Better Communication for Cohesion Policy
(report for Committee of the Regions)

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Europe has to become the most cohesive area in the world.

Cohesion policy is the main European investment tool to achieve the EU Treaty objective of economic, social and territorial cohesion.

Better communicating Cohesion policy projects is very important as it can also affect citizens' perceptions of the EU and raise awareness on the positive impact the EU has on the everyday lives of people.
Main considerations of the report

• **Communication is neither PR, nor propaganda.** We need engagement and involvement of messengers. Communication is 2 ways: to the citizens and from the citizens. We have to accept criticism and explain the benefits of our projects.

• Communication should be an **integral part of policy-making** and implementation. It has to be done in all phases of the projects: designing, preparing and implementing.

• **Awareness of local EU-funded projects** amongst beneficiaries and civil society is crucial, despite different funding amounts in specific regions.

• The **multi-level governance** model and the **partnership principle**, both based on enhanced coordination among public authorities, economic partners and civil society, can **contribute to a more efficient communication** of EU policy objectives and results.
Background of the report

Why do we need a better communication for Cohesion Policy?
Awareness of EU funded projects is variable across the Europe. This depends on factors such as:

- **intensity of EU support** (higher visibility in regions with large allocations),
- **ease of publicity (kind of projects)** depending on the purpose of the investment (e.g. visible infrastructure vs human resources training),
- **intensity and reach** of communication activities.

Figure on the right: Awareness of EU funded projects. Eurobarometer, 2017
Impact

• only 40% of EU citizens heard about EU co-financed projects in the area in which they live.

• people who have heard about these projects say that the impact on the development of their regions has been positive (81%).
Sources

- European cohesion policies are still poorly communicated and information sources tend to be less diversified.

- Eurobarometers show that television remains the most common source of passive news about the EU.

- Active search for information is increasing through digital communication.

Figure on the left: Sources of information about EU co-financed projects (% of participants, multiple answers possible), Eurobarometer, 2019
56% of the respondents in the last Eurobarometer think that decisions should be taken at subnational levels, with close to a third (31%) opting for the regional level and a quarter (25%) favouring the local level, whereas almost one in five think that these decisions should be taken at a European level.
Visibility Challenge

Photo above: Renewed healthcare complex in Cugir, Romania
Local leaders – trusted messengers

• The importance of trust in the messenger is at least as important as the message. And public trust in local and regional authorities is higher than in national governments or the EU. Regional and local politicians, mayors and local personalities have a decisive role to play.

• There is a need to target wider audiences – the whole local community, and not only stakeholders. This has to resonate with the people, it has to be about storytelling, showing that the EU is impacting local citizens.

• CoR Members as "ambassadors of Europe in the regions, cities and municipalities" should set an example.
Tackle euroscepticism

• Increasing the visibility of ESI Funds can contribute to improving perceptions about the European Union and to regaining citizens’ confidence in the European policies.

• Increase of Euroscepticism and political parties that oppose further EU integration is also linked to the perception of the economic, social and territorial inequalities. Cohesion policy is a powerful tool to promote "territorial resilience" as part of the solution in terms of policy responses.

• Communication activities of the positive impacts on the territories and citizens' lives have become fundamental.
Constant dialogue with citizens

- New Cohesion policy legislative package: proposal to create national communication officers to manage in an integrated manner the visibility activities related to the regional ERDF, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, as well as on the Asylum and Migration Fund and the Border Management and the Security Fund. In the same sense, best use should be made of other future EU programmes with local visibility such as Horizon Europe, InvestEU etc. as well as the Europe Direct Information Centres.

- Introducing an "open programming approach" for real dialogue with citizens in designing interventions co-funded by Cohesion Policy in all stages of preparation, implementation or evaluation of operational programmes, including recommendations for Member States to involve local authorities in all phases.

- Uptake of democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting and deliberation (juries, panels and polls) in order to give local people a say and thus drastically changing the way citizens engage in the communication mechanism.
Media Strategy
Focus on alternative and social media

• Designing social media strategies should include references to **local frames**, such as to enhance positive frames, build longer-term narratives linked to individual stories, actively challenge - rather than ignore - negative frames.

• Increase the impact of communicating Cohesion policy is to further **diversify the communication actions** and to upgrade the media activities to the needs of today’s end-user.

• Increase of social media actions in order to enlarge the support of Cohesion policy, following the model of the #Cohesionalliance campaign which has so far been able to connect people and entities with a particular political common cause in order to bring EU co-funded projects closer to their daily lives.
The current European Week of Regions and Cities is the key political event on the implementation of Cohesion policy, which allows political representatives, practitioners, researchers and people to learn, exchange of ideas, influence the EU and voice a particular view of the regional and urban policies.
Post-2020

Quick ideas for communicating Cohesion Policy in the next period, 2021-2027
Body of research

Take account when drafting strategies for the period 2021-2027 of evidence from research carried out on the effectiveness of cohesion policy communication through EU-funded projects such as “Cohesify” and “Perceive” and to make a reference to the “geography of discontent”, which has emerged in the context of populist debates about then European project.
Simplification of communication
for EU-funded projects

• **single "EU" branding** (no reference to ESI Fund or programme level);
• **single national website** providing access to information on all EU programmes and funds;
• special visibility for the operation of strategic importance and **operations above €10 Million**;
• **national communication coordinators** to oversee all EU funds and the important role for programme communication officers;
• **communication strategy** (in a lighter version) **included** in the content of the programme;
• managing authorities can apply **financial corrections** (up to 5%) to beneficiaries noncompliant with communication rules;
• **re-use of communication materials** - managing authorities will have to retain the rights to re-use the communication materials produced and make available to EU institutions (upon request).
Elastic branding and visibility strategies:
an **EU flag** should be ubiquitous in all mandatory or informal materials.
Thank you!

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