by an interviewee “key partners”. A contrasting view held by three interviewees was that the Members of the CoR do not have a role in its Communication Strategy, but that the Communication Strategy should work for the CoR Members. In their view, the communication activities of the CoR should only help the aspirations and needs of the Members (and the cities / regions they represent) filter to EU level. One important point brought up by three interviewees was the idea of the role of the CoR and its Members in creating a two-way process.

Two interviewees noted that the CoR has improved in actively using their Members to spread their communication messages, especially in the last two years.

Achievements and shortcomings of the CoR’s Communication Strategy

Impact of the CoR’s Communication Strategy

The large majority of interviewees had difficulties in expressing specific views on the CoR Communication Strategy or its impact, as they were not aware of it or considered not having enough experience of its details to be able to comment in a meaningful way.

“The CoR Members are both an audience and multipliers / partners in the CoR’s communication activities. Through its Members, the CoR has a golden opportunity to bridge the communication between local level and EU, notably in close cooperation with the numerous regional representation offices in Brussels.”

News agency staff member

“Members are instrumental for the creation of a reverse feedback loop mechanism between Brussels and local / regional stakeholders. The CoR should empower, train, encourage its Members to “spread the gospel” (i.e. communicate on the European project and its added value).”

EU institution staff member
Those who had a certain awareness of the Communication Strategy (two interviewees working in EU institutions) noted that its impact appeared limited in the EU political landscape. While it was noted that CoR’s institutional communication appeared to have improved over the Communication Strategy’s lifetime, contributing to the overall visibility of the CoR among institutional stakeholders, a significant shortcoming in the eyes of interviewees was the impression that the European citizens are still largely unaware of the existence of the CoR and its activities.

To remedy the situation, interviewees mentioned that, as a first step, the (new) Strategy could be disseminated among stakeholders, such as regional offices, press departments, etc. There could also be a meeting of regional representatives to inform them about the Strategy, something akin to an opening conference, a kick-off meeting or a webinar that would shed light on the Strategy. It was also mentioned that the overall impact of the CoR Communication Strategy at a local / regional level is dependent on the activity of the CoR Members representing that region, which highlighted again the importance of Members acting as multipliers of the Communication Strategy.

*Communication campaigns of the CoR between 2015 and 2019*

The large majority of interviewees were equally unaware of the details of specific CoR communication campaigns that took place between 2015 and 2019. Somewhat erroneously, interviewees referred instead to communication activities of the CoR not necessarily linked to its communication campaigns on a number of occasions. These included the Cohesion Alliance (“the most visible campaign done by the CoR”), Bringing Europe Closer to Citizens, RegHub, Cities and Regions for Climate, Future of Europe, Reflecting on Europe and Bridging the Investment Gap. This indicates that stakeholders are able to recall memorable activities without necessarily linking them to an overarching communication campaign entailing a specific message.

In the eyes of a number of interviewees this raised the question of whether citizens are at all aware of CoR’s campaigns, as it seems that it is the audience that gets the least attention when campaigns are implemented.

*Most successful communication methods and tools*

Most of the interviewees were familiar with the portfolio of communication methods and tools deployed by the CoR and were able to single out the best performing among them.

The interview programme revealed that, among its key stakeholders, the CoR is best known for EuroPCom and the European Week of Regions and Cities, its flagship events. These events are extremely well regarded by a majority of interviewees, as well as considered as dynamic and engaging.
However, for all the positive commentary, it was noted that both events are somewhat biased towards the “eurobubble” audience. A significant number of interviewees voiced concerns as to whether any added value from these events trickles down to the citizens. In this view, three interviewees suggested that the CoR should reflect on the opportunity to split EuroPCom in a larger number of smaller events or move it outside Brussels as a way of underlying the true nature of the CoR (as a relay to local / regional stakeholders). In addition, it was noted that the CoR could better leverage the engagement of the regional media who could relay its messages further to the local audiences (specifically, the citizens).

According to four interviewees, the CoR’s engagement in the Citizens’ Dialogues alongside DG Communication of the European Commission was particularly successful and a good example of how EU institutions should work together. The CoR’s own local dialogues, branded “Reflecting on Europe”, were mentioned by almost half of all interviewed. This was hailed as a top initiative providing citizens with opportunities to share their views and proposals on how the EU should evolve in the next decade. The interviewees noted that the dialogues are most credible on very precise topics (e.g. regions in transition) but lose that credibility on wider and generalist themes.

Two interviewees felt very strongly that the Cohesion Alliance was an excellent initiative of the CoR as well, federating regions around a lobby document which resulted in a tangible deliverable to the European Commission. Also, other interviewees who mentioned that the CoR had communicated well on this initiative and successfully engaged participants. To a lesser extent, wider alliances such as the Covenant of Mayors were also noted as impactful and engaging for organisations.

Four interviewees noted they had completed a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and it was deemed particularly successful. Other notable examples from the CoR’s communication portfolio cited during the interviews were its newsletter, press releases, social media accounts and website.

An important aspect, mentioned by stakeholders when ranking communication tools and methods, was their respective suitability to the heterogenous target groups of the CoR reflected in the dichotomy of social media and traditional communication methods (TV, printed materials). In this view, the CoR was considered as being somewhat successful in drawing from a broad range of tools and methods to fit the various needs of its stakeholders.

“The European Week of Cities and Regions is an extremely successful event for key stakeholders of regional policy.”
“I have been impressed with the smooth running of EuroPCom, a well-functioning sleek initiative in European public communication.”

Member of a European Association in the field of Communication

“As (most) EU citizens do not easily distinguish between the EU institutions, it is helpful when they come together to coordinate their communication efforts and relay a joint message about the EU and its activities.”
EU institution staff member
Priority target group(s) of the CoR’s communication activities

The interviewees shared their views on the balance the CoR should seek to achieve in targeting stakeholders in the EU institutions and others on the local / regional level through its communication activities.

Interviewed stakeholders mentioned different levels of communication:

- With the EU institutions, a permanent dialogue should be kept getting to know in advance possible issues affecting the development of European regions and municipalities and putting forward their interests and expectations.
- With the regions and municipalities, the CoR should seek to explore their challenges and opportunities, to provide advice and to offer networking possibilities.
- With the associations, the CoR should strive to coordinate joint actions, avoid overlapping and promote more efficient acting in the field (in regions and cities).

It was noted that both top-down and bottom-up approaches are necessary to strike a balance. The top-down approach should focus on communication about regions, municipalities and local institutions, arguably the best way to connect with citizens. The bottom-down approach is needed to promote local views in the EU institutions. While the CoR applies both approaches in its activities to a certain extent, stakeholders considered that there is still room for more efforts and improvements.

Two contrasting views were prevalent among interviewees. On one side, stakeholders considered that the CoR should communicate equally towards EU institutions and local / regional stakeholders. Depending on topics, the CoR should address a variety of stakeholders via targeted communication to specialised audiences and more accessible messaging for the citizens, the regional stakeholders, associations etc. On the other side, some interviewees thought that CoR fails to reach the citizens (mostly because its communication is considered too specialised) and thus should aim to simplify their activities and make them more accessible and understandable to the broader public. In this view, it was considered that the CoR needs to make a choice on the primary target audience – EU institutions / Brussels stakeholders or local / regional stakeholders – as this would give a more robust framework to their Communication Strategy. In this regard, the prevalent view among interviewees was that CoR is focusing too much on Brussels and not enough on the regions and general public.

“The true added value of the CoR’s communication would be not to cater to the Brussels EU audience but to bring its voice outside of Brussels where it has a much better chance of impact, a field of activity which is less contested and a vacuum of EU institutional voices.”

Representative in a regional office of a Member State in Brussels
The interviewees outlined a broad range of communication priorities that the CoR should focus on in the period of 2020-2025, synthesised as follows:

- **On the CoR’s role**: Embrace the role of a relay between the EU political landscape and local / regional stakeholders (bringing up the voice of the European regions and cities in Brussels; better highlighting its own role as a bridge between citizens and EU);
- **On key topics for communication**: Communicate on relevant topics, such as the new political priorities of the European Commission and how they affect the local / regional level, social inclusion (incl. young generation) at local / regional level, environment and sustainability (incl. green growth and smart cities) and cross-border cooperation between regions and cities;
- **On media relations**: engage with local / regional media to better relay its messaging and ensure its uptake, notably by creating a network with the regional media, in a strategic move to connect regional media with the EU but also strengthening its ties with major media outlets in Brussels (EurActiv, Politico);
- **On communication with citizens**: Focus its communication (at least in part) towards the citizens, leveraging its unique position, in a bid to break stereotypes on eurocracy, inform on the added value and role of CoR and other EU institutions and promote cohesion policy to citizens; and
- **On participation in events**: Meaningfully participate in the Conference on the future of Europe, by providing input as a key institution involved in the legislative process and communicating about this paramount event.

The interviewees were also invited to express their opinion on the key challenges facing the CoR’s communication in the period of 2020-2025, which are summarised below.

- **Achieving better visibility for itself** and stand out from the mass of other European communicators, especially the three institutional behemoths (Council of the EU, European Parliament and European Commission) which are “professionals” of public communication;
- **Communicating positively about Europe** in order to contribute to addressing rampant Euro-scepticism and the repercussions of Brexit;
- **Succeeding in its mission to bring Europe closer to its citizens** by explaining the EU institutions and how they work in accessible terms; and
- **Coping with budgetary and structural challenges** in communication, such as new forms of communication and especially how to reach out to newer or younger audiences.
Most promising inter-institutional communication activities

According to the interviewees, the most promising inter-institutional communication activities were the following (in order of frequency of citation):

- **EuroPCom** – cited by a significant proportion of interviewees across all stakeholder groups and arguably the flagship activity of the CoR, because of its success year after year;
- **Cooperation with the European Parliament and MEPs** – as a way of maximising the use of existing resources in the field and present a united front to the general public;
- **Citizens’ Dialogues** jointly organised with DG for Communication of the European Commission – arguably the most successful initiative engaging citizens with the institutions and a stellar example of inter-institutional cooperation; and
- **European Week of Regions and Cities** – a reliable networking forum for the cities and regions among the EU political landscape, a vitrine to showcase Europe’s regional diversity and an occasion to share best practices at local / regional level.

Synthesis of suggestions for improvement

The interviewees made numerous **recommendations and suggestions for improvement** for the future of the CoR’s Communication Strategy and activities.

The main aspects are summarised below.

- **Maximise institutional synergies.** A key element highlighted by stakeholders were the opportunities for closer cooperation with other EU institutions, especially with DGs for Communication and Regional and Urban Policy of the European Commission and the European Parliament. As (most) EU citizens do not easily distinguish between the institutions, it is helpful when they come together to coordinate their communication efforts and relay a joint message about the EU and its activities. Concrete ways to reinforce this cooperation which were suggested included joint activities “in the field” (with the MEPs, with the European Commission (Citizens’ Dialogues)) and making better use of in-country representations of the EU, Europe Direct Information Centres and European agencies and networks.

- **Define clear roles in the implementation of the Communication Strategy.** This is especially important for the Members of the CoR whose potential as multipliers is not fully exploited.

- **Enhance its communication focus on the local / regional level.** The CoR should endeavour to bring up best practices from local and regional level which could be disseminated among Members of the CoR and scaled up across the EU. The CoR should provide a systematic relay between the EU and local / regional authorities / cities and also create fora to exchange about what works or not at local / regional levels. The CoR should continue creating fora to facilitate the exchange between regions and institutions.
- **Refine its communication portfolio.** Concrete suggestions included “a generational renewal” (focus on paperless communication and using an appropriate approach to social media) and revamping / maximising the added value of the CoR’s website (for instance by granting national delegations a designated space on the website to upload their own information, which would help popularise the CoR and enhance the linkages with local / regional authorities and stakeholders).

- **Better tailor its approach to communication to its target audiences.** For instance, by simplifying the language in the context of activities geared towards local / regional stakeholders and citizens and by considering more thematic communications for its specialised audiences (bespoke direct communication, thematic in-depth analysis on key topics for the EU’s regions and cities in targeted newsletters).
Annex B: Online survey report

This Chapter presents the findings of online survey of stakeholders.

Introduction

Background

The online survey, planned and promoted by the CoR, was launched on 9 September 2019 and closed on 11 October 2019. It was aimed at more than 1,000 stakeholders who represent the main target groups of the CoR’s communication activities and generated 351 responses representing a response ratio of just over a third of the intended target group. The final data set was relayed to the evaluation team together with raw data sets from the baseline and mid-term surveys. The detailed analysis of the responses to the survey questions (17 in total), including a qualitative analysis of two open-ended questions and multiple-choice options, is presented below.

Methodology

As a first step, we performed a data check and cleaning operation, comparing the frequencies and percentages presented in the PDF with the raw data. We noticed only minor inconsistencies between the processed and raw data, pertaining mainly to frequencies of ‘other’ category responses in multiple-choice questions. We also cleaned the data from incomplete results and answers not responding to questions asked, which in several cases resulted in a reduction of valid open-ended responses.

The mix of respondents to the survey represented the stakeholders of the CoR’s communications activities and Strategy relatively well, both in terms of their frequency of interaction with CoR-related issues and their professional background. In this view, we decided not to apply any weighing techniques so as not to distort the validity of the answers.

The questions were clustered and analysed in five main sections: (i) profiling of respondents; (ii) respondents’ perceptions of the CoR’s role and core task; (iii) respondents’ perceptions of the CoR’s communication strategy; (iv) respondents’ assessment of the CoR’s communication channels and (v) respondents’ views on the future of the CoR’s communication and suggestions for improvement of the communication strategy and tools.

Where relevant, we compared the survey data with the baseline and mid-term survey results to present the evolution of responses over time. Comparisons were also made among different sub-groups of respondents, including representatives of EU institutions and local / regional authorities.
Profile of respondents

Respondents’ gender

The ratio of female to male respondents was 52% to 48%, with 16 more females responding to the survey (Figure 1).

Professional categories and areas of responsibility

As shown in Figure 2, respondents were asked to identify themselves according to 10 professional categories, spanning a range of EU and research institutions, private companies and media outlets. As shown in the figure below, the highest percentage (31%) identified themselves as local/regional authorities, followed by associations, networks or NGOs (14%), EU institutions (14%), and private companies (11%). Fewer respondents reported working in academia (at a university or research institute, 7%), national authority (5%), media (4%), regional office in Brussels (4%) and the CoR (2%). Non-categorised respondents constituted 8% of the sample, including retired professionals, officers, members of political parties or unemployed, working for an EU-funded programme, a communications agency and a regional hub, entrepreneurs, translators or other professionals. There were some respondents who did not provide information to define their professional category.

As can be observed in Table 1 overleaf, the number and profile of respondents to the 2019 survey is relatively similar to the mid-term evaluation survey carried out in 2017, with slight variations, including higher proportions of representatives of EU institutions and of local and regional authorities in the 2019 survey, and lower percentages of representatives from the Committee of the Regions, media and universities and research institutes in comparison to the mid-term survey implemented in 2017. It should be noted however that the baseline survey from 2015 reflected a larger sample size than the mid-term and final surveys, as well
as higher proportions of representatives from local or regional authorities and from associations, networks and NGOs.

Table 1: Summary statistics of stakeholder surveys 2015 – 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target group</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2019</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Number of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>respondents</td>
<td></td>
<td>respondents</td>
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<td>Local or regional authority</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>533</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>369</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3** shows a breakdown of respondents’ principal area of responsibility. About a quarter of respondents reported working in EU affairs (26%), and a slightly lower percentage confirmed working in communications (25%). Just over 18% confirmed working in local/regional development, 12% in general public administration, followed by 10% of respondents who reported working in politics. Nine percent of respondents selected ‘other’ categories, including researchers, project managers, students, retired, teachers, controllers, officers, journalists, investors, software administrators and other professional groups. A few respondents did not provide sufficient information to identify their area of professional responsibility.
Job functions

As shown in Figure 4, respondents identified themselves primarily as managers (35%), followed by policy officers (25%), assistants (16%) and elected politicians (7%). Slightly less than one-fifth of respondents (17%) confirmed working in “other” job functions, including consultants/experts, officers, communications professionals or experts, institutional heads of units/presidents/vice presidents, journalists, academics, EU affairs professionals, project managers, students, researchers, data analysts and retired professionals.

Nationality and place of work

As shown in Figure 5 nearly two-thirds of respondents (62%) confirmed working outside Brussels, with the remaining 38% working in Brussels.

As reflected in Figure 6 below, respondents from nearly all EU Member States were represented in the sample, with the exception of Slovakia. At total survey respondents represented all EU Member States (with the exception of Slovakia), with respondents from Italy (17%) were the first minority, followed by respondents from Spain (11%), Germany (11%), France (10%), Belgium (9%) and Greece (5%). Non-EU respondents represented 3% of the survey sample.
Assessment of the CoR’s communication channels

Frequency of interaction with CoR-related issues

When consulted about the frequency with which respondents dealt with issues related to the CoR in their professional lives, nearly four in every ten respondents (38%) confirmed dealing with CoR-related issues either on a daily (15%) or weekly (23%) basis. Slightly more than one-quarter of respondents (26%) confirmed dealing with CoR-related issues a couple of times a month, and a similar number (28%) confirmed dealing with such issues a few times per year. Fewer respondents (8%) stated they never dealt with issues related to the CoR. As reflected in Figure 7, local / regional authorities were more likely than representatives of EU institutions to deal with issues related to the CoR on a more frequent basis.

![Figure 7: Q4: In your professional life, how often are you dealing with issues related to the CoR? (n=351)](chart)

Most frequently used information channels about the EU

Respondents were asked to select the information channels they use most frequently to inform themselves about the EU from a list of options (multiple answers were possible for this question). As shown in Figure 8 overleaf, websites of EU institutions were selected as the most frequently used channels on EU topics (78%), followed by EU specialised media (63%), conferences and events (60%), social media (58%), national media (56%), and publications of EU institutions (55%).

Other sources of information about the EU cited by respondents included newsletters sent out by the Commission’s Directorates-General and Brussels-based representations, information from professional networks and colleagues, international media outlets (such as...
the BBC and the EU Observer) and other channels (such as libraries, academic journals, bilateral meetings, educational institutes).

**Figure 8: Q5: What information channels do you regularly use to get information about the European Union (multiple answers possible)? (in percentage points)**

[Bar chart showing the most frequently used information channels about the CoR]

**Most frequently used information channels about the CoR**

Survey respondents were also asked to select the information channels they use most frequently to inform themselves about the European Committee of the Regions from a list of options (multiple answers were possible for this question). As shown in **Figure 9**, the CoR website is the main source of information (65%), followed by e-newsletters disseminated by the CoR (52%). Conferences and events organised by the CoR were mentioned in the third place (44%), followed closely by social media (40%). Personal contact with CoR members and/or CoR staff (35%) were also selected as popular information channels, followed by CoR publications and graphic support (32%), EU and other specialised media (29%). Fewer respondents mentioned national or regional media (18%) and visits to the CoR (15%).

**Figure 9: Q6: What information channels do you regularly use to get information about the CoR (multiple answers possible)? (in percentage points)**
Individual assessment of selected CoR communication channels

Survey respondents were asked to evaluate the main communications channels of the CoR on a scale of 5 to 1, with ‘5’ meaning excellent and ‘1’ meaning poor. As shown in Table 2, conferences and events received the highest average weighted score in the 2019 survey (3.5), followed by personal contacts with CoR members or staff (3.3), and the CoR website (3.3). CoR publications and graphic support (3.2) and CoR e-newsletters (3.2) were assessed slightly less positively. Visits to the CoR (3.1) and social media (3.1) were the channels that received the lowest average weighted scores.

When assessed against the mid-term and baseline surveys, weighted average scores have registered a decrease over time, with the most significant differences identified in relation to face-to-face channels, including personal contacts with CoR members or staff (from 4.2 in 2015 to 3.3 in 2019) and visits to CoR (from 3.8 in 2015 to 3.1 in 2019). The channels which registered the lowest declines were the CoR website (from 3.7 in 2015 to 3.3 in 2019), and social media (from 3.5 in 2015 to 3.1 in 2019). Conferences and events organised by the CoR have remained as one of the best rated channels over time, including second best-rated in 2015 and first best-rated in 2017 and 2019.

Table 2: Q7: How do you evaluate the information channels of the CoR? (1=poor, 5= excellent) Comparison with mid-term and baseline evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Average weighted scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferences and events</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal contacts with CoR members or staff</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoR website</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoR publications and graphic support</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoR e-newsletters</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits to CoR</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When analysed responses by sub-groups, representatives from EU institutions in the 2019 survey were more likely to evaluate CoR conferences and events and personal contacts with CoR members of staff more positively than average respondents. Local and regional authorities on the other hand were more likely to evaluate CoR publications and graphic support, as well as CoR e-newsletters on a more positive note than respondents in other groups. Relatively similar patterns across sub-groups were observed in the 2017 survey, though with slight variations, with representatives of EU institutions more likely than other respondent groups to more positively assess personal contacts with CoR members or staff, and local / regional authorities more likely to better evaluate visits to the CoR (see Figure 10 overleaf).
Respondents were also asked to provide their views on which information channels they considered would be most useful for getting information about the CoR in the future and worth being further developed (Figure 11 overleaf) (multiple answers were possible for this question). The CoR website was considered by more than six in every ten respondents to the 2019 survey (61%) as the most useful channel for further development in the future. CoR e-newsletters (52%), CoR social media (50%), and CoR conferences and events (48%) followed next. Fewer respondents considered the need to prioritise the further development of personal contacts with CoR members or staff (34%), CoR publications and graphic support (29%) and visits to the CoR (23%).

The 2017 mid-term survey reflected very similar response patterns to 2019 findings. However, differences were more evident against the baseline survey results, where respondents were more likely to consider face-to-face channels (such as personal contacts with CoR members or staff) as useful ways of getting information about the CoR, and less likely to perceive social media as a useful channel worth further being further developed in the future.
Open responses to this question in the 2019 survey also recommended that the CoR should consider developing its use of national and regional media, as well as more traditional communication means (e.g. newspapers, radio and TV). European institutional channels such as Europe Direct, the European Parliamentary Research Service and EU media in general were also cited. Other responses suggested that the CoR should organise regular meetings with the Brussels-based representation offices of European cities and regions or that the CoR should create a dedicated online platform where questions on issues of interest at the local level and specific to each Member State could be raised.

Perception of the CoR’s actual and expected role

Views on the “actual” role of the CoR

The questionnaire included questions to gauge stakeholders’ perceptions of the current role of the CoR. Respondents were asked to rate these roles on a scale of 5 to 1, with ‘5’ being ‘fully agree’ and ‘1’ being ‘fully disagree’. Based on the survey results, respondents were most in agreement that the CoR is creating platforms for (international) meetings, conferences, exchange and cooperation (3.7 weighted average score, as reflected in Figure 12 overleaf). The scores for this role of the CoR have remained stable compared to 2015 and 2017.
Less respondents agreed that the CoR is bringing EU policies and institutions closer to the local and regional level, or that the CoR is a fully-fledged European institution (3.5 weighted average score for both statements, as reflected in Figure 12 below). While the scores have remained unchanged since the 2015 mid-term survey, there was a positive change of 0.4 points from the baseline survey (previously highlighted in the 2017 survey report) in relation to the CoR being perceived as a fully-fledged European institution. In terms of differences across sub-groups of respondents in the 2019 survey, it is interesting to note that respondents from EU institutions were more likely to agree that the CoR is bringing EU policies and institutions closer to the local and regional level than respondents representing local / regional authorities. Most notably, those representing EU institutions were significantly less likely to agree that the CoR is a fully-fledged European institution than local and regional authorities who responded to the survey. This difference was observed as a trend across all three surveys. Respondents were least in agreement that the CoR is influencing EU law-making from a local / regional perspective. With a weighted average score of 3.4 points in the 2019 survey, perceptions remained unchanged from the mid-term survey, but registered an increase of 0.3 points from the baseline survey in 2015. Local and regional authorities were more likely to agree with this statement than representatives of EU institutions, a difference that was visible across all three surveys.

Figure 12: Q9: How do you see the actual role of the European Committee of the Regions? (1= fully disagree; 5= fully agree)
Nine open responses were submitted presenting alternative views provided of respondents on the actual role of the CoR. These included the following statements:

- The CoR “[should strive to] go beyond its elected Members and interact with all EU and regional stakeholders”.
- The CoR “[should act] as a medium/magnifier of information to local/regional media”;
- The CoR “[should aim to provide] an alternative narrative on the role and objectives of the EU”; and
- The CoR “[should be] more active in promoting local activities in EU institutions”.

**Views on the “expected” role of the CoR**

When asked to consider what role the CoR should take in the future, respondents were most in agreement that the CoR should focus on bringing EU policies and institutions closer to the local and regional level (4.2 weighted average score, as shown in Figure 13 overleaf). The scores for this role of the CoR have slightly decreased when compared to 2015 and 2017 results.

In second place, survey respondents believed the CoR should focus on influencing EU-law making from a local / regional perspective, with a weighted average score of 4.1 points in the 2019 survey. The average registered a decrease of 0.2 points in comparison to 2017 and 2015 averages.

Respondents were slightly less in agreement that the CoR’s role in the future should be to create platforms for (international) meetings, conferences, exchange and cooperation. The scores for this expected role of the CoR have remained stable compared to 2015 and 2017.

Representatives of local / regional authorities who responded to the 2019 survey were more likely to support all three statements more than stakeholders representing EU institutions. Interestingly, both local and regional authorities and stakeholders working in EU institutions were most supportive of seeing the Committee of the Regions influencing EU-law making from a local / regional perspective, and least supportive of bringing EU policies and institutions closer to the local and regional level.

Twenty-one respondents provided suggestions of alternative core tasks for the CoR in their open responses. Among the suggestions provided, respondents recommended that the CoR should:

- be an active member of the EU decision-making process,
- ensure gender parity in the EU,
- take part in controlling the regional funds,
- be the face of all regional organisations within the EU,
- identify regional or local risks derived from the application of EU law.
**Figure 13: Q10: What should be the core task of the European Committee of the Regions? (1= fully disagree; 5= fully agree)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All respondents</th>
<th>EU Institutions</th>
<th>Local/regional authorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To bring EU policies and institutions closer to the regional and local level</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To influence EU law-making from a local/regional perspective</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To create platforms for (international) meetings, conferences, exchange and cooperation</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Perceptions of the CoR’s Communication Strategy**

**Assessment of the impact of the CoR’s communication in general**

Respondents were asked to assess the impact of the CoR’s communication in general on a scale of 5 to 1, with ‘5’ being ‘excellent’ and ‘1’ being ‘poor’. As reflected in Figure 14 overleaf, respondents evaluated the CoR’s communication better than average, with a weighted average score of 3.1 out of 5. The average for 2019 is just below the value obtained in the 2017 mid-term survey (3.2). When assessed by sub-groups, respondents working at associations, networks and NGOs evaluated the impact of the CoR’s communication more positively (3.5) than local / regional authorities (3.1) and representatives of EU institutions (2.9).

Responses were also assessed against levels of awareness of CoR communication campaigns. The impact of CoR communication was considered significantly more positive among respondents who confirmed being aware of CoR communication (3.4) than among respondents who were not aware of CoR communication campaigns (2.7).
Differences across sub-groups followed similar patterns in the 2017 survey, with associations, networks and NGOs and those aware of CoR communication campaigns evaluating the impact of CoR communication more positively than respondents in other groups.

**Figure 14: Q1: How do you assess the impact of the CoR communication in general? (1=poor, 5= excellent)**

**Awareness of the CoR’s communication campaigns**

As shown in **Figure 15** overleaf, 56% of respondents to the 2019 survey indicated that they were aware of the CoR's communication campaigns. Interestingly, when compared to 2017 responses, the overall level of awareness of CoR communication campaigns reflected an increase of 7 percentage points. Levels of awareness were higher among local / regional authorities (57%) than among EU institutions (52%), and associations, networks and NGOs (52%). The most significant increase in awareness levels between 2017 and 2019 was registered at the level of local / regional authorities, from 42% in 2017 to 57% in 2019. Representatives of EU institutions also confirmed an important increase in levels of awareness, from 44% in 2017 to 52% in 2019. Awareness levels remained stable among representatives of associations, networks and NGOs, with a slight increase of one percentage point (from 51% in 2017, to 52% in 2019).
Views on the future of the CoR’s communication and suggestions for improvement

Challenges and priorities for the CoR’s communication between 2020-2024

188 of the 351 respondents to the survey provided their comments to an open question about the challenges and priorities they foresee for CoR communication between 2020 and 2024. The answers to this question are illustrated in the word cloud in Figure 16 below.

Figure 16: Word cloud reflecting responses on challenges and priorities for the CoR’s communication (based on 188 survey responses)
In word clouds, the size of a word reflects the frequency with which it comes up in the responses provided. It is visible that the words “citizens” and “local” appear most frequently, which seems to confirm the suggestion to more actively address the general public.

While the question did not make a distinction between the challenges and priorities, leading to some confusion, we attempted to categorise respondents’ answers in order to facilitate the synthesis of stakeholder views and identify any trends. We devised the following categories: (i) topics of communication, (ii) communication activities, (iii) target groups and (iv) empowering regions.

About one third of those who provided comments to this question (62 respondents) mentioned concrete topics of communication, considered as a priority for the CoR, including in particular sustainability, environmental issues and climate change (16 comments) and cohesion policy, EU funds and programmes and their impact on regions (13 comments).

About one fifth of those who provided comments (36 respondents) referred to communication activities. The responses were very diverse, and no broad trends could be identified, however the theme most frequently cited in the responses was social media, either as a challenge or a priority (10 comments).

A similar proportion of respondents providing comments on challenges and priorities (37 respondents) referred to the target audiences of CoR communication. The most common recommendation was to broaden the audience with the aim of targeting EU citizens (or “the general public”) directly. Verbatims of such comments included: “be closer to citizens”, “address real people”, “reach beyond the bubble”. Six respondents mentioned the need to target youth (“More activities for youth, in schools and universities”). Civil society groups, such as think tanks, were also mentioned as a priority group by a few respondents.

Finally, 8 responses related to empowering the regions (“ensuring that the voice of local and regional stakeholders is listened to”, “communicating regional perspectives on EU policies to other EU institutions”).

Suggestions for improvement of the Communication Strategy and activities of the CoR

81 out of 351 respondents provided their suggestions in terms of how to improve the Communication Strategy and activities of the CoR.