The Communication Policy in Support for Effective EU Cohesion Policy. The Case of Romania

by

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Abstract. This paper focuses on effectiveness of the communication policies as tools for ensuring the visibility of the EU cohesion policy. Since the cohesion policy accounts for almost 1/3 of the EU budget resources, member states are asked to provide increased visibility and public awareness of the contribution of the EU budget to the regional economic and social development, employment and competitiveness. The article analyzes the performances of the communication policies about cohesion policy implemented by Romanian authorities, measured in terms of visibility and public awareness. Based on the 2007-2013 experience, for 2014-2020 programming period, it is important for Romanian authorities to integrate the lessons learnt to increase the effectiveness of their communication policy on cohesion policy. Also, it is recommended for Romanian authorities not to neglect the positive contribution that communication policy may have on supporting efficient use of EU funding and absorption rate.

Key words: EU Cohesion Policy, Communication Policy, EU Funds Visibility, EU Funds Public Awareness, Absorption Rate.
JEL Classification: A10

1 Introduction

What is the EU cohesion policy about?
EU cohesion policy is a policy of a particular nature which was traditionally considered to be a supranational, redistributive and compensatory policy.
The compensation function of the cohesion policy becomes visible starting with UK accession. Since then, the EU cohesion policy was ”primarily concerned with meeting compensatory demands articulated from real or prospective losers of the integration process and the most important integration moves in the history of the EU would not have been possible without side-payments to opponents or adversely affected groups” (Eiselt Isabella, 2009). The compensation aim of the cohesion policy is visible both in case of southern and eastern enlargement of the EU, as well as in case of the processes deepening integration. According to some authors (Allen, 2000)”the economic and monetary union was expected to have failed from both political and economic perspectives without side payments and investments in economically lagging member states and regions”. From this perspective it is likely to consider that the cohesion spending is aimed at allocating of the economic benefits among member states and compensating the economic losses triggered by the processes of enlarging and deepening European integration.
Provisions about the redistributive function of the EU cohesion policy are included in all EU Treaties; initially, references about supranational redistributive measures for balanced development of the regions are to be found in the Rome Treaties under the heading of investment and financial aid, while after 1992 (Treaty of Maastricht) references are to be found in distinctive heading dealing with economic and social cohesion. Present cohesion policy may be considered ”a set of specific funds and Community initiatives redistributing financial resources partly collected from the member states and partly gained from the Union’s so-called traditional own resources through the EU budget” (Eiselt Isabella, 2009). Resources for funding the cohesion policy are made available from EU budget and the decision about financial allocation for member states and regions is made by supranational institutions; this is conferring a supranational dimension to the cohesion policy.
Since 1993, the view on cohesion policy gradually moved form a solidarity policy towards a policy supporting balanced economic development, economic gains and competitiveness for regions of the member states. Since 1993, the EU Commission introduced the programmatic approach – EU cohesion funds are allocated on 7 year programmatic periods for specific development objectives of EU regions. The focus on balanced economic development and reducing development disparities represented a key element of the 1993 reform. Still the compensation and redistributive functions of the cohesion policy subsisted since it preserves “the policy objective that economically weaker member states should profit more from cohesion money than affluent ones” (Isabella Eiselt, 2009). The transformation of the EU cohesion policy into a support and investment policy for regional economic competitiveness is visible, in particular, starting with 2007 – 2013 programming period. This represent, at some extent, a substantial reform of cohesion policy so that to reflect more efficiency and competitiveness based objectives and principles. For 2007 -2013 period, there were 3 objectives to be addressed by the cohesion policy – Convergence (reducing development disparities), Regional Competitiveness and Employment (promoting economic competitiveness) and European Territorial Cooperation (promoting trans-European cooperation to develop and implement best solution to common challenges). For 2014 -2020 period, there were defined only 2 objectives - Investments for development and jobs (focusing on supporting balanced development and increased competitiveness for all regions) and European Territorial Cooperation. During current recent programming periods (2007-2013 and 2014 -2020), it could be noticed a shift in the cohesion policy towards projects delivering gains in economic efficiency and competitiveness at regional level. It means that the efficiency and the “value for money” principles will be guiding all projects funded under cohesion policy. During 2007-2013 and 2014 – 2020 programming periods, the EU approach promoted is that the cohesion policy should strongly connect the EU long term development and competitiveness strategies and objectives with the traditional cohesion policy objective of reducing economic disparities and reducing regional development gaps. For 2014 – 2020, the cohesion policy is substantially linked to the EU development and competitiveness strategies. Thus, the cohesion policy will fund projects addressing 11 thematic objectives targeting Europe 2020 Strategy competitiveness and quality employment objectives. Even more, currently, the cohesion policy is labeled as “the most important investment policy of the EU” by European Commission. Consequently, even most of the available funding is addressing the faster development needs of the regions lagging development, this financial support is no longer perceived as an ”aid”, but rather as an ”investment” for faster growth and competitiveness. This approach involved an enrichment of the content of the cohesion policy which is reflected in an increased volume of financial resources in EU budget under Cohesion policy heading.

2 Discussions and results

The need for visibility and public awareness of the EU funding under cohesion policy

There is important volume of EU financial resources invested in the regions of the member states and substantial positive effects in terms of balanced regional development, quality employment and economic competitiveness are expected. At present, the EU cohesion policy is the most important spending item in the EU budget, with a total 347.7 bill EUR for 2007-2013 and 351.8 bill Euro for 2014-2020, representing almost 1/3 of the EU budget resources. This is one of the most important reasons for which the EU institutions are asking for increased visibility and public awareness of the contribution of the EU budget to the regional economic and social development, employment and competitiveness. Thus, all EU relevant legislation is regulating the information, publicity and communication rules and measures to be implemented by the project beneficiaries
and institutions managing programs funded under cohesion policy. All the information, publicity and communication measures have to increase the visibility of the EU funding and to make the public informed and aware about EU financial contribution to the welfare and regional competitiveness it creates through projects funded under cohesion policy. For addressing the specific objectives set up through EU regulations, the publicity and communication measures have to be implemented by both the managing authorities and the project beneficiaries. All information, publicity and communication measures are aimed to inform the public about the role played by EU and about the added value of the EU assistance for promoting the development and increased competitiveness in their regions; in this respect, the impact of the EU funding and project results should be considered as key elements of the messages delivered by authorities and project beneficiaries. The information, publicity and communication policy expected outcomes refer to a positive view of the European Union and to its added value to the regional development, welfare, employment and competitiveness. Also, the communication measures have to address transparency objectives, respectively to ensure that all potential beneficiaries of the EU funding have equal access to available funding and to ensure the public about the transparent and efficient use of the EU funding under cohesion policy. This objective should be addressed in their communication plans by managing authorities. From this perspective, the information, publicity and communication measures aimed to inform the potential project beneficiaries and other relevant organizations about the opportunities available for EU funding under cohesion programs. The communication policy expected outcomes refer to increased awareness about EU funding opportunities and to increased volume of quality funding application submitted as a prerequisite for generating and delivering quality regional relevant projects to support economic development, employment and competitiveness. The information, publicity and communication measures have to cover the entire project and cohesion programs cycles. The specific aims of the information, publicity and communication differ throughout the project/program cycle (Raines P, Taylor S, 2003): from ensuring visibility, accountability, transparency and making the public aware of the EU available funding to be used, towards increased visibility, information and increasing awareness of the public about the positive effects obtained in terms of regional growth and competitiveness. Depending on the phase of the project/programs cycles, the content of the message delivered is adjusted: in the first phases, the messages focuses on presenting the EU funding as a gain from the perspective of increasing available non-reimbursable assistance for regional development and expected outcomes, while in final phase the message emphasizes the actual and real results and positive contribution to the regional development, employment and competitiveness obtained from efficient use of the EU funding. Communication about successful projects and their positive results is very much specific in the last part of the project/program cycle, these “success stories” are proofs of the positive effects of the EU funding; these could be also used at the beginning of a new programming period as proofs of previous periods, as well as indirect incentives for new potential beneficiaries to apply to EU funded programs and to make efficient use of the existing opportunities. All communication policy measures have to be included in the Communication Plans of the managing authorities; these plans are monitored and progress is evaluated against indicators and objectives set up. At EU level, the effectiveness of the member states’ information, publicity and communication policies are surveyed and evaluated. Traditionally the effectiveness is measured by reference to public awareness about EU cohesion policy/projects funded/positive impact of the EU funding and results are presented in special issues of Euro Barometer.

Effectiveness of the information, publicity and communication policy about cohesion policy in Romania for 2007-2013 programming period. Main findings
During the 2007-2013 programming period, Romania first experienced, as EU member, the use of funding available under EU cohesion policy. As beneficiary of EU non-reimbursable assistance under cohesion budget headings, the Romanian managing authorities and project beneficiaries implemented specific measures to comply with information, publicity and communication requirements.

This article aims to analyze the effectiveness of information, publicity and communication policy of the managing authorities. The specific methodology consisted in surveying the communication measures implemented by managing authorities of the 7 operational programs under Convergence objective, during programming period 2007-2013, respectively analysis of the managing authorities’ websites and awareness campaigns. The analysis focuses in particular on the messages delivered by managing authorities and the adequacy of communication means to the target public. We assume that the messages and the means of communication are considered key factors for managing authorities for achieving the visibility, transparency and awareness objectives of the communication policy under cohesion policy. Thus, effectiveness of the communication policy will be assessed against the relevance of information delivered for the public, and will be measured in terms of the public awareness about EU funds.

The EU funds allocated to Romania under cohesion policy during the 2007-2013 programming period are significant, respectively around 19, 23 billion Eur. The financial allocation of structural funds in Romania addresses both the Convergence objective (7 Operational Programs - OP: Increasing Economic Competitiveness OP, Environment OP, Transport OP, Regional OP, Human Resource Development OP, Development of Administrative capacity OP, Technical Assistance OP and the European Territorial Cooperation objective (4 Operational Programs of European territorial cooperation of which funds will be managed jointly with other Member States).
public interventions in written and audio visual media (in particular, interviews and participation of management authorities’ representatives to debates about cohesion policy and structural funds) and information and publicity campaigns (in particular, audio and video advertorials about operational programs and their results). The websites of the surveyed managing authorities are targeting, in particular, potential beneficiaries and beneficiaries; most information available refers to: programming documents, calls for projects and applicants’ guidelines, recommendations, instructions and guidelines for project beneficiaries etc. As far as the general public is concerned, relevant content refer to reports about progress in contracting and absorbing EU funds (all managing authorities) and successful projects funded and implemented (e.g. Managing Authority for Human Resource Development Operational Program, Managing Authority for Regional Operational Program). There is only one managing authority, respectively Managing Authority for Human Resource Development Operational Program, of which web site contains a short film about European Social Fund and its contribution to the education, employment and social inclusion in European Union. Thus, one could conclude that the websites of the managing authorities are primarily concerned with promoting funding opportunities and delivering customized content to address information needs of particular target groups: operational program’ potential beneficiaries and beneficiaries; thus the communication policy implemented by managing authorities with websites support is rather targeting objective related to the visibility and transparent use of available funding under cohesion policy; this conclusion is also supported by the content analysis of these websites: posted information is presented in a very formal and specialized language which limits it’s the availability to the average common understanding of the general public. The visibility of the 2007-2013 EU cohesion policy, as well as the public awareness objectives were addressed by the surveyed managing authorities with specific mass communication tools. As mentioned in previous paragraphs, advertorials in mass media (both written and audio visual sectors) and public appearances of managing authorities officials in the media space (e.g. interviews, attendances to debates and specialized TV shows etc.) were the main tools used to communicate to the general public and to promote visibility of and public awareness about EU funding under cohesion policy. At the beginning of the programming period, the objective of these campaigns was to increase awareness of general public and potential beneficiaries about the availability of the EU funding under cohesion policy. Later, to this objective, additional aims related to increased awareness about funding opportunities available and to encourage potential beneficiaries to undertake the opportunity to use these financial resources to support regional development and employment. During the last part of the programming period, these campaigns aimed at increasing public awareness about actual contribution of the EU funding to the regional development, employment and competitiveness; the campaigns focused on presenting successful and relevant projects and on their results, emphasizing the benefits for citizens and communities. After surveying these campaigns, the authors of this articles, consider that the measures implemented by the Managing Authority of Regional Operational Programs as being the most efficient in ensuring visibility and public awareness; this managing authority is the only one which developed national campaigns with visual and audio media support for both informing the general public about funding opportunities – at the beginning of the programming period - and for informing the general public about the positive outcomes of the funded projects and how funding opportunities were efficiently exploited on the benefits for regions and communities. This good practice was not mainstreamed and was less preferred by other managing opportunities. Increased visibility of the EU funding is also the outcome of the information and publicity measures implemented by project beneficiaries, in particular the obligation to display EU funds visual logos and references to the EU co-funding of their project on all materials, according to the publicity and
visual identity rules to be followed. Beneficiaries’ measures to disseminate information about the projects and project results contributed not only to the visibility but to increased public awareness about the EU funding and impact on regional development and employment.

The Euro barometer surveys (European Commission, December 2013 and October 2010) reveals that Romania did not score the best in terms of visibility and public awareness. In 2013, only 46% of the Romanian population had heard about any EU funded project in the region it lived; the awareness rate is higher than EU average of 34% (lower due to the lower awareness rates recorded in developed member states which received very limited support) but far lower than awareness rates recorded in other New member states from Eastern and Central Europe – 80% in Poland, 67% in Lithuania and Czech republic, 65% in Latvia and Slovakia, 62% in Hungary and Bulgaria or 48% in Italy. The public awareness about EU funding In Romania severely declined in 2013 as compared to the 2010 (first survey of public awareness about EU funding conducted by the European Commission during the period 2007-2013); in fact Romania recorded the most severe decline of the public awareness among EU-27. The downshift was of 18 pp: the public awareness about EU funding and EU funded projects declined from 64% in 2010 to 46% in 2013, unlike Bulgaria which recorded an increase by 18pp, Italy – an increase by 15pp and Poland – an increase by 12pp. The Euro barometer’s findings support the overall conclusion of the authors about low efficiency and effectiveness of the information, publicity and communication policies about cohesion policy. Romanian managing authorities’ of the operational programs under Convergence objective did not perform well and seem to fail to ensure visibility and public awareness about the EU funding positive impact throughout the entire programming period. There are least to main reasons for this low performance of the managing authorities which are considered relevant by the authors of this article:

- the managing authorities used the information, publicity and communication policy as a tool to boost absorption rate. Their activities focused on specific target groups: potential beneficiaries and project beneficiaries with the aim of informing them about funding opportunities to support generation of good projects and of assisting the beneficiaries to implement the projects in line with EU specific requirements. The survey of the managing authorities’ official websites supports this conclusion. Also it is to be noticed that all managing authorities preferred to use tier websites as means of public communication with their potential beneficiaries and project beneficiaries;
- the lack of a strategic view on developing public relation campaigns of most managing authorities surveyed (except for the Managing Authority for the Regional Operational Program - MA ROP). In the first years of the programming period, all managing authorities developed public communication campaigns to present the EU funding available under cohesion policy and expected positive impact on economic and social development. These initial campaigns succeeded to make the general public aware of new funding opportunities, but in the later stages of the programming period, the managing authorities (except for MA ROP) did not bring actual positive results of the projects funded into the general public attention; thus it is likely that the general public perceived the EU funding remained as a promise made but there it was not informed whether or not these promises were kept or not, since it was not exposed to mass campaigns to present how the funds were used and which are the projects funded and which is the actual result obtained. This clearly explains, according to the authors of this article, the severe decline of the public awareness about EU funding in Romanian between 2013 and 2020.

The specific difficulties the managing authorities experienced could explain low efficiency of the information, publicity and communication policy about EU funding in Romania, in
particular in relation with public awareness objective:

- **lack of previous experiences to promote awareness and understanding of the EU cohesion policy:** the 2007-2013 programming period was the first period during which Romania had access to EU cohesion policy. Due to the genuine character, it proved to be difficult for managing authorities to develop communication policies to promote relevant and customized messages for general public and various stakeholders so that to ensure adequate levels of understanding and awareness about the cohesion policy and its tools;

- **complexity of the cohesion policy tools and requirements:** the procedures for accessing EU funding and for implementing EU structural funds funded projects are generally seen, by potential beneficiaries and project beneficiaries, as being complex and bureaucratic. Thus, it proved to be difficult for managing authorities to cope with this difficulty and to identify the adequate messages and means to clearly explain to the general public and potential beneficiaries what the EU funding under cohesion policy is about;

- **diversity of audiences:** the cohesion policy tools – the structural funds – were addressing a wide range of development and employment priorities and were addressing the needs of various stakeholders and population. Thus, it proved to be difficult for managing authorities to develop customized messages around the 3 key messages of the national strategy so that to efficiently address specific stakeholders and population.

Based on these, the authors concluded that, from the perspective of public awareness and public trust in positive impact of the EU funding under cohesion policy, the effectiveness of the information, publicity and communication policy of the Romanian authorities cannot be assessed as satisfactory.

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### 3 Conclusions

**Communication policy under cohesion policy ensuring visibility to fuel increased EU funding absorption rates**

The importance of the information, publicity and communication policy about EU cohesion policy should not be considered only against the objectives expressed in terms of visibility and public awareness about EU funding under cohesion policy, but in a broader manner so that to assess the extent to which the communication policy contributes to the efficient use of EU funding measured by the contracting and absorption rates of EU-funding under cohesion policy. Empirical evidence indicates that information, publicity and communication measures developed by managing authorities in Romania was not used in an effective manner to boost absorption since at the end of 2013, according to available data, Romania was among the least performing member state in absorbing EU funding available under cohesion policy with an absorption rate around 45% (European Commission, 2014). The assumption made is that effective communication policy of managing authorities on EU funding under cohesion policy significantly contributes to increased number of quality applications submitted by potential project beneficiaries, which should normally lead to increased number of quality selected projects and increased number of contracts signed (increased contracting rate). The absorption capacity can be defined as the extent to which a state/region is able to fully spend the allocated financial resources from the EU funds in an effective and efficient way; the absorption rate at member state level quantifies the share of the program budget actually spent by project beneficiaries and reimbursed by European Commission. The absorption rate depends on many factors, including the compliance of expenditures incurred and declared by project beneficiaries with specific EU and national legislations. **Still, the information, publicity and communication policies of managing authorities may provide support for increased of the absorption rate:** if there is large visibility of the EU funding opportunities and the
information delivered is clear and relevant for potential beneficiaries, then, it expected for the managing authorities to receive great number of quality applications and to contract quality projects to be implemented. The increased contracting rate is expected to generate increased absorption rate. Thus, efficient and effective information and communication policy about the EU cohesion policy could significantly contribute to support increased absorption rates, leading, consequently to efficient use of EU funding available in support of regional development, employment and competitiveness. For the 2014 -2020 programming periods, Romanian authorities should not neglect the positive contribution that communication policy may have on supporting efficient use of EU funding and absorption rate.

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