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COHESION POLICY COMMUNICATION EFFORT' EFFECTIVENESS – ROMANIAN CASE STUDY

ABSTRACT

2007–2013 was the first multi-annual programming exercise after Romania's accession to the European Union. In order to reach the horizontal aspects of communication regarding the European funds and EU's role in the effort to reduce the development disparities, Romania opted for a unique National Communication Strategy for all the Structural Instruments. The focus in the communication supported by the bodies through which the operational programmes were carried out (managing authorities, intermediate bodies) was mainly laid on the information and motivation of the potential beneficiaries of structural instruments. On the other hand, at the level of projects funded by the operational programmes, the communication made by the beneficiaries was largely directed by the compulsory procedures contained in the Visual Identity Manuals of the operational programmes through which the projects were financed.

This article contains the conclusions of an analysis on the effectiveness of the communication process for the structural instruments in the first programming period. Its conclusions are based on a case study conducted on the communication process for the Regional Operational Programme at the level of the *Sud-Est* development Region. Thus, the greatest obstacles have been identified (Balkan mentality, prejudices resulting from the previous failures in accessing the European funds, the technical communication language, the negative information associated to the implementation of structural programmes) and the elements that came to support the communication (communication norms and rules laid down in the European and national strategic documents referring to information and publicity) in the concrete case of the Sud-Est Region. At the same time, the analysis of the communication process at the level of the investigated region reveals the functional communication channels for the different categories of target audience: young people (on-line channels), public beneficiaries (information sessions), private beneficiaries (press releases), rural area (information caravans).

Key words: communication, Cohesion policy, Romania.

JEL Classification: R58, Z18.

1. INTRODUCTION

At present, Romania is only in the second multi-annual programming and communication period regarding the EU funds and the Union's role in reducing the development disparities. In both programming periods, i.e. 2007–2013 and the current period (2014–2020), Romania has opted for a common communication

strategy, at national level, to reach the horizontal aspects common to the Structural and Cohesion Funds.

This paper is based on the quantitative studies on the effectiveness and impact of communication strategies concerning the EU funds undertaken within the Horizon 2020 PERCEIVE project and it will briefly present the conclusions of these analyses. A first analytical step envisages to define the general framework in which the communication process for the structural and cohesion funds takes place in Romania. In this respect, a brief familiarization with the core elements of the *National Communication Strategy for Structural Instruments* was included in the first chapter of the paper. This focuses on the defining elements of the above-mentioned strategy: aim and key messages, highlighting the differences that have appeared between the two European programming periods (2007–2013 and 2014–2020) regarding these two important communication issues.

Beyond this general framework, the present paper focuses on the analysis of the communication process in post-accession Romania, at the level of one of the oldest EU policies, i.e. the Cohesion Policy, more exactly of the only programme dedicated to the development regions of Romania – the Regional Operational Programme (ROP). After a brief description of the defining elements of communication under ROP, our analysis broadly presents the conclusions of a case study on the effectiveness and impact of ROP communication in the programming period 2007–2013 at the level of Sud-Est Development Region. The aim of this particular analytical approach was to identify:

– the barriers / issues that contribute to a successful ROP communication to beneficiaries and the general public in the particular case of the investigated region;

– the most efficient communication channels to the different categories of the general public and ROP beneficiaries.

2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

The National Communication Strategy for Structural Instruments lay at the basis of the design of a Communication Plan for each Operational Programme in part. The Management Authorities (established at national level) for each Programme have the responsibility of elaboration and management of Communication Plans for each Operational Programme (Table 1).

While for the period 2007–2013, the ***aim*** of the national communication strategy was *to support obtaining the highest possible absorption rate of Structural and Cohesion Funds* (ACIS, 2007:3), for the current programming period the focus of communication has shifted on *consolidating the notoriety and increasing knowledge of European funding objectives and increasing the understanding of the funding mechanisms through structural instruments* (MEF – Communication strategy 2014:13).

Table 1

Objectives of national communication strategies in Romania, by programming periods

2007 – 2013[1]	2014–2020[2]
• Recognition of EU contribution to Romania's modernization, of the role and obtained results by using Structural Instruments	• Increasing and consolidation of Structural Funds notoriety
• Constant and correct information of all target groups on: funding opportunities benefiting Romania through the Structural Instruments, the reasons why this process was initiated, objectives and benefits of its implementation	• Increasing awareness of EU role and contribution to projects co-financing (including the priorities and objectives of EU Cohesion Policy)
• Ensuring transparency, so as to support the absorption of Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund in Romania	• Increasing the information of potential beneficiaries with regard to the themes, priorities and interventions funded through Structural Instruments

Source: [1] ACIS, 2007; [2] MEF – Communication Strategy, 2014.

The ***key messages*** of national communication strategies, have the following characteristics (Table 2):

– in the framework period 2007–2013, formulated into a generic, abstract language and an administrative style (based on administrative clichés);

– in the period 2014–2020, have higher adequacy and accuracy level.

Table 2

Key messages of national communication strategies in Romania, by programming periods

2007–2013[1]	2014–2020[2]
• Through the Structural and Cohesion Funds, Romania has the opportunity to develop and get modernized faster; • Romania and the EU support ides of projects that correspond to the objectives of the funding programmes and are well prepared; • The structural instruments are accessible on a non-discriminatory basis and their management is transparent and well-controlled	• EU provides non-refundable financial support for Romania's development (from economic and social point of view) – "We continue what we began in the previous period"; • The European finance support the development of society, putting people at the core of development, without harming nature and destroying our future, favouring the creative and persevering people; • The entire society benefits from the effects of EU funding, and not only those who access the funds; • Funding will focus on maximizing the impact on economic growth and jobs; • European funding completes the funds from Romania's budget; • European funding is not social aid.

Source: [1] ACIS, 2007; [2] MEF – Communication strategy, 2014.

As regards the defining elements of the **Communication Plan of the Regional Operational Programme**, these are, in their turn, subsumed to the National Communication Strategy for Structural Instruments, their particularity residing in the regional addressability of the programme. Like in the case of the national strategy, the brief analysis of the ROP communication plan aimed to change key objectives and messages between the two programming periods. A particularity that individualized the ROP and significantly contributed to the increase of the programme notoriety was the logo of the programme, which became a nationally recognized brand.

While for the programming period 2007–2013, the *Objectives* of the Communication Plan for ROP focused on *building ROP notoriety as programme funding regional development*, for the current programming period the focus has shifted on disseminating the *information on funding rules and mechanism to potential beneficiaries* (Table 3).

The assessment of ROP 2007–2013 communication efficiency reveals that these actions were successful: 43% of the general public from Romania had heard of the Regio Programme by June 2015 (REGIO, 2017:4). For the current programming period, the target of the Communication Plan is to increase ROP notoriety to 60% by the end of the implementation (2023) (REGIO, 2017: 4, 26).

Table 3

General objectives of the Communication Plan for ROP, by programming periods

2007–2013[1]	2014–2020[2]
• Generating awareness of funding opportunities; • Informing the broad public on EU contribution to the balanced development of the regions from Romania, on the contribution to regional development policy implementation inclusively	• Promoting ROP role and contribution to regional development in Romania; • Ensuring transparency and information dissemination referring to the funding sources with the view to contract the funds allocated under the programme to all the categories of potential beneficiaries

Source: [1] REGIO, 2010: 9; [2] REGIO, 2017: 12.

ROP *key messages* are significantly differentiated by the two programming periods (Table 4):

i) for 2007–2013, the messages had a general content, not significantly different from other operational programmes, they were formulated in a formal, vague language, lacking concision (prolix);

ii) for 2014–2020, the key messages became short, simple, better targeted to different target audience categories and limited in number. The change in the form and content of key messages was due to the recommendations resulting from the evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of the communication campaign implemented in the previous programming period.

Table 4

Key messages for ROP, by programming periods

2007–2013[1]	2014–2020[2]

• EU and Romania's Government support the development of regions in order to narrow the development gaps. Under ROP, regions will benefit from real fast development opportunities;
• ROP has an important socio-economic component;
• ROP is efficiently and transparently managed
	• Regio SUPPORTS ROMANIA'S DEVELOPMENT
	• Regio means:
	  - balanced development
	  - SMEs competitiveness
	  - energy efficiency
	  - sustainable development
	  - preserving and putting into value the cultural heritage
	  - regional and local road infrastructure
	  - tourism development
	  - development of health infrastructure
	  - development of educational infrastructure
	  - cadastral registration of properties

Source: [1] REGIO, 2010: 10; [2] REGIO, 2017: 16.

The communication component with a significant contribution to the notoriety increase of structural instruments is the *visual identity* (Fig. 1).

ROP 2007–2013 has benefited since the beginning of own logo comprising three elements:

i) Regio emblem;
ii) slogan conceived in a concise language, explicit for the programme purpose: *"Inițiativă locală. Dezvoltare regională"* translated as "*Local initiative. Regional development"*;
iii) name of development region (for ROP logos used by RDAs on regional promotion materials and by ROP beneficiaries from the respective region).

Logo ROP (national version)	Logo ROP (Sud-Est Region version)

Source: REGIO 2013: 5–6.

Figure 1. ROP logo and translation of the slogan in English

By the end of the implementation of the first ROP exercise (2007–2013), the Regio brand was known by 43% of Romania's urban and rural population aged over 18 years (REGIO, 2017: 4). Due to the accumulated image capital, it was decided to maintain the logo for the new ROP 2014–2020 programming period.

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

To evaluate the effectiveness and impact of communication at ROP level in Romania, we used a case study conducted at the level of the Sud-Est development region. The analysis is of qualitative type, and for data collection we used the focus group method. The guide for focus group was developed under the project PERCEIVE and was structured on three themes: *Elaboration, Communication and Evaluation of the Cohesion Policy.*

Data collection was organized in February 2017 with the support of the Sud-Est Development Agency (SE RDA) and the participation of 13 respondents that represented key actors of the process of ROP elaboration and implementation: SE RDA representatives, consultants, beneficiaries representing private companies, NGOs, public administration, representatives of the chambers of trade. During the 4.5 hours of discussions, all the three themes were broadly approached, each participant expressing openly their opinion, under the protection of anonymity.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The object of the analysis to follow is represented by the topic under discussion within the second theme of the focus-group: Communication of the cohesion policy. The most important issues on which the discussion focused were the following:

– success/barriers in the communication of the cohesion policy and programmes to beneficiaries and the general public, so that the targets of the communication programmes are reached;

– effectiveness of different communication channels in targeting different categories of target audience.

4.1. SUCCESS / BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

o *Elements of successful experiences.* The communication process of the Cohesion Policy at Sud-Est Region level is perceived as a positive experience. The success elements invoked by the participants in the focus group describe a hierarchy of the communication process based on *information* and developed into multiple *communication forms*.

The evaluation of participants, mainly of SE RDA representatives, is based on the fact that RDA provides sustained information to the different categories of target groups (broad public, potential beneficiaries, effective beneficiaries), organizing well-defined information activities, with clear priorities (information, mobilization, persuasion).

In the perception of SE RDA representatives, the recipe for successful communication resides in the compliance with the norms, rules and milestones set out in the European, national and regional strategic documents referring to information and publicity. The evaluation of how the regional operational program (ROP) was communicated is done in an impersonal language: *"As such, we start from writing and approval by the management unit of a communication plan that has to fit to the national communication strategy. By implementing the national communication strategy the increase of REGIO visibility from 43% to 60% is had in view. This is a concrete element, until the end of the financial period 2014–2020. Hence we have to perform a series of actions, starting from a certain base. At the time when a program is launched, a financing line will be opened, so we start, as we called it, on a caravan promoting the respective funding opportunities. .... Then we have the announcements in the print press, the eSite announcements. .... Step two, help-desk, ... Then we have the implementation of projects, in which the system is the same."* (SE RDA representative).

Depending on the status of beneficiaries (public or private), SE RDA uses different categories of intermediary facilitators (regional (Regio) network of communicators – facilitators for public beneficiaries (mostly); chamber of trade, consultancy firms – facilitators for the private sector) that become additional channels for the information flow: *"With us, vis-à-vis the publicity made to the project or to a funding scheme, too many drawbacks will not appear, because with us, the highest percentage of potential beneficiaries are represented by the public authorities, who can be approached very easily in relation to what we have to do. This is because we have at national level a communicators network, which is developed, or formed, from the regional network of communicators in which all the public authorities and not only are members… Thus, only the private firms remain, which we have to capture, to get them informed… In this respect, we have always used and relied on the chambers of trade…, the consultancy firms."* (SE RDA representative).

The communication process is perceived as dysfunctional out of objective reasons, generated only by the characteristics of projects:

– excessive formalization of the communication process at the level of certain projects: *"…these are those projects that were limited to formal activities. That is a press conference was organized, look, the project came to an end, a press release was issued and put into the print press, and that's all… That's what we are doing, many of us, we are also doing this with the technical assistance projects. Well, do we promote? No!"* (SE RDA representative).

– the different perception of the impact of a project in accordance with its objectives/addressability. An argument to this is the fact that the results of a technical project can be promoted and disseminated under a limited and strongly formalized framework, as this is not of interest for the general public.*: "Because it's very tedious to promote a technical assistance project. Who's interested in*

this? Nobody. But if funding goes to a project that has a certain addressability, for instance you make a hospital, a care home for children… It is obvious that these projects are self-promoted." (SE RDA representative). *"Because maybe nobody is interested in a micro-enterprise project that purchased a lathe, right? And another thing is a project of impact, such as a patrimony project or a public infrastructure project."* (SE RDA representative).

Solving up the communication problems also comes from the normative, formalized framework of the requirements of the current financial exercise: *"What is important is that this communication part under ROP 2014–2020 also shifted a little bit in the project development part…. Now there are, you should know, also domains, such as domain 7.1 destined to tourism resorts, where it is compulsory when submitting a project to make proof that public consultation was made with regard to the respective project… So not only that you make the project known to the community and you have a consultation with the community in relation to the development of the project…."* (SE RDA representative).

The evaluation of the modality of promoting, communicating the projects that were implemented by the beneficiaries of Cohesion Funds in SE region generally appreciates the professionalism of certain beneficiaries; for example, the press campaigns at national or regional level or the existence of a strong public relation: *"It seems to me that Vrancea communicated very well. The County Council communicated a monuments restoration project very well. It had a very large-scale campaign in the national print press and in the local press…They had RP (public relation), they had people in charge of it, and they obtained the impact they wanted. Another project that communicated very well was in Constanţa area. The entire seafront from Constanţa, or Ovidiu Square… They made a very good RP on the national market."* (SE RDA representative).

The beneficiaries appreciate that the communication process is successful as it is subject to clear regulations, it is carried out according to well-established, formalized rules: *"Generally, from the beneficiary's point of view there are some rules that you have to respect, and if you have respected them, you are successful. Let's say, if you reached the proposed indicators in relation to all the instruments used so as to make public what you have implemented, this is the definition of success, in my opinion, nothing more can be added to this…… each project communication part of this type strictly followed certain rules, certain provisions that were finally executed."* (Chamber of Trade representative).

In the beneficiaries' opinion, a successful communication depends on how the promotion is made; beneficiaries consider that promotion should be achieved under concrete, material, visible forms, such as:

– participation to national events with relevant actors in the field of regional development (e.g. Structural Funds Gala) (private company representative);

– creation of specific local sites (e.g. oenological space) (private company representative), museums (NGOs representative).

In conclusion, there is a formal appreciation of the successful communication elements: complying with the rules, regulations, implicitly with the indicators specific to the communication phase, determine the normal course of the information and publicity process. In particular, the SE RDA representatives invoke the national strategy and the communication plan as guidelines to this process. On the other hand, the public beneficiaries emphasize the indicators specific to project communication.

By its nature, SE RDA is more involved in the communication process. Out of total communication specific words, 74% were used by SE RDA representatives, and 21% by the public beneficiaries.

The most frequently used communication means are the electronic means: 80% of words referring to these technical supports refer to e-mail, Facebook, site.

For the beneficiaries, the successful communication takes place in targeted actions, specific to the particularities of the target audience from Romania, which brings maximum visibility: participation in national, museum events.

o ***Barriers to communication.*** The assessment of barriers to communication takes into consideration a set of factors focusing on mentalities, prejudices, expectations and perceptions specific to the Romanian cultural matrix. Obstacles also appear in the case of inadequacy between the expectations of beneficiaries of funds through the regional operational programs and the language used in the communication of programs.

The main barriers invoked by the participants in focus group are the following:

– the Balkan mentality – is mentioned only once and it is explained by the existence of prejudices: *"It is obvious that prejudices are a barrier because if you have prejudices, and we know them, people do not sufficiently trust the implementation system, people think that this is not transparent enough, that it is wrong, not based on values but rather based on Balkan principles, and it is very difficult to change this mentality that got rooted and which has its reasons."* (SE RDA representative). The argumentation uses an intricate, thick construction of "pliers" type, indicating a stereotype from the respondent's part;

– the prejudices that are not part of the traditional cultural matrix, generated by the mechanisms specific to the European projects. There are two types of prejudices valorized as significant barriers:

    a) prejudices stemming from failures: *"It is very difficult to work with somebody who has already formed an opinion about a certain issue, let's say about funds, he has heard from a certain source, from another person let's say, that funds are difficult to access, that you must have a lot of time, that there may be situations when you have to return the money ...; it will be very difficult to work with that person, he already has a bias, he already has a certain idea about funds.."* (private actor – consultancy);

    b) mobile prejudices, transferred from the experience with other EU funds: *"of course, prejudices can do this, other beneficiaries from NRDP, for instance, came to us and told us that certain things were happening there and that they doubted they could get funding under ROP, and this subsequently proved that it wasn't true. So there are prejudices that are moved from one program to another."* (SE RDA representative);

– the language used is considered as an obstacle in a bivalent perspective:

    a) in the case when it is not adequate to beneficiaries' expectations, the dry, technical language generates a negative impact: *"… I can imagine that it is very difficult to get to the common citizen level. Who has a limited universe, and has some expectations determined by the environment in which he evolves or has some other priorities. Finally, I say that he can perceive less such a technical language, ultimately so far away from his daily problems."* (SE RDA representative);

    b) the repeated use of negative language is considered to drive off beneficiaries: *"...it is very difficult to come with a positive language, so to speak, on a negative matter, as people are more attracted by the negative part, that is if it were a disastrous project.."* (SE RDA representative). The strong attraction exerted by negative information feeds the prejudices in relation to European funds: *"If we see every day in Romania, I don't know what corruption scandal, they came, took them, tied them, arrested them, these negative events capture the attention, …; it is very difficult in Romania when you have a negative campaign, I consider that there was a negative campaign in the last 2 years vis-à-vis the way in which these funds were spent, to come and say that today they are also spent correctly"* (SE RDA representative).

4.2. COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

In accordance with the organizational status, the participants in focus group made a selection of the communication means (Table 5).

A special category is represented by ***young people,*** for which, regardless of the organizational status of the interlocutor, social networks, social media platforms are considered the most appropriate means to communicate efficiently: *"For young people, Facebook in the first place"* (private actor – consultancy); *"It is difficult to tell which channels are interesting for young people… probably at this moment in the light of the new events I think that Facebook is the most relevant"* (NGOs representative); *"it very much depends on the target group that is addressed, if you have for instance programs for young people with start-ups, yes, you use Facebook"* (SE RDA representative).

Table 5

Communication matrix

Communication channels / beneficiaries	Young people	Public beneficiaries	Private beneficiaries
Local mass media: radio, TV, press (online press included), press releases	0	3	3
Group meetings, information sessions	0	3	2
Caravans	0	2	0
Internet	3	0	0
Facebook, Twitter	3	1	0
Press conferences	0	2	3
Panels, information plates	0	0	2

Source: focus group

In order to communicate to ***public beneficiaries,*** the most efficient channels are considered the following: group meetings and information sessions, these being perceived as forms of network communication: a single information provider in relation with several receivers that have active behaviours. Information is of open type, debated, filtered by the present receivers: *"... for the public beneficiaries there is one type of communication, which generally isn't this communication through mass media, as I rather prefer direct communication, ... we organize these actions, these information seminars..."* (SE RDA representative).

The online press is perceived as having a positive impact, at individual level there is a daily routine of reading papers online: *"I would say that for those from public institutions, the online print press, as my colleague also said, I think that all the local public administration employees read the press online; I think that nobody waits at the traffic light in the morning to cross the street and buy the newspaper from the newsstand, like a few years ago."* (private actor – consultancy).

In the perception of SE RDA representatives, the modern channels are less efficient in communication, in the case of public beneficiaries: *"... for the public authorities it is less relevant to use Facebook…"* (SE RDA representative).

The private beneficiaries are perceived as being sensitized by local channels: press conferences and press releases: *"If we speak about ... private beneficiaries, ... it is clear that they must use press releases…"* (NGO representative); *„for the public area we have the information session and the press conferences, for the private area the same thing"* (SE RDA representative). *"I think that also the print press, that is it depends if it also appears online, because, for instance, I haven't bought a newspaper for years, but I read it online every morning, I'm interested as a user…"* (private company representative).

o ***Issues concerning the urban/rural divide.*** In the opinion of participants in focus group, the differences between the rural and urban cultural patterns generate the selective use of communication channels.

For the ***urban area*** the functionality of the following channels is positively appreciated:

– modern communication channels (online press, Facebook): *"For the urban area I think that the online press is the mostly indicated and the first used channel"* (Chamber of Trade representative);

– information sessions, public debates: *"... in the urban area, we have the information sessions..."* (SE RDA representative), ...”; *"... we made a public debate at the moment when we outlined the strategy ..."* (NGO representative);

– meetings with mass media: *"For the urban area we proceed like this, for instance if we have an information session or we use the print press and television, they are coming, making interviews, discuss, take pictures, talk with people, talk with us."* (SE RDA representative);

– Information Desk (helpdesk): *"... starting with the month of April, we shall open the so-called Information Desk, in each county there will be a man with this role of taking over the questions by different programs."* (SE RDA representative).

For the ***rural area,*** the following communication forms are considered efficient:

– discussions at the local council: *"In the rural area I think that the direct discussion would be more efficient, the rural area is more difficult to reach, the access is difficult, and most often people do not get informed from Facebook there, they discuss things at local level, a meeting is organized at the local council..."* (private actor-consultancy);

– institutionalized (ad-hoc) communication networks: *"And a very important thing for the rural area is the use of information multipliers, but you can never make information campaigns in each commune, or in each place; we, for instance, used the urban area, that is the public authorities from the urban area, to disseminate information in the rural area, in their zone."* (SE RDA representative);

– caravans: *"... for the rural area the organization of meetings, of those promotion caravans..."* (Chamber of Trade representative);

– leaflets, brochures*: "...there are leaflets or brochures of all kind ... it's information, let's say, quite well structured, from which people find out for the first time, broadly, details about what is going to be launched."* (private actor – consultancy);

– information sessions: *"I think that in the rural area we must go and meet them, that is organize information sessions."* (SE RDA representative); *"In the rural area, I should say, now the LAGs are operating at ATU level, and there are animation and information sessions, which are the most fruitful."* (private actor – consultancy).

The brief analysis of words used by respondents in the context of this topic (of discussion) reveals the high share of those who consider mass media as the main communication channel for the urban areas (67% of total words used in this

context) and the significant share of the syntagma "*information sessions*" for the rural area (50% of total words used).

o ***Issues concerning open data and transparency.*** For both public and private beneficiaries, it is important to have open data and, implicitly, to ensure transparency, in all phases, from writing to implementation of regional programs and projects: *"Yes, in all the phases, as no one has anything to hide, information should be available to everyone. I think that in all phases."* (Chamber of Trade representative); *"... in all phases from my point of view, hence you cannot make a difference in the end, we're speaking about programming, you go there and tell what you can do, everything you know at the respective moment, because certain methods are outlined, you start from what you gather from the territory and you must tell them what, because he is waiting something from you. ... for the writing part, also the meetings with the beneficiaries, with the management authorities, these are equally important,... In the implementation period... meetings of the type let's see, let's discuss what is going on in project implementation, but most often in the implementation stage you go to the management authority or to the intermediate body and ask directly because there are specific cases"* (NGO representative).

The private beneficiaries are the most sensitive to data openness and transparency. This observation is generated from the consistency and diversity of the answers provided. For instance, the only coherent argumentation of the need for data transparency and openness in the programming phase comes from them: *"In the initial phase... In the programming phase, the beneficiary must be very well informed on the respective program, to see if he fits and how he can meet the terms... He must know exactly all the terms he must comply with."* (private actor – consultancy).

This type of consistent argumentation, from which the clichés and ambiguities are absent, is found in the answers of those who consider that the implementation phase must benefit from open, transparent data: *"I think that at the beginning, but more in the implementation part, because everybody must know that everything is transparent, because many beneficiaries come and ask me what's the price? ..... As I said, what should I pay for my project to be the winner? I came across this situation many times and this conception is totally wrong; the same way, for the implementation, you should communicate each time you can, for acquisitions, what has been made so far, so that everybody knows what is going on in that project, the more visible, the better."* (private company representative).

o ***Storytelling – relevance of different narrative factors in communication.*** A form of communication considered to be beneficial is storytelling, the narrative that can stimulate emotions, positive states of mind and can become an efficient channel to transmit messages. *"The story is interesting as a means of*

communication as it reaches the audience very fast. People, and adults like to hear stories sometimes, so this is an interesting instrument that remains in people's mind until it is forgotten and something new appears." (SE RDA representative).

Table 6

Quantitative assessment of narrative factors

– number

	RDA representants			Public beneficiary			Private beneficiary		
	+	–	neutral	+	–	neutral	+	–	neutral
Story	12		4	2			5	4	5
Number		5	1		3				
Emotions and positive states of mind	3						1		
Characters (prince, princess, master Toma)	1							1	
Total	**16**	**5**	**5**	**2**	**3**		**5**	**5**	**5**

Source: focus group

The tendency to positively appreciate the ***storytelling*** as a means of communication is obvious: out of total words used in the context of this theme, 70% refer to story. In the case of SE RDA representatives, the narrative is perceived only in positive terms, as: ... *"...it is very simple to tell a story about a road that was made, which connected an isolated locality to the rest of the world, or an operation room that saved the lives of many people."* (SE RDA representative); the utilization of a positive character completes the positive message: *"a book for children circulated under ROP, with the title TOMA. It was a book with one story that told something, what could be done. ... I gave it to the kindergarten children and they were very glad. ... Master Toma was nicely drawn there."* (SE RDA representative). Moreover, the appreciation trend index is positive, with the value 0.47.

Numbers are negatively valorized, being considered as:
– abstract values, which cannot bear positive messages *"...I don't think that numbers are very easy to include in stories, because they pertain to the abstract side, to the very technical side ,... "* (SE RDA representative);
– creating confusion: *"Wrong numbers can be recorded and forwarded. ... so working with numbers should be avoided if they are not tackled in an extremely professional context and well explained."* (Chamber of Trade representative);
– difficult to remember: *"I don't think that people remember numbers. People don't remember numbers*." (SE RDA representative).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The formalization from the communication guidelines is positively appreciated, as it creates a common, unitary, distinct framework that helps in the individualization of EU initiatives as against other funding (national) initiatives.

Awareness and use of communication guidelines is higher for SE RDA, the compliance level of beneficiaries being monitored and systematically checked together with the monitoring of the other technical and financial aspects of projects. The consultancy companies play an important role in projects compliance with the requirements from the Visual Identity Manuals, as they provide specialized assistance to beneficiaries throughout the implementation of projects.

According to the opinions expressed during the Focus group:

– *A successful* communication resides in complying with the norms, rules and milestones set out in the strategic European and national documents referring to information and publicity;
– *The main barriers* to communication are: i) the Balkan mentality, ii) the prejudices resulting from previous failed experiences in accessing European funds, iii) technical communication language, iv) negative information (e.g. Failed projects, Corruption) associated with the implementation of structural programmes;
– *The implementation of guidelines* existing in the communication guides is positively valorized, as it facilitates understanding the Cohesion Policy and transmission of project results to the broad public, marking the success of implementation;
– *The communication matrix* at the level of Sud Est region reveals the most efficient communication channels for the different categories of target public:
 i)   for *young people*: social networks, mass media platforms;
 ii) *public beneficiaries*: group meetings, information sessions and online press (new media are less efficient);
 iii) *private beneficiaries:* press conferences and press releases;
 iv) *urban area:* modern communication channels (online press, Facebook), information sessions, public debates, meetings with mass media, information desks;
 v)   *rural area:* discussions at the local council, institutionalized (*ad hoc*) communication networks, information caravans, information sessions;
– Private beneficiaries are the most sensitive to the *data openness and transparency* issue;
– *Storytelling as communication means* is positively perceived. On the other hand, the *utilization of numbers* in the communication process is *negatively valorized*, as it is considered that numbers may induce confusion and are difficult to remember.

In the communication process of SE RDA, the information of beneficiaries is on the first place, in order to increase access to structural funds, while communication to the broad public has a secondary role. SE RDA is making efforts to adapt the (technical) communication language, resulting from the Communication Plans of Structural Programmes, to the different target audience categories to which it addresses at regional level.

There are two categories of regional partners who, in the opinion of participants in the focus group, have played an important role in the communication process of regional programmes: one is the REGIO Communicators Network and the second is the group of journalists from the regional mass media.

Thus, it was appreciated that the regional network of Regio communicators is a functional interface, with stability and continuity, being an important regional actor in sustaining the communication activities, whose role as image vector of the Cohesion Policy could be strengthened / increased. On the other hand, the journalists from the regional mass media have an increasing interest in SE RDA activity and in the implementation of structural instruments at regional level, which may represent an important vector of the Cohesion Policy communication.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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