

Final Report

Evaluation study on good practices in EU Regional Policy communication 2007-2013 and beyond

October 31st 2013

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EU regional policy accounts for a third of the EU budget yet public awareness across the EU varies greatly

EU regional policy seeks to strengthen the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the EU and to reduce the large differences between Europe's regions. The budget for regional policy is substantial, accounting for Euro 347 Billion between 2007 and 2013. However, European citizens are not always aware of the impact of EU regional policy on their local communities (for example, in terms of economic growth and the creation of jobs). Also, levels of awareness of regional policy vary substantially between EU Member States and regions.

DG REGIO seeks to improve EU regional policy communication

DG REGIO commissioned an evaluation on EU regional policy communication to identify good practice in the Member States and review its own approach to communication with the aim of using this to develop a revised strategy for the 2014 to 2020 programming period. More specifically, the evaluation evidence is drawn from:

- 107 responses to a questionnaire on communication activities with Managing Authorities across the EU;
- 100 interviews with representatives of Managing Authorities and other stakeholders in a sample of eight Member States;
- An additional 22 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and informants at EU level (e.g. EU institutions, EU information providers, journalists, and academia);
- Online surveys of (1) Info regio website users and (2) interested parties regarding DG REGIO's own communication activities (358 and 213 responses, respectively);
- A benchmarking exercise of communication activities of three relevant institutions, and a strategic workshop with a number of DG REGIO representatives.

Summary of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of DG REGIO's communications

The fact that regional policy is a policy area that touches upon many aspects of development and covers all of the EU's countries and regions constitutes one of the main **strengths** of DG REGIO's communication. Given its strategic importance, the DG has the potential to deliver powerful and appealing messages (such as its effects on growth and regional development). The DG's improved relations with the media and its highly praised events are seen as strong channels through which to deliver such messages.

In terms of **external opportunities**, the evaluation found that the transition to the next programming period and the changes that the next generation of programmes will bring, provide a good opportunity for the DG to communicate more directly and explicitly about its strategic priorities and about key results and impacts achieved. Many examples of effective communication practices have been identified. There is potential for these to be given more visibility and for DG REGIO to encourage more learning between Member States.

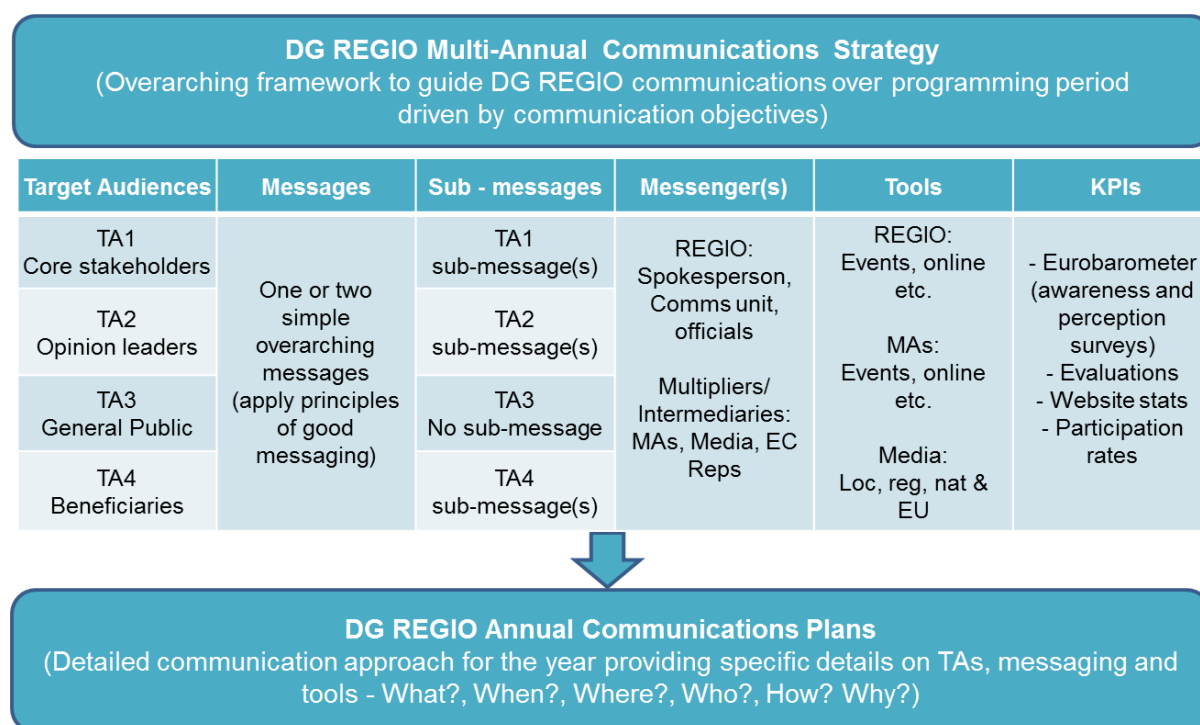
However, the evaluation has also identified several **weaknesses** of DG REGIO's communications, including a rather impersonal and distant approach coupled with fragmented information and messages. The DG is also seen to be too conservative and risk-

averse, which is reflected in the fact that external communication strongly relies on the Commissioner and his spokesperson. Communication is not seen as a priority within DG REGIO and there is scope for it to be taken far more seriously across the DG. The lack of an integrated digital strategy (and heavy reliance on traditional tools such as publications) is also increasingly problematic.

There are several **external threats** to the effectiveness of the DG's communication efforts. For example, there is a general lack of interest from the media and general public in regional policy which has resulted from the fact that the information available on the topic is typically complex, excessive, and fragmented. Additionally, the growing levels of Euro-scepticism (exacerbated by the economic crisis), declining media coverage of regional policy (as a result of more urgent priorities), and diminishing resources at national level are likely to negatively impact on people's awareness and perceptions of regional policy.

It is recommended that DG REGIO...

1. Devise an **overarching multi-annual strategy** and **annual communication plans**, specifying who the DG wants to target, what it wants to communicate, and how it intends to do so. It is recommended that the DG convene a workshop (involving senior and middle management and communication experts) to develop the priorities for an overarching strategy, and that the strategy is reviewed and updated on an annual basis. Please refer to Figure 0. illustrating this approach.
2. Specify a clear **hierarchy of target audiences**, with messages and sub-messages and tools for each of these audiences. The DG should look to develop concrete objectives and key performance indicators for each of the elements.
3. Develop **clearer and more customised messages**. The DG should keep in mind that less is more, messages need to be simple and straightforward, they need to tell a story and be consistent. The DG should not be afraid to make a big claim in its messages, for example on what it has accomplished.
4. Make better use of **online communications**, guided by a digital strategy and a plan of implementation. It should also make itself more accessible by taking a more **'personalised' approach**. This could include encouraging officials to interact with audiences using social media, and organising more events in Member States.
5. **Elevate the profile of communication** and send out the message that "communication is part of everyone's role". This culture shift will need the commitment of senior and middle-management as well as by the DG's staff.

Figure 0: Multi-annual strategy & annual communication planning**DG REGIO should also consider the following fundamental questions (options):**

1. **Priority target audiences:** Should the DG dedicate significant more effort, time and resources to reaching the general public (directly and/or via intermediaries and multipliers such as Managing Authorities and beneficiaries), or continue to mainly focus on specialist audiences? What is the optimal balance?
2. **More focused communication:** Given the limited resources and the complexity of regional policy, should the DG develop a communication strategy that for a period of time concentrates on only a few key priorities / target groups / countries, rather than attempting to bring the whole of regional policy closer to citizens across the EU equally?
3. **Joint ESIF communication:** Following the introduction of the ESIF, to what extent is the opportunity to intensify collaboration with other Commission DGs in the area of communication (to enhance the overall visibility of the EU) preferable and feasible?
4. **Intensification of MA interaction:** Should interaction with Managing Authorities be intensified, and if so, how can MAs be incentivised to use regional policy interventions to promote a positive message about the EU in a wider sense?

Answering these questions will involve making strategic choices and require careful weighing of the (potential) advantages and disadvantages. These choices call for further discussions at relevant levels within DG REGIO so that an overarching communication strategy can be put into place ready for the new programming period and guide the allocation of human and financial resources.

1 INTRODUCTION

This final report is the fourth and final deliverable submitted by The Evaluation Partnership in the context of the Evaluation study on good practices in EU regional policy communication 2007-2013 and beyond.

The purpose of this report is to present the full results of the study. The report consists of the following **main sections**:

- Section 2 briefly describes the evaluation study's purpose, and summarises the main methods and tools used to collect and analyse data.
- Section 3 contains the main evaluation findings, broken down into Regional policy communication in the Member States (Task 1) and DG REGIO's own communication activities (Task 2)
- Section 4 presents the key conclusions from the study, as well as recommendations and a series of options for DG REGIO's consideration as it seeks to refine its communication approach for the upcoming programming period.

The present report has been kept deliberately concise so as to enable its widespread use. A large amount of complementary materials are submitted as **annexes** contained in separate documents:

- Annex A contains the detailed results of the case studies on eight Member States that were carried out as part of Task 1.
- Annex B contains a range of materials to support the findings for both Task 1 and Task 2, including the results of the various surveys, questionnaires and interviews that were carried out.

Any queries related to this report should be directed to the project director, Mr Ben Ward.

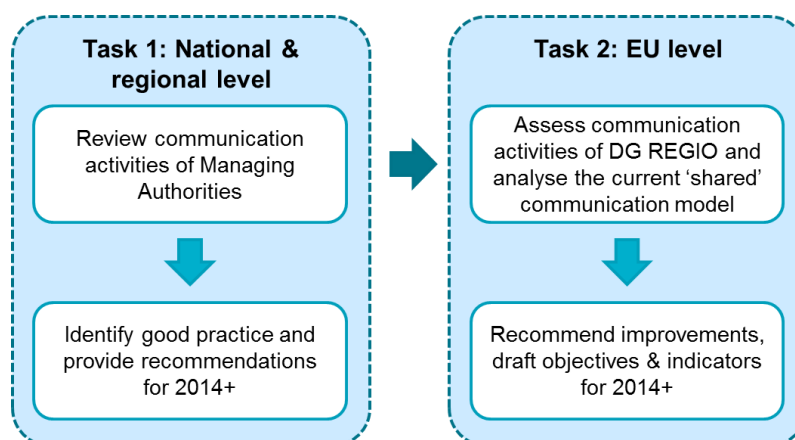
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2 PURPOSE OF AND APPROACH TO THE EVALUATION

In early 2013, DG REGIO contracted The Evaluation Partnership to conduct a study entitled “Evaluation study on good practices in EU Regional Policy communication – 2007-2013 and beyond”. The **main purpose of the study** is to develop a fuller understanding of what different stakeholders – in particular the Managing Authorities (MAs) of the ERDF Operational Programmes (OPs) – do to communicate about EU regional policy (especially with a view to raising awareness among the general public), and how effective these activities are.

The study was broken down into two main tasks. **Task 1** focused on the national and regional level, with a particular focus on the identification of good practices in the communication approaches, activities and tools of MAs and other key communicators in selected Member States. A selection of good practices identified will be presented and shared at a conference in December 2013. **Task 2** focused on the EU level, and on DG REGIO’s own communication activities during the programming period that is about to come to an end. Based on the results of the study, the evaluators were tasked to make recommendations to improve / re-focus DG REGIO’s own communication activities, and to define SMART objectives and key performance indicators (KPIs) for the period beginning in 2014.

Figure 1: Key components of the evaluation study



The **methodology of the study** included data collection via the following main elements:

- For Task 1 (regional policy communication at the national and regional level):
 - Fieldwork in eight Member States, including interviews with a total of over 100 representatives of MAs and other communicators and stakeholders, each resulting in a report with an assessment of the situation and a series of good practice examples that were identified.
 - A questionnaire for all MAs of ERDF OPs across the EU regarding their own communication activities (107 responses).
- For Task 2 (DG REGIO’s own communication activities):

- Online surveys of (1) Inforegio website users and (2) interested parties regarding DG REGIO's own communication activities (358 and 213 responses, respectively).
- An additional 22 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and informants, including representatives of different EU institutions, EU information providers, journalists and academia.
- A review of communication approaches and activities of three institutions that share (some) similar communication challenges, namely Regional Development Australia, the World Bank, and the European Commission's DG Agriculture and Rural Development.
- A workshop where the evaluation team shared key preliminary results with over a dozen DG REGIO representatives, followed by an open and frank discussion of possible changes and improvements.

For more details on each of these methods / tools, as well as a summary of their respective results, please refer to the annexes.

3 EVALUATION RESULTS

3.1 Regional policy communication in the Member States (Task 1)

Task 1 of the study was dedicated to exploring how regional policy is communicated at the national and regional level in the EU Member States, with a particular focus on identifying good practices that could be shared and disseminated in order to facilitate mutual learning.

For this purpose, we undertook case studies featuring visits to eight selected Member States, in order to collect data on different communication approaches and tools, and engage directly with communicators and stakeholders. The detailed results of these case studies are contained in annex A. We also developed and sent a questionnaire to the Managing Authorities (MAs) of all Operational Programmes (OPs) in the EU Member States, in order to provide a realistic and comprehensive picture of their communication activities, tools, target audiences, key messages, resources, challenges they face, etc. A total of 107 completed questionnaires were received by the evaluation team; a detailed summary of the responses is provided in annex B.1.

The ensuing pages contain selected key results from the analysis of data collected via both of these methods (case studies and questionnaires), with an emphasis on lessons learned and potential implications for the future of DG REGIO's own communication strategies and approaches.

3.1.1 Communication structures and resources

Since regional policy is implemented de-centrally by the national and regional authorities that are responsible for drawing up and managing the OPs, these **national and regional authorities also have an important role to play** in communicating about the policy. For the 2007-2013 programming period, article 69 of Council Regulation 1083/2006 obliges Member States and MAs to provide information on the respective OPs and publicise co-financed operations. EU citizens and beneficiaries are the main target groups of those information and publicity actions, whose aim is to highlight the role of the Community and to make sure that assistance from the Funds is transparent. The detailed requirements are laid down in Articles 2 to 10 of Commission Regulation 1828/2006¹, which stipulates inter alia that a communication plan has to be drawn up by the MA for the OP for which it is responsible (or by the Member State to cover several or all OPs co-financed by the ERDF, the ESF or the Cohesion Fund), and lays down a few basic minimum requirements. The box below provides an overview of the main communication requirements for Member States, MAs and beneficiaries that will come into force for the period 2014 – 2020¹.

¹ It should be noted that at the time of submitting the final report the available provisions are still draft, hence subject to final changes.

Outline of information and communication rules for MS, MAs and beneficiaries (2014 – 2020)

Member States and Managing Authorities will be responsible for:

- (i) drawing up and implementing **communication strategies**, including measuring the progress of the communication actions;
- (ii) establishing a **single website or portal** providing information on, and access to, all operational programmes in their Member States (including a list of operations by operational programme and by fund updated every six months);
- (iii) **informing potential beneficiaries** about funding opportunities under operational programmes; and
- (iv) **publicising to EU citizens** the role and achievements of cohesion policy and of the funds.

Beneficiaries will be required to acknowledge support of EU funds by displaying the EU emblem and a reference to the fund/s supporting their operation. Information via websites, posters, networks and plaques/billboards will be also requested to specific categories of beneficiaries, in proportion to the size of their operations.

The way in which regional policy communication is organised differs significantly across Member States and OPs. In some countries, the responsibility for communication is highly **centralised**, meaning that a national authority plays an important role in developing, co-ordinating and/or implementing communication strategies and activities. In the Member States on which case studies were conducted as part of this project, this is the case of Sweden (where the responsibility lies with a dedicated Communications Unit in the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Estonia, France and Hungary (where a relatively strong central co-ordination function is complemented by some de-centralised implementation). At the other end of the spectrum, in Germany the planning and implementation of communication plans and actions is entirely **de-centralised**, i.e. the responsibility of the MAs of the regional OPs, with only minimal coordination at the Federal level. Italy, Poland and Spain follow a similar approach in principle, but do have stronger central coordination mechanisms.

Table 1: Regional policy communication structures in the EU MS

| Type of communication management structure | Member States (those visited for this study in bold) |
|---|---|
| Fully centralised | Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovenia, Sweden |
| National coordination and regional OP implementation | Denmark, Estonia, France, Hungary , Ireland, Slovakia |
| Regional OP implementation and some national coordination | Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Italy, Poland , Portugal, Romania, Spain |
| Regional OP implementation only | Austria, Belgium, Germany , Luxembourg, the Netherlands, United Kingdom |

Source: Technopolis (2008): Review of EU Cohesion Policy Communication Plans: 2007-2013

It is not possible to draw definitive conclusions as to the advantages and disadvantages of different models; each country's situation and circumstances bring with them different challenges and opportunities, and the communication models tend to reflect broader factors related to the national political systems and governance models (e.g. federal or centralised). Nonetheless, it seems clear that (different levels of) **central co-ordination can lead to synergy effects and/or economies of scale**, which manifest themselves in approaches and tools such as common web portals (e.g. in Estonia), large-scale national communication campaigns (e.g. in Hungary), a common logo (e.g. in France or Poland), or – where resources are scarcer – at least effective and consistent communication support for MAs and beneficiaries (e.g. in Sweden).

Regarding the question of **single or multi-fund communication** (left open by the above-mentioned Commission Regulation), our research shows that in most cases, MAs have developed single-fund communication approaches and structures. In practice, this usually means that a separate communication plan is developed and implemented for the ERDF and/or the OPs co-funded by it in the country or region in question. However, there are several instances where the ERDF is communicated jointly with other Structural Funds (in particular the European Social Fund, but also, in a few cases, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development). This sometimes means that common communication plans involving OPs co-funded by the different Funds have been developed. Even where this is not the case, in some countries / regions there are common tools, such as websites, brochures, logos, etc., which try to provide information in a holistic way, and often emphasise the EU funding over the individual OPs. Because of this, the evaluation results suggest that co-ordinated multi-fund communication approaches tend to result in a higher visibility for the EU (although the inverse may also be true: MAs that want to emphasise the EU dimension are more likely to choose a multi-fund approach in the first place).

As for the **financial resources** available for communication, the review of a sample of communication plans of OPs in the countries we visited suggests that the amounts earmarked for communication vary widely, from less than 0.05% of the total OP budget in some cases, to more than 0.5% in a few others. The analysis is complicated by the fact that, as noted above, there are cases where individual OP communication budgets are 'topped up' by those provided by a central co-ordinating authority, or where resources are pooled across different funds. Nonetheless, it seems that, for most 'typical' regional policy OPs, between 0.1% and 0.3% of the total OP budgets have been set aside for communication. This means that most 'typical' (i.e. medium-sized) OPs will have foreseen spending around €1-5 million on communication during the 2007-2013 programme period (although the study was not in a position to ascertain what proportion of this has actually been spent). While these figures might appear small in relation to the overall budgets, they do add up to a sizeable amount when seen across Europe: assuming that approximately 0.2% of the budget of all regional policy OPs is spent on communication, this adds up to a total that is likely to be somewhere in the region of €1 billion (or almost €150 million per year).²

The **human resources** available to plan, develop and implement communication activities also varies. The questionnaire responses of MAs suggest that for most OPs the number of staff for whom communication is their main responsibility is one or two. This number is only

² Based on an EU investment of €347.4 billion, and national co-funding of between 25% (in 'convergence' regions) and 50% (in all other regions).

exceeded in very large OPs, mostly in ‘new’ (EU-12) MS, where in a few cases, MAs indicated they have up to seven ‘communication officials’. However, these numbers need to be seen with a degree of caution; during the country visits, it became clear that in many cases, the officials tasked with communication are also responsible for other (in some cases many other) tasks. It therefore seems likely that the average of three dedicated communication staff per MA resulting from the questionnaire data over-estimates the true situation.

3.1.2 Target audiences and tools

In their communication plans, MAs are required inter alia to define the **target audiences** of their communication activities. Broadly speaking, one can distinguish between three key target groups:

- Beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries (project providers), who mainly need to be informed of practical aspects related to funding opportunities, rules and regulations, etc.
- The general public (i.e. citizens at large), who should be made aware of the EU funding for their country or region, how the money is spent, and what the results are.
- Stakeholders (incl. politicians, public administration, civil society, social partners...), who can play different roles vis-à-vis the policy, including as decision-makers, implementation partners, multipliers, etc.

In the questionnaires, MAs were asked to estimate the relative **importance of these target groups** in their communication efforts (i.e. the priority afforded to each group). In their responses, MAs claimed that, on average, approximately 50% of their communication is focused on (potential) beneficiaries; around 30% on the general public; and about 20% on stakeholders. The responses also suggest that MAs in the newer (EU-12) Member States, with their typically higher per-capita funding, prioritise the general public to a slightly greater extent (39%) than their counterparts in the ‘old’ EU-15 (27%).

MAs were also asked about their **use of multipliers**. The vast majority indicated they rely to a “great extent” or “some extent” on beneficiaries (94%) and/or intermediate bodies involved in the programme implementation (84%). The regional or local media (74%) and other public authorities (69%) were also frequently mentioned as multipliers. Other groups, including the national media, civil society and social partners, and the academic and research community, are only used as multipliers by a minority of responding MAs.

Furthermore, MAs were asked to specify which **types of tools and activities** they use to communicate with different target audiences. The results (see the table below) suggest that websites are the most popular tool to communicate with all target audiences. However, after this, the tools to engage different audiences can vary quite significantly.

Table 2: Use of different tools and activities to communicate with different target audiences, according to MA questionnaire respondents

| Communication tools | Target audiences |
|---------------------|------------------|
|---------------------|------------------|

| | (Potential) beneficiaries | General public | Stakeholders |
|---|---------------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Conferences and/or seminars | 95% | 53% | 88% |
| Open days and/or festivals | 42% | 56% | 37% |
| Project tours | 25% | 20% | 47% |
| Websites | 97% | 96% | 92% |
| Electronic newsletters | 64% | 48% | 60% |
| Blogs | 6% | 6% | 4% |
| Social media tools and campaigns | 45% | 62% | 42% |
| Videos | 58% | 67% | 54% |
| TV programmes | 28% | 40% | 23% |
| Radio | 40% | 60% | 30% |
| Outdoor advertising (billboards etc.) | 31% | 44% | 25% |
| Short brochures or leaflets | 91% | 83% | 77% |
| Extensive booklets or other publications | 69% | 45% | 57% |
| Print periodicals (magazines or newsletters) | 47% | 36% | 46% |
| Regular contact with media (press releases, briefings, conferences) | 58% | 74% | 56% |
| Special activities for journalists, competitions, tours, etc. | 19% | 32% | 21% |

Source: MA questionnaires, Q4. *In the last three years, which tools and activities have you used to communicate with the following target audiences about the OP and regional policy?* n = 106

The question of **if, how and what MAs communicate to the general public** is especially relevant in the context of this study, as it goes to the heart of the question of to what extent citizens are aware of regional policy and the benefits it brings (for their country or region), and in a wider sense, whether, “[a]s a positive side effect, EU cohesion policy can contribute to strengthening public support for the EU as a whole, by highlighting the positive impact [...] in each of the 271 regions across the Union.”³

When reviewing communication materials and during interviews conducted as part of this study, it became obvious that different MAs perceive their ‘mission’ quite differently as far as communication is concerned. All understand that, in order to make their OPs work, they need to inform and attract (potential) beneficiaries. They also understand that, for the sake of transparency and accountability, the general public has a right to know how funds are spent.

However, some MAs try to go (sometimes far) beyond this, and see the Structural Funds as a vehicle to convey ‘bigger’ ideas, such as that EU membership brings with it concrete benefits for their region, country or constituency, or even that European unification is a good

³ European Commission: Factsheet – Ensuring the visibility of Cohesion Policy: information and communication rules 2014-2020

thing. Such differences of approach are often reflected in the types of activities. For example, some MAs were keen to share information about their participation in fairs and other large-scale publicity measures, whereas others felt that (in the words of one interviewee) “it is not our job to hand out balloons to the public – why would we? That’s not what our OP is about. Our communication focuses on transparency and accountability, in full compliance with the rules.” Broadly speaking, it seems fair to say that many MAs’ communication efforts focus in the first instance on the OP and on regional / national development and growth strategies, whereas the EU dimension / contribution is at risk of being more of an afterthought.

The *visibility* of the EU contribution can also be telling – such as in the example of different OP websites. Based on our review, they all seem to comply with the formal rules (e.g. inclusion of the EU flag), but visually, they sometimes emphasise different things. We came across examples that make clear visual references (in terms of colours, symbols used, etc.) to the EU, as well as others that do so to a much lesser extent. A look at the different types of logos used can also be interesting: while a logo that emphasises the OP in question (such as the two examples on the right below) does not necessarily imply that the EU dimension is neglected in the communication effort, a clear visual reference to it and/or a choice to focus the corporate identity more on the respective Structural Funds than on the OPs (such as in the examples on the left) can be an indication of a high priority afforded to informing the public about the EU origin of the funding and its wider implications. In the examples below, it is also worth noting that the MAs in Brandenburg made the conscious decision *not* to design a separate logo in order to avoid confusion, but instead communicate the EU flag, usually together with a regional symbol. Saxony, on the other hand, has designed a specific logo, but not for a specific OP, but for the Structural Funds (ERDF and ESF) in Saxony.

Figure 2: Programme / Fund logos of selected German regions

| | |
|--|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Brandenburg</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">(Text / image ‘brand’ for the ERDF)</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">North-Rhine Westphalia</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">(NRW OP logo)</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Saxony</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">(Saxon ERDF logo)</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Poland – Germany (Saxony)</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">(OP logo)</p> |

There is no single factor that differentiates the MAs that are more ‘enthusiastic’, ‘Europhile’ communicators from the others. Available resources obviously play a role, as do the political priorities of the respective (national or regional) governments and ministers – there are examples where a change has resulted in the curtailing of regional policy communication activities. But apart from high-ranking politicians, our research suggests that the capabilities and priorities of communication officers also matter. Individuals or teams who are creative, knowledgeable, and passionate about communicating (about the EU) can make a big difference. Even so, it would seem that the socio-economic environment is such that ‘Europhiles’ are finding it harder to get support for their messages throughout most of the EU, even in places that were previously favourable.

3.1.3 Good practices

A significant part of the research was dedicated to identifying and assessing good practices as far as regional policy communication – especially to a wider public – is concerned. During the course of the eight country visits and the broader desk-based research conducted in a larger number of Member States, we compiled a total of over 50 individual approaches, activities and tools that we consider to be good practice for one or more reasons, such as their design, content, the language used, outreach, novelty effects, visibility of the EU and the extent to which key messages defined by the EU are reflected. It is important to note we found good practices in nearly all the countries and regions we visited, but hardly any of these activities and tools were considered to fulfil *all* of the good practice criteria – for example, high quality videos did not necessarily reach a particularly large audience, or attractive and user-friendly websites did not necessarily feature the EU dimension very prominently.

In very general terms, the types of good practices we identified can be categorised as follows (for a summary overview and detailed descriptions of good practices, please refer to annex A):

- **Events and campaigns:** We came across a large number of events of very different types, characteristics and sizes. The examples that stood out included:
 - Participation in larger events, fairs or festivals (at which the main challenge tends to be attracting visitors and capturing their interest), as well as specific events that used different ways in which to convey key messages and bring regional policy closer to citizens.
 - There are also examples that demonstrate that even smaller events targeted mainly at beneficiaries or stakeholders (and typically favoured by OPs with limited communication budgets) can reach the general public if well organised and combined with an effective media outreach strategy.
 - ‘Campaigns’ represents a specific type (or rather series) of ‘events’, which includes installations that are displayed for a period of time, as well as competitions, where citizens can participate and win prizes. Such competitions can encourage citizens to identify and engage with the

manifestations of regional policy in their local area, and thereby grasp the contribution to their own lives.

- In several countries, specific activities were organised for school children. They include formal lessons, where pupils are provided with information in a more or less typical school setting, as well as a more playful way of encouraging learning about the EU and regional policy via a game / competition.
- **Audio-visual materials:** A number of OPs / MAs produced promotional videos and spots, for use in a variety of settings. They include:
 - More or less typical advertisement spots (duration typically 30-60 seconds) that are broadcast on TV and/or in cinemas. The concepts used to convey the often complex reality of regional policy in a way that the audience can grasp quickly and easily vary considerably – in some cases using elements of surprise or even humour. Such spots can potentially reach a substantial number of viewers (albeit at a significant cost).
 - A different category of audio-visual material is made up of slightly longer videos (duration typically 3-5 minutes), which are used in different settings (e.g. at conferences and/or for specific audiences). Such videos face similar challenges in terms of the complexity of the subject matter, as well as the challenge of dissemination (i.e. how to make them accessible to an audience that is sufficiently large to justify the production cost).
 - Finally, in a few countries, the MAs were able to produce / place content in television programmes. This includes the production and broadcasting of documentaries, as well as – interestingly – product (or ‘idea’) placement in entertainment programmes.
- **Online information tools:** All OPs use websites, most of which are relatively similar in terms of the type of content they provide and the general structure. We were able to identify a number of examples of websites that stood out for various reasons, including their user-friendliness, and/or innovative content. In addition, we came across an example of a website targeted specifically at young people, and a few examples of the use of social media to communicate information about the EU Structural Funds and regional policy.
- **Printed materials:** Brochures, leaflets, magazines etc. on all aspects of regional policy (at general, fund, OP, priority or project level) still abound in all of the countries visited. The good practice examples were chosen for different reasons, including their outreach (e.g. a special newspaper distributed to all households via bulk mail in a region where this format is relatively popular), their professional design (e.g. specific examples of magazines / newsletters dedicated to the Structural Funds), focus on a topic of particular interest to the general public and the EU contribution to this (e.g. a leaflet on high-speed rail), or the extent to which they were tailored to the specific target audience (e.g. children).
- **Media relations:** All MAs attempt to engage the media (in particular the regional and local media) to a greater or lesser extent, and most acknowledge that generating

interest in and coverage of regional policy tends to be challenging. In addition to traditional media relations work (press releases, conferences), some have invited journalists to take part in specific tours or project visits to raise their awareness and provide an incentive to report – sometimes with considerable success. In the context of media relations, we also found interesting examples of projects that may not have a direct impact, but prepare the ground for successful dealings with the press (especially in crisis situations), including analysis of coverage and strategy formulation.

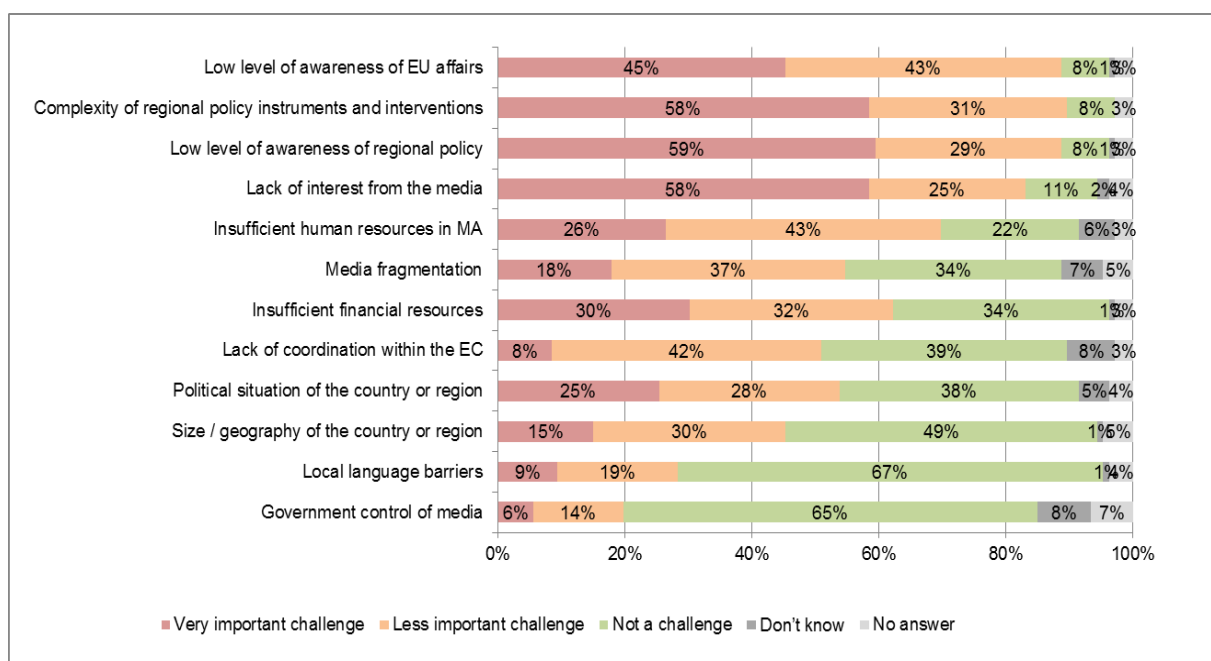
- **Internal tools and activities:** It is also worth highlighting a number of internal tools and activities used by MAs and IBs to enhance their own communication activities and/or those of multipliers (in particular beneficiaries). Some countries use internal networks and/or workshops to exchange knowledge and/or train communicators, or even organise competitions for MAs and beneficiaries to submit their best communication activities, and thereby identify and disseminate best practices.
- **Branding and corporate design:** Finally, it is worth mentioning branding and corporate design. Different countries / regions / OPs use a variety of logos and other distinguishing features to give a consistent and recognisable look and feel to their communications. These often refer to the OP as such, which sometimes means that the EU dimension is not very prominent. We have identified examples where the logos and corporate identity gives the EU centre stage, by focusing on elements other than the specific OP in question.

While these good practices could (and should) be disseminated and shared widely, with a view to providing inspiration or even ideas that could be copied elsewhere, it is also important to keep in mind that **EU countries and regions are very different** from each other, and this can have important implications for communication. There are several cases of interesting activities or tools that were identified as good practice in one country or region that clearly would not work (as well) in others. For example, free newspapers delivered to households via bulk mail are more widely read in some regions than in others; ‘idea placement’ on TV shows may be effective in some countries, but would be viewed very sceptically in others; and a seemingly innocuous idea (such as DG EMPL’s ESF Circus campaign) can elicit negative reactions (e.g. in countries where circuses carry a stigma as a form of entertainment associated with the Soviet past).

3.1.4 Challenges

As part of the questionnaire, MAs were also asked about what they perceive as the most significant challenges when it comes to communicating effectively to the general public. By far the most frequently mentioned challenges were related to the complexity of regional policy coupled with low levels of awareness and a lack of media interest (see the graph below).

Figure 3: Main communication challenges according to MA questionnaire respondents



Source: MA questionnaire, Q13: *In your opinion, what are the challenges to effectively informing the general public in your country or region about regional policy?* n = 106

In the interviews conducted as part of the case studies, communicators and stakeholders emphasised largely these same issues, but were also able to provide some more nuanced views. Many interviewees emphasised the point about the **complexity of regional policy** (with its many different priorities, programmes, interventions etc.) and the large variety and often lack of visibility of projects, which makes developing well focused and targeted messages and activities difficult, and means it is challenging to overcome the perceived widespread lack of interest among the public as well as the media. This seems to come mainly from the lack of truly ‘newsworthy’ stories and material; beyond specific projects that may be relevant mainly at the local level, regional policy communicators often struggle to find ways of capturing people’s attention. It was frequently noted that the excessive use of overly technical jargon further exacerbates this; perhaps most importantly, many questioned the usefulness of (and need for) communicating about different Structural Funds separately (rather than in an integrated way that emphasises the EU origin of the funding rather than the individual funding mechanisms). Even the name “regional policy” was described as an obstacle by some who felt it does not carry the right sort of connotations (by seeming to suggest a focus on provincial / rural areas, at least in some EU languages).

Recent developments, in particular the economic and financial crisis and its consequences, were said to have led to a **deterioration of public opinion** towards the EU which makes people (and the media) even less receptive to positive messages about regional policy. This means that MAs in places such as Italy or Spain, but also France or Germany, are increasingly facing a more hostile environment, similar in some ways to what the MAs in Sweden, for instance, have dealt with for a long time. At the same time, in ‘newer’ MS where the attitudes towards the EU have not been as directly affected by the crisis, several interviewees noted that their communication efforts are made more challenging because the ‘novelty effect’ of EU membership and funding has worn off, as people have become so

used to seeing signs with the EU flag on them that they may be beginning to take EU support for granted.

When asked about **what DG REGIO could / should do** to help them overcome these challenges and communicate effectively, communicators in Member States and regions tend to appreciate the 'hands-off' approach the EC takes to their communication requirements – although some of the most 'Europhile' would not mind stricter rules and greater uniformity. But even they are generally not particularly interested in more materials from DG REGIO, feeling that they would not be sufficiently tailored to their needs and priorities. However, many would be keen on a more local EC presence, especially visits by high-ranking officials (ideally the Commissioner), which give the EU a 'human face' and generate media interest.

3.2 DG REGIO's communication activities (Task 2)

Task 2 of the study was dedicated to collecting feedback on DG REGIO's own communication activities and tools (e.g. INFOREGIO website, RegioFlash newsletter, events, networks, audio-visual tools, etc.) from a wide range of actual and potential users. We conducted two online surveys, the first one with users of and visitors to the INFOREGIO website (which resulted in 358 responses) and the second one targeting key stakeholders and multipliers to gather feedback on communication tools and activities developed by DG REGIO (which resulted in 213 responses). The detailed results of these two surveys are presented in the annex with supporting data collection evidences (annexes B.2 and B.3). We also conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with current and potential multipliers of DG REGIO, including European level organisations and institutions, information providers and journalists. This information was integrated to the results of the significant number of interviews that were carried out as part of the Member State case studies. The detailed interview findings are provided in annex B.4. Following from this, the evaluation focussed on assisting DG REGIO in developing strategic thinking around potential communication models where the responsibilities are shared between the EC and Member States. We conducted a benchmarking exercise with three selected organisations that face similar challenges (see annexes B.7 to B.9 for the detailed case studies) and we held a participatory workshop with DG REGIO to discuss main findings stemming from the data collection.

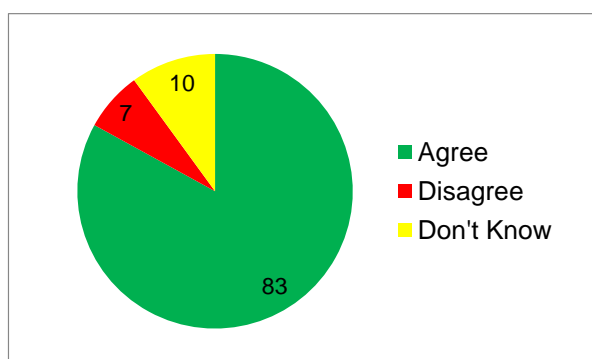
The subsequent pages contain selected key results from the analysis of data collected via the online surveys, the interviews and the benchmarking exercise, with an emphasis on lessons learned and potential implications for the future of DG REGIO's own communication strategies and approaches.

3.2.1 DG REGIO's communication role, approach and priorities

The broad majority of respondents to the online survey on DG REGIO's communication tools and activities are supportive of the statement that the Commission should play an active role, alongside the Member States and other stakeholders, in raising the visibility and understanding of regional policy among the general public in the EU.

Figure 4: Level of agreement of survey respondents on DG REGIO's communication role

"The EC should play an active role, alongside the Member States and other stakeholders, in raising the visibility and understanding of regional policy among the general public in the EU."



Several people consulted as part of the evaluation including journalists but also some within DG REGIO feel that the DG's communication approach is rather **conservative and risk averse**. This is attributed partly to hostile press coverage in the past and wanting to avoid such situations in the future. The view of some within DG REGIO's management is that Commission officials only feel comfortable with providing information after it has been checked and double checked and when it is legally certain. The main problem with this approach is that such a degree of veracity in the information is only feasible to communicate on an ex post basis, so it is hard to find information that is true and that can be communicated in real time.

This overly cautious approach to communication is reflected in a number of comments to some of the specific communication tools, namely that the Twitter account, the INFOREGIO website and the newsletter are not sufficiently exploited in terms of communicating breaking news, or that Commission officials who are not authorised spokespersons are not allowed to give interviews. A few selected comments from interviewees and from respondents to the surveys are presented below:

"The website and the Regio Flash newsletter lack more timely and updated news."
(Industry/business representative responding to the INFOREGIO survey)

"DG REGIO should not be afraid to have a more active Twitter activity. Tweets should be sent more often and relevant messages from other users could be re-tweeted."
(National/regional/local authority responding to the DG REGIO tools survey)

"What's the point of listening to a presentation from a Commission official if I (as a journalist) can't ask my own questions? It's useless for journalists." (Journalist interviewed)

Establishing specific codes of practice to communicate about things that are on-going, where people can say: *"we are doing this, and the state of play at the time of publication is xx"* can be a good method to communicate with a lower level of certainty but with a stronger degree of actuality.

A related important point raised (by journalists, MAs, staff in the DG, EU institutions, information providers and survey respondents) is that the focus of DG REGIO's communications has been on **process and outputs** (issues related to sound financial management) but that there has not been enough emphasis on reporting on the actual results of regional policy funding. The focus has been rather conservative, based on what has been spent/funded/done in the first instance, but has not gone a step further to make claims for actual results of work done. As a result, the image held by some –in particular journalists– is that of a DG that works a bit like an auditor, and doesn't convey a softer side in that it actually deeply cares improving regional prospects.

"It's less about procedures and more about results that people want to hear about."
(Representative of EU institution interviewed)

"People need to feel the advantage of regional interventions. This is only possible if there is a link between evidence of impact and the individual situation of the citizen (e.g. employment situation, structural change of the regional economy and the decision of staying or moving away etc)." (Academia/research stakeholder responding to the DG REGIO tools survey)

DG REGIO management officials interviewed highlight that the current reform process introduced by the Commissioner situates DG REGIO in a transition phase. The reform is expected to line up all programmes and projects against a set of strategic priorities, so it will be easier to situate what has been done in a broader policy perspective and to make claims on what has been achieved (as reporting will be more oriented towards results).

The box below shows how Regional Development Australia moulds messages for the general public (emotional, of a local nature, emphasising the positive elements of the regions) that are different to the messages targeted at stakeholder groups.

Regional Development Australia: emotional messages enhancing the regions

The communications strategy can be summarised in a few words – decentralise and make maximum use of relays. The objectives tend to be discussed in hard cash terms for industry, but in more emotional terms for the general public – there is an emphasis on making people “feel good” about the region in which they live. The lesson from Australia is that people want to feel good about what is happening in their region rather than about how it is being made to happen.

In terms of what should be the **priorities of DG REGIO**, nearly eight out of every ten respondents to the survey of DG REGIO communication tools agree that fostering a joint communication policy, exchange of good practice and peer learning should be the Commission’s main concern in supporting the work of MAs and other stakeholders. This includes for example organising more visits to and events in the regions (*“being on the ground and meeting with people”*), giving more visibility to EU-funded projects, playing a more strategic and harmonising role (e.g. providing guidance and oversight, defining what exactly regional policy is, what is trying to be achieved and harmonising the vision and the communication activities across MS) and generating stronger networking between communication officials and managers of EU funds in the MS (e.g. having a regularly updated, e-mailable repository of good practice examples per activity / tool).

What do core stakeholders want from the EC?

| | |
|--|-----|
| Joint communication, good practice & peer learning | 78% |
| Intensify media relations | 71% |
| Improved website | 63% |
| More audio-visual materials | 61% |
| More written materials | 33% |

Source: survey of DG REGIO communication tools

There are also many respondents (71%) who consider that the Commission could support MAs by intensifying its relations with the media. Feedback from the open responses to the survey and from the interviews with stakeholders suggests that national, and especially regional and local media should be more actively targeted by DG REGIO (or by its designated multipliers in the Member States). Many of the stakeholders consulted also felt that general media (print and broadcast mainly) should be more regularly used as a channel to communicate with citizens. Ideas proposed include running one page ads in newspapers, participating in political talk-shows, developing documentaries, etc. Though to a lesser extent, respondents to the survey also demand from the Commission an improved website

(63%) and the development and dissemination of more audio-visual materials (61%). More information on the different priorities is provided below.

3.2.2 Messages

Several stakeholders consulted as part of the evaluation (journalists working at national and local levels, in particular) feel that DG REGIO's **messages can be rather impersonal** and pitched at a level that is detached from the practical day-to-day issues that are of concern to most people. Journalists tend to see this as a generalised problem of the Commission, which is seen to be too bureaucratic – an institution with many different heads – and detached from the national contexts and local realities. Representatives of certain EU institutions like the Committee of the Regions argue that the organisations that they represent face similar constraints in that they cannot possibly produce as high quality and differentiated information as do regional counterparts across the continent, so they tend to focus on the aggregated level and to rely heavily on multipliers:

“Similarly to DG REGIO, we cannot produce precise news for every corner in Europe. We find it quite challenging to cover this continent with the different national structures and the different languages there exist.” (Representative of EU institution interviewed)

MAs and other stakeholders in the MS consulted as part of the case studies complain about the inappropriateness of the use of the term regional policy in smaller MS where they do not operate within the confines of recognised sub-national territories, such as in the case of the German Länder. This is seen to lead to some confusion.

Those consulted across the board (MAs, IBs, journalists, EU institutions) agree that focusing on concrete local examples to communicate how EU funding makes a difference in people's lives could be a way of getting closer to citizens. Responses to the online survey and interviews also suggest that story-telling could highlight human success stories from the point of view of tangible results and impacts of EU funding, but also from a more honest perspective, without ignoring challenges and problems and how these were overcome. There is also consensus that there is a niche that needs to be further taken advantage of in relation to communicating stories of cooperation between regions (cross-border projects), with a focus on what can be learned from the experience of others.

DG REGIO stakeholders are also of the opinion that regional policy is generally perceived as being a **'boring topic'**. Given that many of the topics discussed and communicated remit to money, it is argued that the impression is that of DG REGIO as a bureaucratic cash machine administering money that comes from taxpayers:

“If EU regional policy messages are mostly focused on money, the risk is that these lose their interest if/when the money is reduced.” (DG REGIO official consulted)

In addition to the messages being impersonal and boring, the shared view among stakeholders consulted via interviews is that the topic of regional policy is **highly technical**; this is another factor that plays against accessibility of information on EU regional policy.

Journalists consulted argue that the complexity of the topic is such that it demands extra time and efforts from them to get their head round to it:

“Reporting about regional policy is not for beginners: familiarity with the rules and implementation mechanisms is essential to cover the issue of regional funds.” (Journalist interviewed)

The legal and technical requirements are also considered to be too precise and complex. According to MAs and stakeholders interviewed as part of the case studies, the obligation to indicate which EU fund a project has received its grant from is misleading. The general public know little about the distinction between the Cohesion Fund and the ERDF and care even less. Communicators suggest removing these tags, perhaps replacing them with a simple ‘Paid for by the EU’ slogan to get the most important message across. The fact that each fund has its own budget line makes communicating cross-fund and carrying out joint activities (which is the MAs preferred way of working) very complex.

Coupled to the complexity of the topic and of the legal and technical requirements of EU funding, the current **information overburden** from Commission sources that journalists are exposed to (multiplicity of press releases, newsletters, websites), and the fact that it is not organised in a way that is user-friendly and easy to browse, is said to be frustrating and even counter-productive for those tasked with reporting about regional policy and EU affairs in general. The consequence is that covering EU regional policy turns into a time-consuming task, discouraging journalists to report about it:

“The information available is so vast that paradoxically it ends up misinforming.” (Journalist interviewed)

EU information providers in the Member States (EC Representations, Europe Direct Centres, Team Europe experts) are tasked with communicating to citizens and supporting them in terms of specific concerns. Their view is that citizens are positive when they see concrete achievements and projects in their regions as a result of EU funding, but that they are not interested in meta-messages about EU regional policy as such. Survey respondents also highlight that some of the key terms most frequently used by DG REGIO (e.g. regional policy, Managing Authorities, etc.) may not be understandable to all:

“DG REGIO tends to deliver information only for the initiated ones, and does not take the citizens into account. It’s their money that is being administered, so the EU general public should perceive the benefits of it.” (National/regional/local authority responding to the INFOREGIO survey)

With the exception of a (small) number of country visits from high level Commission officials, stakeholders working in the Member States and at local level (journalists, local authorities, beneficiaries) do not have frequent or direct contact with Brussels representatives, so the information is usually received through filtered and diluted messages:

“Brussels lacks a face in this region; usually when we publish a piece of news on the EU we include a photograph of an EU building or institution. We lack EU referents.” (Journalist interviewed as part of the case studies)

The shared view among stakeholders interviewed as part of the country case studies is that the **EC and DG REGIO do not have a strong presence** in their countries, and this

observation is more manifest at local levels. Regional and local authorities, as well as journalists interviewed, would value more frequent visits of the Commissioner or of other high level DG REGIO representatives. The majority complain that interaction with the EC is limited, and that DG REGIO is not aware of the work and projects conducted in their regions. Stakeholders in different countries agree that the Commissioner's physical presence can add significant prestige to events or press conferences, bring regional policy and structural assistance to the general public's attention, and give the EU a more human face. Those regions who received visits from the Commissioner in the past confirm their success and broad coverage.

3.2.3 Target audiences and multipliers

The shared view of many people consulted by the evaluation is that there is not a clear segmentation of DG REGIO's messages, tools and channels according to target audiences, and that this lack of differentiation attempts against the effectiveness of the DG's communications. Both interviewees and survey respondents meet with difficulties when trying to assess who is/are the key audience/s that the INFOREGIO website and the Panorama magazine (to name a few examples) are directed at:

"I struggle to understand if the Panorama magazine is targeted at the general public, at researchers, at authorities or at other stakeholders." (Representative of EU institution interviewed)

"DG REGIO should clarify the target audiences of each of its tools, as not all tools can appeal to everyone. If it is people working with cohesion policy programmes a certain jargon is probably ok. If it is people interested in how cohesion policy contributes to their work, less sophisticated language should be used." (Managing Authority responding to the survey on DG REGIO tools)

Whilst the majority agree that DG REGIO should focus more its communications on the general public, opinions are divided in relation to what should be the strategy to succeed in creating stronger bonds with citizens. On the one hand, there are many survey respondents who highlight that there is scope for DG REGIO to move closer to citizens by making a more active use of traditional and social media, by exercising a stronger presence in the regions, and by working closer to local governments, social actors and other stakeholders in the regions (e.g. schools, universities). The challenge of this approach is that communicating directly with citizens can be a titanic (some say unachievable) task for DG REGIO.

Representatives of EU institutions and umbrella organisations who tend to share the same challenges that DG REGIO faces argue that communication to broader audiences should be delivered through MAs in the Member States. National and local authorities also tend to support this position:

"Direct communication with the general public is problematic as DG REGIO is too far from end audiences. The challenge relies in making sure that MAs and implementers do it better as they are closer to the people. This should not be done by top down requirements but in a genuine dialogue with multipliers and by building their competencies in communication." (Managing Authority responding to the survey on DG REGIO tools)

Interviewees representing EU institutions argue that communication has become an important part of the work of MAs in the MSs in the current programming period, and this change is also reflected in interviews carried out with MAs as part of the case studies. When communication obligations were conceived, they reportedly met with resistance from some MAs who were reluctant to show the EU flag on their communications. With the initial difficulties overcome, DG REGIO has a strong advantage in that MAs have the potential to act as de facto EU officials in spreading the messages out. This is an important asset that needs to be effectively managed.

MAs are key communication partners but they are not the only ones with the potential to play the role of external multipliers. In the current communication model, DG REGIO communicates indirectly with beneficiaries through the MAs. However, there is some level of demand from beneficiaries in the Member States (those visited by the evaluation) for the Commission to forge more direct links with them. As highlighted in a paper developed by a communication agency for DG REGIO that was made available to the evaluation⁴, this model also entails risks in that the experience (positive or negative) that beneficiaries have when interacting with their respective MAs impacts on their general feelings towards EU regional policy and on the way they communicate about it. There are opportunities for DG REGIO to avoid some of these risks by talking directly with this audience through a customer service-oriented ‘what the EU is doing for you’ approach. This could involve showcasing beneficiaries’ own stories to their European peers or involving them in other interactive, networking opportunities. There is also a need to promote more effective collaboration between MAs and beneficiaries in the Member States.

Along similar lines, the benchmarking analysis of Regional Development Australia – where locally based Committees play an important role as disseminators of the information that is developed centrally – suggests a potential for examining ways in which local business and political figures in the regions can be brought onside more visibly. If they could gain credit for “bringing their region’s issues to the attention of Brussels” DG REGIO could gain increased standing and credibility at ground-level from the association with them.

The main challenge of delivering the messages to citizens via multipliers is the lack of direct control over their communication. EU information providers interviewed highlight that regional and local media tend to cover EU regional policy from the perspective of local governments and authorities, mainly because it is local governments who interact with the media and install the news on the agenda, so they are likely to highlight the role that they play as opposed to the part played by EU funds.

Another question that was formulated during the evaluation was whether European Commission Representations in the Member States can do more to communicate about regional policy. Whilst press officers in the EC Representations interviewed are positive about their potential to communicate more about the topic, MAs and DG REGIO officials consulted raise doubts about their commitment, resources and knowledge of the policy to do so:

⁴ Strategic Note for proposed Communication Action Plan around Cohesion Policy 2014 – 2020 (and adoption of legislative package), July 2013, presented by Mostra to DG REGIO.

“EC Representations normally have a long list of priorities; hence communicating regional policy is often not seen as one of them. The degree of commitment varies: in countries such as France the Representation feels it’s not their role to be selling the EU in the French regions.” (DG REGIO official consulted)

There is consensus among DG REGIO officials consulted that if EC Representations are to be more frequently approached for support, it is DG REGIO that needs to take the initiative and provide press officers in the Representations with the necessary tools to disseminate the messages to national and local media in the Member States.

3.2.4 Tools

The results of the two surveys and the interviews conducted suggest that awareness and use of DG REGIO’s communication tools and activities tends to be low, even among core stakeholders. Awareness is higher among representatives of EU institutions and among MAs in charge of OPs in the Member States and tends to decrease among other authorities, among journalists working in national and local media and among other stakeholders in the Member States and regions.

This section outlines the key findings collected for the main tools. Detailed findings can be found in the respective annexes.

The INFOREGIO website

Even though the INFOREGIO website is positively assessed by its users, feedback from the website survey and from the interviews suggests that there is room for improvement. For example, the way that the website is structured (without entry points for specific user groups) can make navigating through it a complex and time-consuming experience:

*“It is quicker to Google something than to try to navigate on Commission websites”.
(Representative of EU institution interviewed)*

Secondly, there is a shared perception that the news on the website are not current enough, and that it is difficult to discern the validity of specific documents or pieces of information:

“Generally speaking, I do not get my regional policy news through the DG REGIO website. By the time it is on there, I have heard about it from another source”. (Representative of EU institution interviewed)

“I wouldn’t go to the DG REGIO website to find information on what is currently happening. We cover much of the structural funds negotiation and rely heavily on informal contacts, but the website is not a source of information.” (Representative of EU institution interviewed)

“The information should be classified according to relevance and date. It’s difficult to find whether a specific piece of information posted on the website continues to be relevant or is out-dated.” (Consultant responding to the INFOREGIO survey)

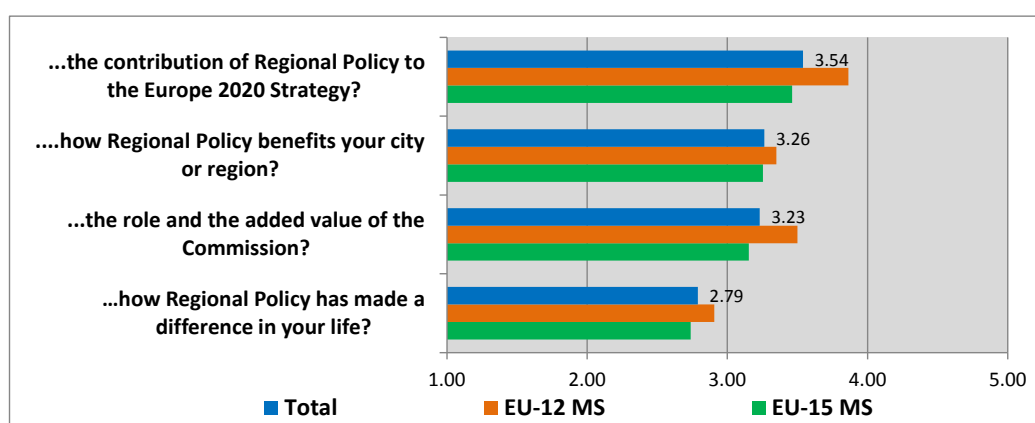
Specialised stakeholders and journalists also argue that the website should aim at better reflecting the policy cycle (discussions on the upcoming programming period were not reflected on the website). Many users consulted as part of the evaluation mentioned that the website could be less general and more focussed on offering up to date information tailored

to the specific situation in each region, including for example amount of funding available and ways in which the funds are being used, best practice examples of projects funded and related news, events and documentation. An approach more focussed on the story-telling dimension (how EU funded projects have improved people's lives) is also considered to be missing.

Both survey respondents and interviewees agree that the website should aim to reflect a more balanced mix of opinions by including more critical views and by analysing challenges and obstacles faced by project implementers across Europe. Many of those consulted feel that the website as it currently stands is too institutional and 'propagandistic', and people would value a shift towards a more reflective approach.

Finally, website users are of the opinion that INFOREGIO is good at describing the macro contributions of regional policy to the Europe 2020 Strategy goals but needs to do more in terms of how regional policy contributes to improving people's lives using very concrete examples. There should also be reporting on aspects that haven't worked and explanations of why.

Figure 5: To what extent has the INFOREGIO website helped you to better understand...



NOTE: Average scores on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "not at all" and 5 means "to a great extent"

Events

Overall, DG REGIO events are considered to be predominantly effective at targeting diverse audiences. They are judged to be highly professional and the success of the main flagship events organised by DG REGIO (in particular the Open Days, but also the RegioStars Awards) suggests that there is potential to do more in this field. A few interviewees representing EU institutions and within DG REGIO management acknowledge that a stronger focus on events would demand a permanent team in charge of observing the 'market' to identify needs and materialize these in concrete events.

DG REGIO **Open Days** are viewed positively by the majority of stakeholders consulted. They are considered as a great networking opportunity for regional stakeholders across Europe to engage with their counterparts from different Member States. They are also perceived as a bottom-up democratic event where the regions are listened to and are provided with the opportunity to exchange experiences and learn from each other year after year.

On the downside, the Open Days are considered by many interviewees (representatives of EU institutions, MAs and other stakeholders in the MS, and journalists) to have grown out of proportion in recent years. People seem to prefer the smaller editions of previous years, in that they allowed for more effective learning and long-lasting networking. There are a few interviewees who argue that the Open Days is confined to the Brussels bubble whereas a stronger, real impact could be achieved if it went local. A number of smaller events in the regions replicating the Open Days model could be a good way to get closer to the regions and, in particular, to attract more local and national media attention in the Member States. Journalists and DG REGIO management are of the opinion that one big annual event like the Open Days captures the attention of the media at a specific time of the year, but fails to achieve a regular coverage.

Awareness of the **RegioStars awards** is much lower among interviewees and survey respondents, though views of those who are familiar with the event remain positive. Views on the event are generally positive among those who took part in it, and many of those who attended acted as multipliers, disseminating information of the event to colleagues. MAs and other stakeholders interviewed in newer MS (Estonia and Hungary) consider that the competition is an effective means of sharing best practices from across the Member States. Interviewees in countries like Italy and Spain are more sceptical as to the transparency of the selection process, as the OPs that took part did not receive feedback on how the projects had been evaluated. Suggestions for improvement from survey respondents who attended the event include organising the ceremony outside Brussels and inviting a broader number of people apart from officials and nominees.

Overall, views on the **INFORM network meetings** are positive among MAs interviewed as part of the case studies, with interviewees who have attended them seeing them as an opportunity / means to:

- Listen to the ideas and opinions of other communicators on regional policy and to share best practices, both during the meetings and informally on their margins (Estonia, France, Hungary, Poland);
- Seek inspiration (Germany, Hungary);
- Learn about something new (France);
- Meet relevant people and develop a more personal relationship with them (France);
- Self-evaluate one's own communication activities against those of others (Germany);
- Give communicators the feeling that they are part of a larger community, and that what they do matters (Germany).

At the same time, it was noted by a few interviewees that there tend to be few tangible outcomes from the meetings, and that after a while, the repeated presentation of 'good practices' can become a bit stale. Moreover, the profile of meeting attendees is considered disparate, with many people working in communication, but not knowledgeable of regional policy. This is seen as a hindrance to the discussions, as the focus moves from more strategic debates on the communication of structural funds to general communication principles.

Publications

In the framework of an overall trend towards paper-less communications, DG REGIO is still considered to be essentially a publications oriented DG. As evidenced by the results of the survey on DG REGIO's communication tools, even though respondents are highly familiar with the DG's publications and these are found to be of high quality, people would like to see DG REGIO organising more events, intensifying its media relations and further developing its online and audio-visual approach. Only three out of every ten survey respondents are supportive of the DG placing a stronger emphasis on developing more written materials.

The **Panorama magazine** is the most popular tool among survey respondents, with 83% of those surveyed confirming they are familiar with it. In general, people like the design and layout of the magazine, and the way the information is presented. Fewer respondents consider that the magazine provides information that is of interest for the general public or that it offers a balanced perspective of EU regional policy:

"Panorama is too institutional and not very stimulating. I tend to get the EU relevant information from other sources. It would be more interesting if more provocative articles were included, giving space to critical or alternative voices. The current editorial line is too consensual and propagandistic." (National/regional/local authority responding to the survey of DG REGIO's communication tools)

Those who are more critical of the magazine (interviewees and survey respondents) express concerns over the lack of clear definitions on the target audience/s of the publication:

"Panorama seems to be a magazine with no clear target; it is not that useful for experts and is difficult to understand for common people." (Industry/business stakeholder responding to the survey of DG REGIO's communication tools)

Suggestions to improve the magazine include featuring more provocative, critical and less propagandistic or institutional articles, producing special issues covering specific topics or regions, providing more facts and hard data, developing a more effective outreach strategy at national and regional levels, and exploring electronic distribution of the magazine for wider audiences.

The **RegioFlash newsletter** is considered by respondents to the survey and by MAs in the Member States as a useful source of information to stay abreast of regional news and developments, but the majority do not have the time to read the editions in detail, except if there are issues of relevance to their work or region.

Recommendations for improving the newsletter include featuring more specific and detailed information and news, more appealing headlines (ideally referring to stories), information of the content of the newsletter on the email title (to encourage people to open the newsletter and to glance through it), more information on best practices, more interactive elements (inviting comments from regions), and providing information on upcoming events long before the dates.

Audio-visual tools

Awareness of audio-visual tools is generally low both among interviewees and survey respondents. On average, only one out of every four respondents to the survey on DG

REGIO communication tools was familiar with the two videos showcased.⁵ However, the majority of survey respondents would like the DG to disseminate more audio-visual material. A stronger focus on videos could be useful for DG REGIO to elaborate on more emotional, accessible and simpler messages.

Suggestions for improvement of the two video series on the survey all pivot around their dissemination, including stronger promotional actions on Euronews, the EU YouTube channel, social networks, links to MAs and local authorities' websites, etc., improved online access to the videos, shorter duration and availability in a wider option of EU languages:

"The videos should be distributed in places where people meet 'virtually' to discuss regional policy issues. Relying on people just coming to the INFOREGIO website to view the videos is not enough." (Consultant responding to the survey of DG REGIO's communication tools)

A few journalists interviewed (in particular those working on radio and TV) argued that much of the Commission's communication is developed for print journalists and that there is a shortage of tools for radio and TV journalists:

"We (journalists working on TV and radio) need sound bites, not just press releases. Short audio clips on the website would be very helpful." (Journalist interviewed)

Additional general comments collected via the survey point out to the opportunity for developing video messages from DG REGIO officials and experts to be featured in events, schools, or distributed through different channels. The organisation of live broadcasting events is also considered to be an interesting way to increase the presence of the Commissioner or high level Commission officials in the MS and regions without the need to attend these in person.

Social media

There is consensus among those consulted by the evaluation that a more strategic and regular use of social media by the Commissioner and the DG could improve their public profile:

"There's a strong potential in social media as a multiplier. More and more journalists follow and turn to social media nowadays, so traditional media can feed from messages in social media." (Journalist interviewed)

As evidenced by the results of the two surveys, respondents highlight that an active social media strategy could be a powerful tool to communicate relevant news in a timely fashion, to install or respond to more conflictive issues, and to liaise with younger audiences. It could also raise the visibility of events, publications, videos, press releases, etc., and position other key communicators within the DG. Managing Authorities and other relevant stakeholders in the MS could be encouraged to re-tweet messages from the Commissioner to increase the reach of messages to broader audiences across the EU.

⁵ The two videos included in the survey were the RegioStars Awards series of short films and the EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020 3-minute film.

At present, **@EU_Regional on Twitter** is only followed by 15% of respondents to the survey with website users, which suggests that there is scope to further promote this channel. Even though the Twitter account is judged to provide up-to-date information on important messages, events and issues, tweets are rarely re-tweeted. Followers are scarcely encouraged to seek for more information related to the tweets they receive.

Respondents to the survey recommend dividing the Twitter profile into two: one for cohesion policy practitioners and the second – for a wider audience – with information on policy results. Respondents also feel that the content is too focused on the activity of the Commissioner and that its use should be more active. There was one suggestion in particular to use the Twitter account to reflect more broadly on issues that touch Europe from a regional perspective, and which are not necessarily linked to regional policy.

The **“Europe in my region” photo competition on Facebook** is popular among survey respondents, with one third of the sample confirming awareness of this activity. The photo competition is regarded as a relevant form of communicating about projects funded by EU regional policy and as a good way of increasing public awareness of the values of regional policy. The 2012 competition registered over 500,000 visits to the Facebook application, over 600 eligible photos submitted, and more than 7000 votes cast. The 2013 edition of the competition saw an increase in the number of photos that participated in the competition, with over 860 photos submitted. Suggestions for improvement of the competition focus on stronger promotional actions in the MS.

Overall, few respondents to the survey and case study interviewees are aware of and use the **RegioNetwork group on Yammer**. Whilst some interviewees (in particular from newer MS) consider it to be a useful tool for exchanging information, stakeholders in the former MS are more likely to agree that there are a lot of such networks out there and that those that are aimed at pooling resources and ideas are much more profitable to be members of than those that only involve sharing experiences. Language represents a barrier for stakeholders in countries like Spain, who find it difficult to follow the debates in English. Whilst some interviewees find it more confusing to follow on a day-to-day basis, others think that the format is attractive and similar to Facebook.

3.2.5 Media relations

Overall, there is some frustration among journalists consulted with the current Commission’s multi-headed approach, as it is said to lead to confusion and fragmented understanding of many of the Commission’s policies and actions:

“The different DGs communicate as if their policies and actions were totally detached from one another”. (Journalist interviewed)

There seems to be a strong view that DG REGIO should communicate jointly with other Commission DGs – in principle those responsible for the other ESIF funds – and transmit a more consistent integrated EU message. On top of this, the Commission (and DG REGIO) are seen to lack a face. Interaction with the media tends to take the form of press releases and other written tools. Journalists are more likely to react positively to personal informal

contacts than to formal tools – they demand more presence from (and an open line of dialogue with) DG REGIO and the Commission as a whole.

On a more positive note, many journalists interviewed who follow DG REGIO's news on a regular basis coincide that media relations have improved in the last year, with a more active spokesperson, better press releases and more accessible news updates.

This view is also shared by representatives of EU institutions, though stakeholders in this group tend to be more sceptical about the degree to which DG REGIO can effectively improve its relations with the media. Many in this group argue that no matter which messages are being communicated, if these are coming from Brussels they will be received by the media as propaganda. On top of this, in a context where media in Brussels and elsewhere are overloaded with information, respondents agree that the positive stories that revolve around Commission funding for projects are not as readily published by the media as the stories involving corruption scandals with EU funds.

In terms of the type of media that is most interested in reporting about regional policy, journalists agree that there are big differences between commercial and public media on the one hand, and between national and regional/local media on the other hand. Commercial media is seen to be more interested in reporting about scandals and negative news pieces, whereas public media tends to have a greater interest in showcasing the EU from a positive perspective. Regional and local media are also considered to be more focused on regional policy issues than national media.

EU information providers interviewed raise an interesting point in relation to regional and local media. Whilst regional papers are more likely to cover regional policy, they only have an interest in reporting about a particular topic if the issue being communicated has a connection with the local reality. On top of this, regional media don't look at EU regional policy as a phenomenon with a European dimension but the focus tends to be on local governments and authorities. This is probably linked to the fact that it is local governments who interact with the media and install the news on the agenda, so they tend to highlight their role.

The box below confirms the importance that local media have for Regional Development Australia, and the strategy they use (centrally) to ensure that umbrella messages are consistent.

Regional Development Australia: importance of local media

Regional Development Australia places a strong emphasis on local rather than national media. The use of "shell" press releases ensures consistency of overarching messages but avoids any feeling of the story being dictated from the centre. There seems to be a higher level of awareness at grass-roots level of what has actually been delivered from the centre than there is in EU Member States of what contribution has been made by EU-level programmes.

3.2.6 Internal communication

While the role of communication has become more prominent in DG REGIO some would argue within and outside the DG that there is still some way to go. There is a view among several consulted within the Commission that many DG REGIO officials would not consider communication to be part of their role. Many organisations (including other DGs) take the view that good external communication starts internally and place significant importance on ensuring staff recognise that communication does form part of their role whatever it might be. In line with this, journalists consulted also express their frustration with the fact that DG REGIO officials who are not authorised spokespersons are not allowed to give interviews.

DG CONNECT: strategic importance of staff with strong communication skills

An explicit objective in DG CONNECT's communication strategy is to encourage staff and ensure that they are adequately equipped to communicate with stakeholders. The premise here is that officials working in specific areas should be more than capable of communicating on what they work on. For example, some officials have started to write blogs on their specific areas, something that has rarely been seen across the EC. The DG's website and blog posts have minimal editing by the communications team, which is a sign of the level of trust that they have in staff. There are of course guidelines to assist members of staff on how to communicate, particularly to prevent staff speculating on policy areas outside their brief with which they are unfamiliar.

The World Bank: the power of in-house bloggers

"The way people think about the World Bank today is different from five or six years ago and our new communications style has contributed to that. The Bank of five or six years ago would have not been so comfortable having 300 plus bloggers in-house. Representing the Bank is done at such a relatively low level because the nature of the communications space continues to be one of youth. The social web and media team doesn't have to go through six layers of clearances to communicate with millions of people."

Extract from interview with World Bank

The stated communications aims remain to tell the story well, to ensure that it is accurate, and to have it contribute to a positive view of the Bank. But beyond that, there is a real desire to avoid one-way communications. In the Bank's view, conversation and dialogue can actually help improve development outcomes in the countries concerned.

3.2.7 Lessons from other organisations

A number of lessons can be drawn from the benchmarking exercise undertaken with the Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport (RDA), the World

Bank, and DG Agriculture and Rural Development (see annexes B.7 to B.9 for the full reports). These are presented by organisation and according to the following key areas:

1. Communication strategy, objectives and messages
2. Target groups and communication tools
3. Stakeholders and multipliers
4. Challenges

Communication strategy, objectives and messages

1. The Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport

When asked whether they had a written communications strategy, the Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport (hereafter the Department) confirmed that they did indeed have one, but said they were unable to locate it. Their approach to communications might best be described as “informal”, but it is nonetheless effective. The overwhelming majority of press and media stories under the headings of “regional+Australia” are positive. They are usually about the local impact of spending programmes and they include federal level messages as well as local ones. The strategy can be summarised in a few words – **decentralise and make maximum use of relays**. The objectives tend to be discussed in hard cash terms for industry, but in more emotional terms for the general public – there is an emphasis on making people “feel good” about the region in which they live. **Messaging is also kept simple**. There are no more than four or five overarching messages and they are repeated as often as possible.

It may be objected that this approach is too simplistic for a much more complex communications environment such as the EU. But at a time when the Commission is frequently being criticised for “over-communicating” – putting out too many and too complex messages too often – it is at least worth asking whether DG REGIO should consider doing less rather than more. The new regulations for the upcoming spending period have led to a focus on process rather than outcome. It may be argued that the lesson from Australia is that people want to feel good about what is happening in their region rather than about how it is being made to happen.

An interesting difference between the Department and DG REGIO is that the Department also has responsibility for culture and sport. Both these areas of activity engender strong local emotions (local football team, local theatre, local festivals...). DG REGIO cannot start sponsoring concert performances. But it may be worth considering how the European dimension can be brought into messaging at regional level in domains other than the economic.

2. The World Bank

Perhaps the most striking feature of the World Bank’s (hereafter the Bank) external communications is the way that they are so intimately connected with the objective of **making a difference on the ground**. Most professional communicators these days routinely draw the distinction between information and communication. Information is relatively neutral while communication has a more specific purpose and should be more

two-way. But for the World Bank, this seems to be the starting point rather than the end point. Real two-way communication is the norm and the intention of the conversation is not just to make audiences favourably aware of the Bank's messages but to change behaviour in ways which will produce measurable results on the ground.

The stated communications aims remain to tell the story well, to ensure that it is accurate, and to have it contribute to a positive view of the Bank. But beyond that, there is **a real desire to avoid one-way communications**. In the Bank's view, conversation and dialogue can actually help improve development outcomes in the countries concerned.

It would be an interesting exercise for DG REGIO to take some of the texts from the Bank's development communications handbook and replace the word "development" with the phrase "EU regional development". On the face of it, there seems to be no immediately obvious reason why a technique which has worked so well in the rest of the world could not be applied within the European Union as well.

3. DG Agriculture and Rural Development

The synchronisation of the communication strategy with the term of the Commission at DG Agriculture and Rural Development (hereinafter DG AGRI) and their annual action plans combine to make for good discipline: objectives and messages are not only set out but shared with other stakeholders (in this case the European Parliament). It is also to the DG's credit that **they re-engineered their key messages in the light of focus group findings. For a large DG with a complex message to communicate this shows quite a degree of flexibility**. There is a saying among military commanders that "no plan ever survives contact with the enemy". The same could be applied to communications and audiences.

Target groups and communication tools

1. The Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport

As with the Department's strategy and objectives, analysis of target groups and use of tools is managed at a very straightforward level. **A broad distinction is made between stakeholders and the general public but there is not a deep degree of segmentation beyond that.**

The tools employed are basically press releases, Twitter and the website(s). But this is more sophisticated than it may first appear. There is a **strong concentration on local rather than national media**. The use of "shell" press releases ensures consistency of overarching message but avoids any feeling of the story being dictated from the centre. The net result of all this is that, when federal ministers go on visits to the regions, the ground has been well-prepared for them. There seems to be **a higher level of awareness at grass-roots level in Australia of what contribution has actually been delivered from the centre** than there is in EU Member in relation to EU level programmes.

2. The World Bank

Like DG REGIO, the World Bank has to balance its communications efforts between two large groupings – stakeholders and the general public. Both can be segmented and subdivided, but the Bank is in no doubt that **the general public audience comes before the stakeholders in terms of communications priority**. It may be argued that their stakeholders – since they sit on the board of the Bank itself – are much closer already than Member State stakeholders are to DG REGIO. But it seems intuitively attractive to win first in the court of public opinion and then use that to success to leverage approval from stakeholders. Certainly, this seems to make sense when it comes to political audiences as the most influential group in the mind of any politician is their electorate.

It follows from the concentration on the wider audience that mass communication tools are the most appropriate, and the Bank makes particularly good use of the **interplay between traditional and new media**. They are not perceived as separate channels, they are very much interlinked.

3. DG Agriculture and Rural Development

The image of DG AGRI itself, as distinct from its policies, has changed substantially over recent years. In the past, the DG was frequently criticised for being “too close” to its agricultural constituency:

“...DG VI as it once was had a reputation of being particularly close to farmers. Its head official was always drawn from France and was usually close to large-scale French grain interests. Many of the officials were French and [others] who worked there were usually Francophiles.” www.capreform.eu

The irony of this criticism will not be lost on officials who have looked out of their windows to see farmers protesting about the CAP in Rue de la Loi. But the legacy of the old, long-standing image of the DG and its policies was that it was concerned with the interests of one group of Europe’s citizens to the detriment of the rest. The DG has sought with some success to counter this by emphasising how many people depend directly and indirectly on the land (not just farmers, but inhabitants of rural areas, those involved in food production and distribution, the retail sector etc). This is still essentially a defensive position to take, but it is preparing the ground for a more positive narrative. It has also switched the focus from the policy (=the CAP) to the contribution made by the sector (=the land, the farmers). **At the moment, DG REGIO positions itself as supporting the regions, but not as a “champion” of those who live and work in the regions.** There may be scope for repositioning here.

Stakeholders and multipliers

1. The Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport

The **Regional Development Australia (RDA) Committees** play an important role in the Department’s communications. Regional Development Australia (RDA) is an Australian

Government initiative that brings together all levels of government to enhance the development of Australia's regions. A **national network of 55 RDA committees represents all of Australia** – and includes remote, rural, regional and metropolitan regions. RDA has a broad set of objectives aimed at enhancing the economic, social and sustainable development of Australia. Each Committee is comprised of Members who are local leaders with broad experience, as well as proven networks of contacts within their region. The Committees are renewed and refreshed on a regular cyclical basis.

It is hard to think of a parallel to the RDA Committees in European terms. The EC Representations are very much extensions of Brussels and not perceived as being rooted in their local communities. The Committee of the Regions generally engages in dialogue with Brussels-based representatives of the regions rather than at grass-roots level. Many regions in the MS have their own Regional Development Authorities of one sort or another, but these are not often perceived as being linked closely with a federal-level administration (i.e. Brussels).

TEP would certainly not want the conclusion to be drawn from this that the solution is to set up another layer of Committees. But it may be worth examining the ways in which local business and political figures in the regions can be brought outside more visibly. If they could gain credit for “bringing their region’s issues to the attention of Brussels”, and DG REGIO could gain increased standing and credibility at ground-level from the association with them, then the outcome would be a win-win.

2. The World Bank

In relation to multipliers, there is rather less to say since the Bank makes relatively little use of external multipliers in the sense that the term is normally used within the Commission. If a parallel is drawn between the Bank’s local office and the EU representations, the big difference is that the World Bank’s local offices are servicing only one client – the central office in Washington DC. They do not have 28 competing clients to deal with as the Commission’s Representations in the Member States do. This might tend to swing the argument in terms of greater use of the Managing Authorities, but they have their own agendas which may be very different from those of DG REGIO.

3. DG Agriculture and Rural Development

DG AGRI’s attitude to relays is nothing if not pragmatic. They accept that there are some partners (in MS administrations for example) who cannot share their approach, but at least they maintain contact. The interface with stakeholders via the Advisory Groups is particularly well rooted and ensures that the DG has plenty of advocates on the ground in the countries concerned.

The journalists’ network is an undoubted success. Perhaps the problem for DG REGIO in transferring the idea is that there is less of a common sense of belonging among journalists who might write on regional policy than there is among agriculture journalists. Less active but nonetheless useful networks have been developed among transport journalists by DG

MOVE and among consumer affairs journalists by DG Health and Consumers. But here again there are recognised specialist correspondents. **One solution might be to start with Editors of regional publications. They would share a pride in their own regions and a dislike of their national metropolitan media.**

Challenges

1. The Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport

The main challenges for the Department seem to be from the inside rather than from the outside. Australian politics are notoriously rumbustious and changes of ministers bring changes of messaging and changes of priority. It does appear that **simplicity brings with it a degree of flexibility** and the Department has been able to adapt to two changes of minister in the relatively short time since its inception.

In the case of DG REGIO, a change of approach has been imposed by financial imperatives. But if the DG wishes to reposition itself during the transition, the lesson from Australia would seem to be that **messaging on the ground carries more weight than messaging from the centre.**

2. The World Bank

In the relatively short time since his appointment, World Bank President Kim has done a good job of refocusing media attention away from the perceived shortcomings of the institution and back towards its objectives. The communications team have little doubt that direct, **two-way communication** with their key audiences has played an important role in this process. They are only operating in seven languages, as against the 23 which need to concern the Commission, but they do have directly interested audiences in 188 countries. On the basis of the World Bank's experience, the key question would seem not to be whether to empower staff to engage more with external audiences, but *how* to do so.

3. DG Agriculture and Rural Development

It is interesting to see how the challenge related to the lack of awareness and interest of the general public on the CAP was taken by DG AGRI as an **opportunity to re-focus the key messages** of the DG on farming and why farming is important for citizens, for their food and for the countryside. It was decided that only after that will come the message that because farming is important there is an agricultural policy conducted at EU level. In line with this, many of those consulted as part of the current evaluation argued that there is scope for DG REGIO to re-think its focus on communicating about the funds to communicate more broadly about Europe's regions per se, their main strengths and advances, in a more emotional and less rational mode.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

This section draws conclusions, based on the triangulation and interpretation of findings from all evaluation methods, sources and themes. The conclusions have been structured following the analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to DG REGIO's current communication model, and to support the formulation of a series of recommendations and the development of a number of open questions and options that require further thought and debate within the DG.

4.1.1 EU regional policy framework

Regional policy has been one of the pillars of the European integration project since the Treaty of Rome founded the European Economic Community in 1957. The purpose of EU regional policy is to strengthen the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the EU and reduce significant differences that still exist between Europe's regions. During the current 2007-2013 programming period, EU regional policy addresses a population of 497 million people in 27 Member States, touching all regions in the EU. The budget for regional policy between 2007 and 2013 (€347 billion) accounts for a third of the EU budget.

Within this framework, it does not come as a surprise that the nature of the policy is very **complex and multi-faceted**. With three main objectives under the current programming period (Convergence, Regional Competitiveness and Employment, and Regional Territorial Cooperation), the policy is tasked with addressing the disparities between the EU's MS and regions, which have become more significant with the enlargement process initiated in 2004.

EU regional policy is delivered through operational programmes and financed by three main funds, which can be used under some or all of the regional policy objectives: the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), and the Cohesion Fund (CF). The funds support projects in a number of areas, including research and innovation, information society, business development, transport, energy and environment, employment and social inclusion, education and training, health, culture, tourism, etc. Rules, guidelines and procedural issues behind the objectives and instruments are numerous and compound.

The set-up and management of regional policy funds (including responsibility to communicate) is shared between the Commission, the Member States and the regions. As a result, DG REGIO communicates both *'to'* but also *'through'* many different groups. Stakeholders in charge of executing the funding constitute the most important target group at present, including Managing Authorities in charge of the Operational Programmes, other national, regional and local authorities, implementing bodies, beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries. This group is particularly important because they have an obligation to communicate to the wider public in their countries and regions about the EU funds. EU-level stakeholders and journalists are also targeted by DG REGIO's communications, and are seen to play an important role as multipliers of regional policy messages. EU citizens are the

end audience of DG REGIO's communication – the tax-payers who support the policy but also the end users who benefit from its results. Communication with the wider public is only possible if conducted in partnership with those in charge of implementing the funding in the Member States and if picked and disseminated by media and by other key stakeholders.

4.1.2 Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of DG REGIO's communication

In such a complex context (as regards what is being communicated as well as how, by who and to whom), DG REGIO's communication is faced with a series of challenges – some of them due to inherent attributes of the DG's approach, others external elements or threats that represent obstacles to the achievement of the communication objectives. In addition to the challenges, there are positive aspects or strengths in DG REGIO's communication approach that should be built upon, and there are also external opportunities that improve the chances of achieving the objectives. Figure 6 below presents a summary overview of the main factors identified by the evaluation. Both the challenges (weaknesses and threats) and the positive aspects (strengths and opportunities) are discussed briefly below.

Figure 6: SWOT analysis of DG REGIO's communication model

| | | Helpful to achieving objectives | Harmful to achieving objectives |
|---------------------|--|--|---|
| Internal attributes | | Strengths: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic importance of regional policy in the EU context • Significant aggregated regional policy communication spending by all OPs • MAs receiving money from DG REGIO have an obligation to communicate • Strong, positive, 'Robin Hood' type message to deliver • Media relations have been enhanced with the arrival of the new spokesperson • DG REGIO Open Days and other events in general are assessed positively by stakeholders consulted | Weaknesses (or Limitations): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureaucratic, depersonalised, boring communication • Fragmented information and messages • Conservative and risk averse communication approach (too much focused on process and outputs) • Communication not sufficiently embedded in DG REGIO's staff roles • Low awareness and use of DG REGIO's communication tools and activities • Lack of a fully-fledged, integrated digital strategy (strong reliance on publications) |
| | | Opportunities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The new ESIF brand can bring / reinforce a more integrated message • The upcoming period is an opportunity for more strategic communication • Scope to share and to communicate the many communication practices across the EU • Scope to communicate about stories of successful cooperation between regions • Story-telling can bring the Commission closer to the media and the general public • Opportunities to look at (and learn from) communication elsewhere | Threats: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low media coverage of EU regional policy • Media tendency to report about negative stories involving corruption • Media scepticism towards information coming from Brussels • Regional media don't look at EU regional policy as a phenomenon with a European dimension • Growing euro-scepticism and more immediate concerns in many EU countries • Diminished financial and human resources at national level |

Internal weaknesses

One of the main weaknesses of DG REGIO's communication is its largely impersonal nature and the fact that it is seen as detached from the practical day-to-day issues that are of concern to most people. Stakeholders consulted agree that the main messages delivered and the key concepts used are too technical, difficult to understand and actually quite boring. Even the terms that are most frequently used and that are taken for granted – regional or cohesion policy, structural funds – are not always easily understood by non-specialised audiences. People demand from the DG more concrete examples, anchored in the local realities, to more explicitly communicate how EU regional funding makes a real difference in people's lives.

DG REGIO's communication is also seen as lacking a broader guiding thread or an umbrella narrative to contextualise the fragmented information and messages and to communicate from an integrated EU perspective, in coordination with other key players at EU and MS levels. There is consensus among those consulted that the Commission should ask itself what the story that it wants to tell is (behind all the projects funded) and to look for common denominators that can bring the pieces together in a coherent message.

Stakeholders interviewed, in particular those within DG REGIO, recognise that DG REGIO's communication approach is cautious and risk averse, with too much of a focus on process and outputs and not enough of an emphasis on the actual results of EU regional policy funding, and how these translate into tangible impacts that people can perceive and relate to.

This tendency towards a rather conservative attitude is also reflected in the fact that communication to external audiences relies strongly on the Commissioner and a few authorised spokespersons within DG REGIO, but is not sufficiently embedded in DG REGIO's staff role. There is a fairly widely held view within the Commission that experts in the DG are recruited for their expertise in managing money and complex procedures, but not for their communication skills. This often hampers the potential of DG REGIO staff to act as multipliers, and also causes some discontent among journalists, who complain that the DG's staff are not allowed to give interviews.

All of the above results in a disconnect between 'what' is being communicated and what the general public (and the media) are typically interested in.

The question of 'how' DG REGIO communicates is also sometimes problematic, as it is also influenced by the issues highlighted above. There is a tendency to rely too much on publications at the expense of an approach that should be more focused on the digital – including a more user-friendly and up-to-date website, a social media strategy and a stronger dissemination of audio-visual material – and on the personal – featuring a less structured and formal approach to media relations, and a stronger presence 'on the ground' outside Brussels.

External threats

Notwithstanding the limitations referred to above, there are a number of external factors that hinder DG REGIO's efforts to communicate effectively. At a more general level, the social

and economic crisis that has affected many European countries in recent years has resulted in growing levels of euro scepticism (even in countries that were traditionally supportive of the EU). 'Europhiles' are finding it harder to get support for their messages throughout most of the EU. In addition, the current situation – with major and more immediate problems occupying the agenda – contributes to a leaner coverage of regional policy issues. The economic crisis is also heavily affecting national, regional and local administrations in many Member States as a result of diminished resources available. Managing Authorities confirm that, faced with budgetary restrictions, communication funds are among the first to be cut.

In a context where communication with the general public is mainly channelled through MAs, the financial difficulties faced by many governments, but also the fact that DG REGIO lacks direct control over messages, where MAs may have different agendas, target audiences and priorities, can impact on how well regional policy (in particular the EU contribution and added value) is communicated and to whom.

Communicating with the general public via the media is not considered to be an easy task. Many (within the DG but also those representing other EU institutions) argue that institutional communication coming from Brussels is generally received sceptically by the media as 'propaganda'. No matter what the content of the messages communicated are, it is the sender who is being questioned. Journalists interviewed also admit that the media has a certain predilection to cover a story if it is linked to fraud or to financial scandal. This results in low coverage of positive stories that revolve around Commission funding for projects.

Regional and local media, which are more likely than national media to report about regional policy-related stories, don't always look at EU regional policy as a phenomenon with a European dimension but tend to emphasise the role played by local governments and authorities. This is probably linked to the fact that DG REGIO has very little presence in the regions and that it is local governments that interact with the media and install the news on the agenda, so they have a tendency to highlight their role, sometimes at the expense of the role played by the Commission.

Internal strengths

DG REGIO has a number of significant strengths that can be built upon when re-thinking its communication approach. The strategic importance of regional policy as part of the EU's portfolio is undeniable. It is a horizontal policy area that touches upon many aspects of development, and many of those consulted as part of the evaluation are of the opinion that it should have a higher profile also in other related policy areas.

Unlike other EU institutions – that may have less sensitive or more procedural/legal issues to communicate – DG REGIO is perceived to have the potential to deliver powerful and potentially appealing messages. Some argued that it can provide a 'Robin Hood'-type message (grounded on the argument that they take from the rich and give to the poor to build a more equal Europe) – although it is also clear that such a message would obviously be more appealing to the 'poor' than to the 'rich' (relatively speaking).

The fact that Managing Authorities receiving support from DG REGIO are obliged to communicate about the EU funds is a very strong premise. In total, the spending on regional policy communication by all OPs is likely to be somewhere in the region of €1 billion for the

2007-2013 programming period. No other DG across the Commission is seen to have as many multipliers and as much money to communicate (albeit indirectly) in the Member States as DG REGIO does. With all the risks and difficulties this brings (lack of control, different audiences, interests and priorities), it is an important advantage that needs to be made better use of.

Even though there is scope to improve many of DG REGIO's tools, the results of the two online surveys implemented by the evaluation reflect positive views of the INFOREGIO website and of selected publications, events, videos and social media channels. The DG REGIO Open Days stand out as an example of a successful flagship event that is praised as a valuable networking opportunity for regional stakeholders across Europe to engage with their counterparts. People would like to see more events like the Open Days, probably in more reduced dimensions, so as to reach beyond the 'Brussels beltway'. Another area that is seen to have been enhanced recently with the arrival of the new DG REGIO spokesperson is that of media relations. The shared view of journalists interviewed who follow DG REGIO's news on a regular basis is that media relations have improved in the last year, with a more active spokesperson, better press releases and more accessible news updates.

External opportunities

The current transition from one programming period to the other, and the changes that the next generation of programmes will bring, provide a good opportunity for DG REGIO to communicate more broadly about its strategic priorities and about key results and impacts achieved in the period that is coming to an end. In particular with regard to the upcoming years, the introduction of the new ESIF brand offers an opportunity to work together more closely with the other Commission DGs involved (DGs EMPL, AGRI and MARE) in order to adopt a more coordinated approach and communicate common messages focused on results and not so much on the individual funds or the money spent. Politically, stakeholders within DG REGIO argue that it is also an opportunity to move away from 'redistribution' messages towards messages focused on a growth and jobs policy.

The evaluation has also identified many examples of effective communication to the general public in the Member States, including events, campaigns, installations, competitions, school projects, audio-visual materials, websites, effective use of social media, written materials, media relations activities, and internal tools and activities. In a similar line, there are many stories of successful cross-border projects that have enhanced cooperation between regions. There is a strong potential to give more visibility to these examples and to encourage communicators in the MS to explore ideas with a view to learning from best practice elsewhere.

If DG REGIO were to combine a more strategic discourse (next programming period, ESIF) and a stronger focus on examples, the result could be a focus on story-telling, highlighting human stories from the point of view of impacts of EU funding. This approach would be more likely to capture the interest of the media and the general public. If narrated from a more 'honest' perspective, without ignoring challenges and problems and how these were overcome, it could also increase the credibility of the messages and dissipate the idea of institutional 'propaganda'.

4.2 Recommendations

Following on from the main conclusions outlined above, the evaluation study leads to a series of recommendations to improve the effectiveness of DG REGIO's communication effort going forward.

4.2.1 An overarching multi-annual strategy and annual communication planning

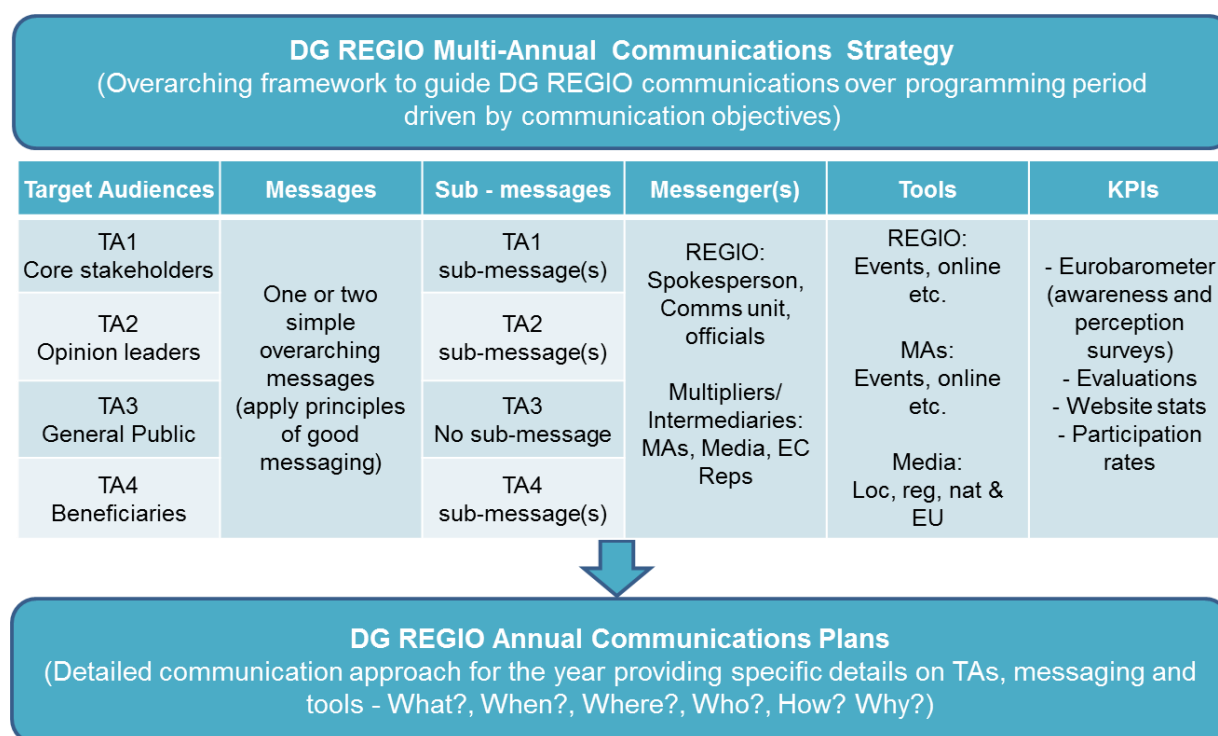
It is recommended that DG REGIO develop (1) an overarching multi-annual strategy and (2) annual communication plans. The overarching strategy should focus on the communication objectives, who the DG wants to talk to? (target audiences), what the DG wants to say? (messages) and how the DG intends to do this? (channels and tools) for the next programming period (2014-2020). The annual communication plans should provide more specific detail on each of these points for the ensuing year (see Figure 7 below illustrating this approach).

It is recommended that DG REGIO convene a workshop to develop the key ideas and objectives that should be reflected in the overarching multi-annual strategy. This should include participants from DG REGIO senior and middle management, from the Cabinet and the communication unit. It is important that the "options" presented in section 4.3 are discussed and for a decision to be taken on whether the DG should adopt any of the proposals put forward.

Once the strategy is implemented, it is recommended that DG REGIO review the multi-annual strategy at the same time as developing annual communication plans. This review process might also take the form of an annual workshop to consult and agree on any changes to the overarching strategy as well as the specifics of the annual communications plan.

4.2.2 A clear hierarchy of target audiences, with messages and tools for each

It is essential that both the multi-annual strategy and the annual communication plans detail a clear hierarchy of target audiences, with messages (and sub-messages) and tools for each. Once these elements have been agreed (taking into account the "options" described in section 4.3), concrete objectives and key performance indicators (KPIs) should be developed. In the context of a hierarchy of target audiences, DG REGIO should ensure that more emphasis is placed and resources spent on reaching the primary target audiences, while not losing sight of the others.

Figure 7: Multi-annual strategy & annual communication planning

4.2.3 Clearer, sharper and customised messaging

It is recommended that DG REGIO adhere to the following principles (drawn from evaluation findings) when developing messages for the future:

- **Less is more:** Develop one or two simple overarching messages as well as specific sub-messages per target group. Messages targeted at the general public need to be pitched at a very different level than specialists, and the communication plan needs to recognise this and act on it.
- **Keep it simple and straight forward:** The simpler the message the more memorable and “sticky” it becomes (particularly any overarching messages / those targeted at the general public).
- **Tell a story:** Stories are able to give messages a human face potentially allowing people to connect more easily with what regional policy means. The key here is generating interest among target groups (i.e. convey a “human” story to the general public, convey a story of robust “evidence” to a core stakeholder);
- **Find the core:** Effective messages take the form of short sound bites which are not able to tell the whole story. DG REGIO’s job is to develop the message(s) based on a unifying element which captures the essence of what EU regional policy is actually doing.
- **Be consistent:** The more a message is repeated, the more people will remember it and be able to share it. DG REGIO should not be concerned about sounding like a broken record, not everybody is listening all the time and you are not your audience.

- **Be bold:** DG REGIO should not be afraid to stand out, make a big claim and state its own accomplishments (this is something that the DG might not have done enough of in the past).
- **Be focussed:** The point here is that DG REGIO's message(s) is defined as much by what it doesn't say as by what it does. The more the DG tries to be everything and reach everyone, the more it becomes nothing and reaches no one. The evaluation has identified this as being a key challenge for DG REGIO. The debate on the extent to which the DG can take a more focussed approach is discussed in section 4.3 below.

4.2.4 Increased focus on online tools, events and a more “personalised” approach

It is recommended that DG REGIO focus on two different yet complementary communication approaches. The DG should do more online as well as taking a more personalised approach and “going local” through events, in particular.

Doing more online: DG REGIO should place greater emphasis on utilising online communications including the website and social media. In order to take this forward effectively it is recommended that it be guided by a digital strategy and plan of implementation. The evidence suggests that the majority of DG REGIO target audiences are increasingly receptive to online communication and feel that the DG has some solid foundations on which to build.

A more personalised approach: It is recommended that DG REGIO make itself more accessible. As an organisation it is seen by many to lack a “face” in that, aside from the Spokesperson's service, access to DG REGIO officials is relatively limited. In practical terms, becoming more accessible might entail sending officials out on mission more and encouraging them to blog and interact with audiences using social media. The DG should also consider “going local” by putting on (and/or participating in) more events in the Member States. The positive feedback on Open Days (and other events like the Regio Stars Awards) from those consulted as part of this evaluation suggests that DG REGIO would benefit from doing more on this front. Organising a series of events in Member States could be an effective way of getting closer to the regions and attracting more local and national media attention.

The extent to which a more personalised approach is adopted is a point that the DG needs to consider carefully (based inter alia on the options put forward below). However, based on feedback from a variety of stakeholders, it is recommended that some level of effort is made on this front at the very least.

4.2.5 Making communication a priority

It is recommended that DG REGIO elevate the profile of “communication” and stress how important it is in the context of what the DG is doing. This starts with a greater emphasis on internal communication (the rationale being that good external communication starts internally) and a strong message to staff that communication does form part of their role whatever it might be. This culture shift will obviously not happen overnight and will not come

about as the result of the Director-General sending everyone an email. It will require a commitment from senior and middle management, and a two-way dialogue with staff to ensure that communication moves up everyone's priority list.

4.2.6 Be bold

It is recommended that DG REGIO take a bolder approach to communication. There is recognition that there has been a change in this direction particularly with the arrival of a new Spokesperson but there is scope to go further. In line with the principles of effective messaging, the DG should not be afraid to make a big claim and state the accomplishments of the EU's regional policy. At the same time, when things go wrong or when results are not good, it is recommended that (as most consulted as part of this evaluation would advocate) a pro-active, transparent and lesson learning communication approach be adopted. It goes without saying that this all needs to be professionally and carefully orchestrated.

4.3 Options for consideration

In the previous sections, we have put forward a series of concrete recommendations to better plan, structure, prioritise and implement DG REGIO's communication activities during the next programming period (2014-2020). However, there remain a series of fundamental questions relating to the strategic orientation of communications going forward. The answers DG REGIO decides to give to these questions will define how the recommendations presented above (most of which relate more to the *process* than to the actual *content* of the communication) will be put into practice. They involve making strategic choices, each of which has profound implications and requires a careful weighing of potentially significant advantages as well as disadvantages. Therefore, these choices cannot be made by the evaluation team, but require further discussions at all relevant levels within DG REGIO. Only if key stakeholders (not only in the communication unit, but throughout the organisation) have bought into the future strategic direction can it be successfully implemented.

4.3.1 Priority target groups?

Arguably the most important question DG REGIO needs to clarify is which target group(s) to prioritise. As noted in the recommendations above, the definition of target audiences is the first step in developing effective messages, channels, tools, etc. In the past what might be called 'specialist' groups (core stakeholders, multipliers, and opinion leaders) have been the main group targeted by DG REGIO's communication activities. Communicating to and raising awareness among the general public, on the other hand, has been mainly (although not exclusively) left to the MAs in the MS and regions.

Going forward, the question raised by this study is whether DG REGIO should dedicate significantly more effort, time and resources to attempting to reach the general public (directly and/or via intermediaries and multipliers), or should continue to focus mainly on

specialist audiences. This is not a clear-cut ‘either/or’ question – in fact, it is clear that both groups need to be targeted to some extent. However, a clear balance needs to be found, and DG REGIO should avoid trying to ‘be all things to all audiences’. Strategically, a greater focus on the general public would represent a significant shift in DG REGIO’s approach, and have important consequences for how its communication is conceptualised and carried out.

| Option | Focus on communicating to the general public to a much greater extent |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| What it could entail | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop specific messages, to appeal to EU citizens at large, and/or specific sub-groups • Implement (more) campaigns, tools (online / audio-visual) and activities (with media / direct contact) targeting the general public • Strengthen co-operation with MAs to raise awareness among the general public, and emphasise the EU contribution • Distinguish more clearly between <i>informing</i> (provide factual information) and <i>communicating</i> (attempting to change attitudes) |
| Advantages / opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrating the added value of the EU to citizens is crucial in the current socio-economic climate • In order to generate interest, communication to the public needs to emphasise (more) relevant messages than has often been the case to date • Less reliance on MAs, which may have their own priorities and not emphasise the EU dimension / key messages defined by Brussels |
| Disadvantages / risks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DG REGIO may not have the necessary resources and know-how to <i>effectively</i> communicate to the general public in all 27 MS • Risk that this would detract from the (essential) communication to core stakeholders and specialist audiences • Related to the previous point, some argue that communication to experts and opinion leaders eventually ‘trickles down’ to the general public anyway • Risk of duplication of MAs’ efforts, and resulting resentment from these |

4.3.2 More focused communication?

The study has confirmed the many sources of complexity that regional policy communication implies – a multi-faceted policy, funding very many different types of priorities and interventions in different regions, often with somewhat intangible results, and an audience that is fragmented into a multitude of interest groups, countries, sectors, etc. This raises the question of whether it is advisable – or feasible – to devise a single communication strategy that does justice to these complexities, and manages to reach citizens (and stakeholders) across the EU in a way that speaks to them in a meaningful and relevant way.

In order to illustrate this dilemma, think of two Member States – one that acceded to the EU relatively recently, with high per capita support from the Structural Funds (funding inter alia large infrastructure projects), and a population that in its majority views EU membership as a positive, interesting development; and another that has been a member for several decades, is a net contributor to the EU budget, and whose population’s prevailing attitude towards the

EU can be summed up as ranging from apathy to hostility. In such circumstances, it is hard to imagine messages or tools that would resonate equally well in both environments.

On the other hand, DG REGIO's resources are obviously limited, and a tailored approach to communicating a large number of different topics and audiences may not be feasible. In light of this, it seems worth considering whether it is necessary to adopt a more focused approach, i.e. a communication strategy that for a specific period of time concentrates on only one or a few key priorities and/or target groups, rather than attempting to bring the whole of regional policy closer to citizens across the EU on an equal basis.

| Option | Focus DG REGIO's communication efforts on a limited set of key priorities |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| What it could entail | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divide the upcoming programming period into intervals (e.g. three two-year periods) • Define a relatively homogeneous set of priorities and/or target audiences for each interval (e.g. on a geographical basis: Central and Eastern Europe, Northern and Western Europe, Southern Europe) • Intensify the presence of EU officials in the selected regions and collaborate closely with selected OPs • Develop tailored materials, possibly launch own campaigns in the selected regions (e.g. a 'tour bus') • Assess awareness and perceptions before and after the 'intervention period'. |
| Advantages / opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The approach takes into account differences between regions – one size does <i>not</i> fit all. • Better to achieve a lot in a few places, and then move on, than to do a little bit everywhere (this approach could be illustrated by the idea of using a 'hose pipe' instead of a 'watering can') • Ability to plan focused activities, monitor / assess results, and learn lessons. |
| Disadvantages / risks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can DG REGIO justify focusing on some regions / OPs / topics / groups and neglecting (at least temporarily) others? • How would MS / regions take to being singled out for 'intensive communication support'? • Would DG REGIO have the resources at its disposal to plan and do this on a sufficiently large scale? |

4.3.3 Joint ESIF communication?

With the adoption of the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014 – 2020 for Growth and Jobs, there will be a set of common rules governing the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF). This is meant to increase coherence and synergies amongst the five instruments, which will henceforth be known as the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF).

This common framework and label brings with it opportunities, but it also risks creating greater confusion by adding yet another acronym and 'brand' (ESIF) to a subject matter that is already perceived as overly bureaucratic, technical and cluttered by many. This study has shown how a proliferation of names and logos of actors, funding mechanisms and vehicles (EU institutions, Funds, OPs, MAs, IBs, etc.) can detract from the visibility of key ideas and messages. However, it also provides examples of how such problems can be resolved, such as the case of Saxony, which has developed a common logo and visual identity for all its EU-funded programmes and activities, which can be adapted to include the acronyms / names of one or more Funds, where appropriate.

The introduction of the ESIF represents an opportunity to intensify collaboration with the other relevant Commission DGs in the area of communication, and perhaps even develop joint approaches that could significantly enhance the clarity and visibility of the role of the EU and the impacts of its structural and investment policies. However, whether such collaboration is feasible in practice remains to be seen.

| Option | Closer collaboration with other DGs under the ESIF umbrella brand |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| What it could entail | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DG REGIO communicates jointly with other DGs (AGRI, MARE and EMPL) with a stronger focus on EU support as a whole or under a new ESIF umbrella brand. • Development of a common visual identity for the 'EU funds' or the '5 ESIF funds' • Co-ordinated simple communication and messages with other Commission DGs involved • Communication guidelines for multipliers (with support from DG COMM) • Joint activities, events, tools and media actions |
| Advantages / opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May help nudge / force the EC to abandon (to some extent) its excessively formalistic, compartmentalised communication approach – Does the general public really need to know which Fund is involved, or is it enough if people know that the EU is behind it? • Will simplify the main messages and provide a broader guiding thread to contextualise the information. • Synergies can be created: more EC officials ('multipliers') across the EU communicating about EU support/ESIF funds, tools and materials. • Regulations for the new programming period allow for easier financial management of multi-Fund communication activities by MAs |
| Disadvantages / risks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May generate more confusion: The ESIF is a new brand that will coexist with the communication of the individual funds (unless DGs are prepared to 'let go' of their Funds and brands to some extent) • In view of pre-existing communication agendas, practices and interests, it may prove very challenging to achieve buy-in across different DGs, ministries, stakeholder organisations for joint communication. • Vastly differing interests, needs and expectations of diverse ESIF audiences (what concerns a farmer may not be meaningful for a fisherman or a regional authority, for example) • Likely to encounter resistance from those MAs and beneficiaries whose visual identity is currently focused on DG REGIO funds. |

4.3.4 Intensification of MA interaction?

The present study has confirmed once more that, in view of their key role in regional policy implementation, the MAs of the national and regional OPs are the most important actors when it comes to communicating the policy. Together, they have spent in the region of €1 billion on communication over the course of the current programming period; even though a large part of this is dedicated to the more 'institutional' side of communication (rather than awareness-raising among the general public), these amounts still dwarf anything DG REGIO itself has spent or may be able to spend in the future on communication. Hence, it seems fair to say that any (albeit small) collective improvement in the quality and/or quantity of the MAs' communication efforts is likely to have a larger impact than anything DG REGIO itself may be able to achieve.

At the same time, the extent to which DG REGIO can influence the communication activities of MAs is limited. The Regulations for the next programming period have been or will soon be adopted, so from a legal perspective, there are only the common minimum requirements (which are not significantly different from the previous period, although some rules have been tweaked). Thus, DG REGIO has few 'sticks' (figuratively speaking) at its disposal, and will need to rely primarily on 'carrots' instead if it wants to encourage and incentivise MAs to go beyond the formal legal requirements and communicate more intensively to the general public, and/or provide more visibility to the EU (alongside the OPs and national/regional institutions, growth and investment strategies etc.).

The study has confirmed that most MAs would be open to DG REGIO playing an expanded role and providing more support and guidance. But DG REGIO will have to tread very carefully; purely insisting that MAs disseminate information about the EU and regional policy widely, and portray it in a positive light, is unlikely to generate the desired effects. Rather, MAs need to be incentivised to the greatest extent possible and given good reasons to make them understand *why* it is not only in DG REGIO's, but also in their own interest that regional policy interventions are used to promote a positive message about the EU in a wider sense.

In closing, it should be noted, although these issues have been presented as separate options, they are obviously interlinked, and the strategic choices that are made in one area may affect the others. This is especially true when it comes to the interaction between DG REGIO and the MAs; if DG REGIO decides to take forward any or all of the three options presented previously, this will have to be factored into how it engages with MAs. For example, a decision to focus on some countries or regions for a given period would provide an opportunity to attempt to engage those MAs in a more targeted way.

| Option | Intensify efforts to help MAs communicate more effectively to the general public |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| What it could entail | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take advantage of all opportunities (Monitoring Committee Meetings, visits by EC officials to the regions or by regional authorities to Brussels, etc.) to drive home the importance of communication. • Development and dissemination (possibly via a dedicated online platform) of communication guidelines and tools, best practice examples, relevant news and policy updates, information on events, etc. • Development of talking points and 'shell' press releases that the MAs and beneficiaries can adapt to their national and regional contexts • Building on INFORM, create spaces for more (European and/or regional) encounters and exchange of experiences and knowledge among MA communicators, with guidance from DG REGIO • Initiatives / tools to engage beneficiaries (project providers) to a greater extent, link them and provide them with common tools / a platform to share results |
| Advantages / opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MAs sending the message out across Europe is an important comparative advantage – if appropriately used, no other policy area has as many multipliers of the message in the MS as DG REGIO. • In terms of both resources and know-how of local needs and interests, MAs are best placed to reach the public (and media) in their respective regions • The fieldwork for this study suggests there is an appetite among many MAs to receiving more support and guidance. • Beneficiaries (project providers) are de-facto communicators; their more active involvement would help to strengthen disciplined approach to messages. |
| Disadvantages / risks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk that, in spite of DG REGIO's best efforts, MAs are reluctant to go beyond the formal communication requirements, or make full use of materials / guidance developed by DG REGIO • Can DG REGIO mobilise sufficient resources (human and financial) to engage with MAs in a sufficiently intense way, and provide not only a forum for exchange but also more materials, guidance and support? • Risk that MAs feel 'side-lined' if DG REGIO builds stronger ties with beneficiaries. |