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GUVERNUL
ROMÂNIEI

Regio
PROGRAMUL OPERAȚIONAL REGIONAL

Instrumente Structurale
2014-2020

SUMMARY REPORT

1ST STAGE

ASSESSMENT OF THE INFORMATION LEVEL, NECESSITIES, AND PREFERRED CHANNELS

2017 September

Contract: *Services of sociological studies in order to evaluate the information and communication needs, and the information and communication activities eficiency, according to the Communication Plan for the Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020;*

1ˢᵗ **Stage –** *Assessment of the information needs, levels, preferred channels among the potential applicants;*

Summary report

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Content

General presentation

Context

This report contains information from 4 researches elaborated under the contract 183 / 26.04.2017, contract which aims at the evaluation of the information and publicity actions carried out according to the Communication Plan for ROP 2014-2020, and at proposing recommendations to guide the measures of information and communication for the period 2020 - 2023, until the program is completed.

Stage I of this contract aimed to establish the information needs, the channels, and its status among potential applicants. This report addresses various types of beneficiaries and actors with potential to be involved in ROP 2014-2020, as follows:

Four sociological studies: a public opinion survey– questionnaire based, two inter-view-based studies, and one based on focus-groups.

TARGET

METHODOLOGY

Local public authorities (respondents are representatives of the County Councils, Municipal/City/Town, across the country).

→ Public opinion survey (questionnaire based) on a sample of 503 public authorities.

Potential beneficiaries, other than the local public authorities: registered social services providers (public or private); university level educational institutions; SME's form urban and rural area; micro-enterprises from the urban area; cult/religious establishments; technological transfer and innovation infrastructure, scientific and technological parks; business incubators and accelerators; NGO's.

→ Structured interview based survey on 202 respondents among beneficiaries that are not local public authorities.

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Media partners and journalists that are involved in the public communication process of Regional Operational Programme.

→ Structured interview-based inquiry among 80 journalists from all the development regions.

Communication officials from the management level structures at the regional level or from ROP-Management Authority or Implementation Organisms.

→ Focus-group research at the level of the communication and information officials from ROP-MA, IO.

Methodology explanatory notes

Each of the 4 inquiries has had its own specificity in regards of the data collection. Therefore, the public opinion survey (1) at the level of the local/county public authority beneficiaries (LPA) has a 503 respondents sample, officials from the County or the City/Town Councils across the country. The questionnaire was applied face-to-face (with only 2 exceptions). The inquiry regarding the other beneficiaries (2) had a sample of 202 (various representatives of social services providers, state owned university level institutions, SME's, technological transfer and innovation infrastructure, scientific and technological parks; business incubators and accelerators; NGO's). The focus-group based study (3) included 8 focus-groups on communication officials from the management level structures at the regional level or from ROP-Management Authority or Implementation Organisms. They could take place with the support of the Regional Development Agencies (RDA's) and the ROP Management Authority. The participants were selected as to they would and should reflect diversities on their opinions, covering the entire area of discussion topics (regarding the internal communication). The group meetings were face-to-face, using locations situated in each development region.

The study regarding the media partners (4), that is, the journalists being involved in the public communication process related to ROP had 80 respondents, 10 fore each development region. The participants' selection was made with the support of the Regional Development Agencies.

Sample structure

Considering the respondents category distributions, the survey that was applied to LPA's (and County level, as well) included surveyed institutions as it follows: 45% urban administrative institutions, 47% rural, and 8% at the county level.

Public administration type	No	% within the national population for each type
County administration	40	95%
Municipal administration	74	72%
City/town (urban level) administration	152	70%
Urban (overall)	226	71%
Communal (rural) administration	237	9%

Table 1 – LPA Survey sample structure

The interview based study, at the level of the media partners, that is, journalists involved in the ROP-Regio public communications process had a sample of 80 persons, distributed as it follows:

Media institution type	No	Percent
Press agency	9	11%
On-line publication	13	16%
Printed Press	29	36%
Radio	10	13%
Television	19	24%
TOTAL	80	100%

Table 2 –Interview-based survey sample structure

All four surveys had samples with relatively equal distributions in each region. Thus, all regions have the same representation.

The study on beneficiaries other than LPA's had 202 respondents (from the same number of organisations/ institutions).

Type of beneficiary	No	Percent
Registered social services provider	48	24%
State-owned university level institution	39	19%
Urban SME's	27	13%
Rural SME's	8	4%
Urban micro-enterprises	11	5%
Religious establishment	14	7%
Technological transfer and innovation infrastructure/ scientific parks	13	6%
Business incubator, accelerator	7	3%
NGO's	35	17%
TOTAL	202	100%

Table 3 –Sample structure– other than LPA's beneficiaries survey

For the focus-group based inquiry, the target was on the internal public, and 72 (overall) persons were included in the study. The groups had a heterogeneous structure, considering the respondents' position within their job hierarchy, also regarding the number of the group participants. On average, each meeting had 8 participants at the focus-group, also, regarding the job position, there were selected individuals that are involved in the communication process, but also individuals responsible with the fund accessing.

Data collection instruments

Each of the 4 studies were based on the general objectives of the research and took place gradually, including structured interview guides. In the following section the themes covered by each study will be described.

The LPA's officials survey was focused on the following:

- Assessing of their experience with REGION funded projects;
- Identifying the general attitudes ;
- Assessing the current level of information;
- Identifying the information needs at the LPA's level:
- Assessing the inter-institutional network of communication;
- Identifying the optimal communication channels;
- Assessing the communication instruments in use.

The study on the beneficiaries, other than LPA's, was focused on:

- Assessing the Regio awareness level;
- Assessing the Regio-related projects' communication experience level;
- Identifying general opinions regarding Regio;
- Identifying the information needs among the potential beneficiaries;
- Identifying optimal information channels;
- Assessing the communication media;
- Identifying the good-practices models.

The focus-group study was oriented towards:

- Assessing the general attitude towards the Regio-related internal communication processes.;
- Identifying the communication relationship of each of the involved actors within RDA's. ROP-IO and MA, the Ministry.

- Analysing and assessing the used communication instruments;
- Identifying the main problems within the Regio communication processes;
- Identifying the information needs at the level of the internal public;
- Identifying the optimal information channels.

The study on journalists was focused on the following themes:

- Assessing the general level of information;
- Evaluating the communication network of the RDA's representatives with the Ministry and ROP MA;
- Identifying the expectations that the media partners have towards the information on ROP;
- Identifying the optimal relational channels with the mass-media, form the journalists' point of view.;
- Identifying the expectations of the journalists regarding the communication processes during the current program exercise.
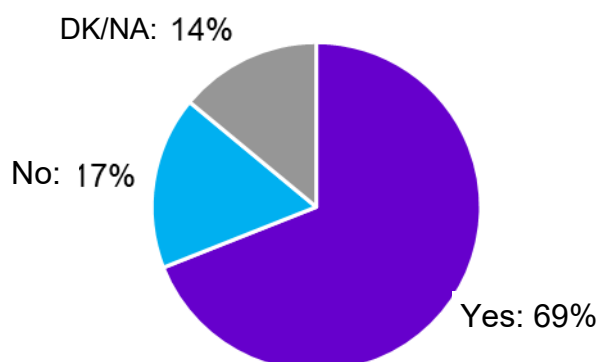
Data analysis

County and local public authorities

A majority of the local public administration institutions that were included in the sample (63%) declares that they have implemented at least once a project that was financed through Regio in the previous program, thus, there is a high level of experience in this regard. Along with the correlations of the previous experience with the appreciation manners, this extended familiarity with Regio - funded projects gives also a series of comparisons between the two financing periods and, last, but not least, a high level of expectations.

This experience was 100% percent for the County Councils, as all their representatives declared that they had been involved in project implementing in the 2007-2013 period. Accordingly, their level of expertise is significant. Similarly, the municipal public administrations were involved in 97% in accessing and implementing ROP financed projects.

Thus, there is no surprise in finding that a large part of the representatives manifest their intention to access ROP-Regio finances in the future.

Does your institution have the intention to access at least one project that will be financed through Regio?
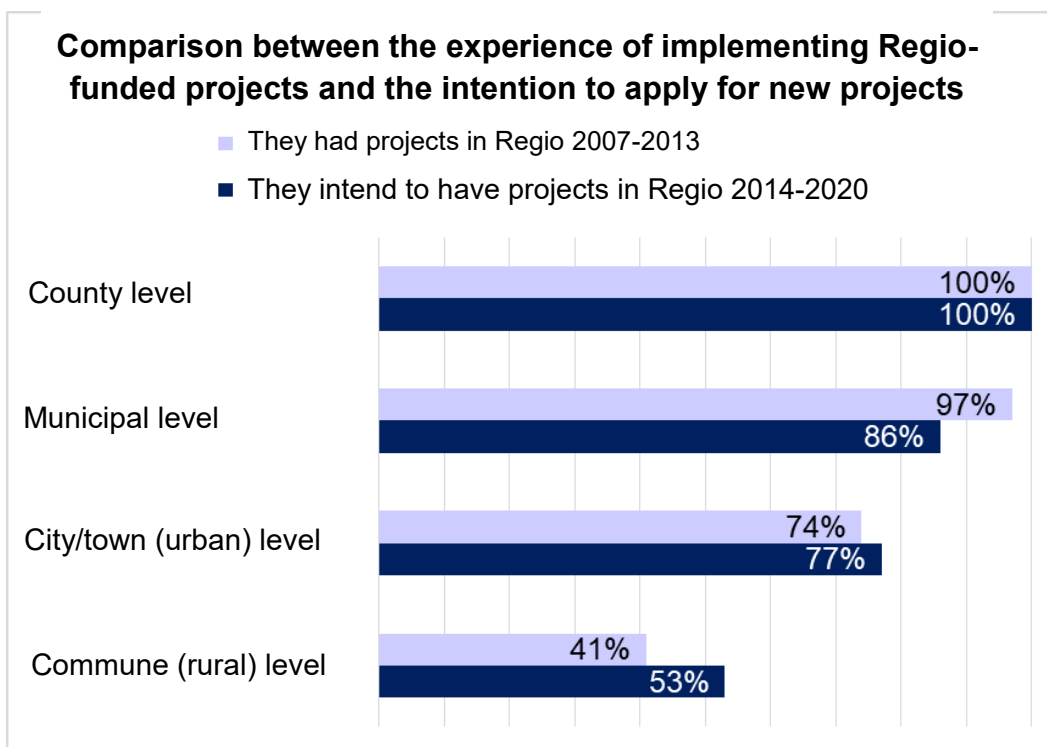
DK/NA: 14%

No: 17%

Yes: 69%

Graph 1 –LPA's intentions on accessing funds with ROP-Regio 2014-2020

All the county level institutions have expressed their intention to access funds, however, only 53% of the communal (rural) LPA's share the enthusiasm. The following table gives a better description of the distribution of the answers.

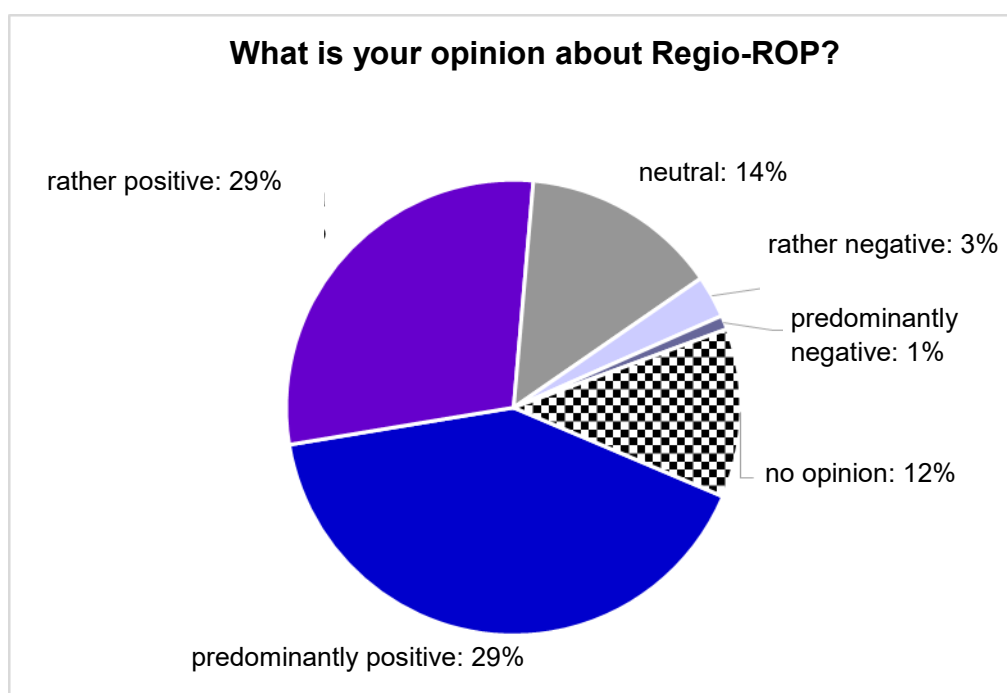| Is the institution that you represent willing to apply for financing projects in ROP 2014-2020?	County	Municipal	Town/City	Town/Commune (rural)
Yes	100%	86%	77%	53%
No	0%	1%	9%	29%
DK	0%	12%	14%	18%

Table 4 –Intention of accessing funds through Regio by the type of LPA's

The comparison between the experience of implementing projects in 2007-2013 financial period and the intention to apply for financing in the current exercise shows an important increase for the small localities group (small towns and rural). On the other hand, a significant part of the LPA's (at the municipal, city, town or commune level) declared themselves as being in expectation, given the fact that not all the financing lines of Regio are open yet.

Comparison between the experience of implementing Regio-funded projects and the intention to apply for new projects

■ They had projects in Regio 2007-2013
■ They intend to have projects in Regio 2014-2020

County level: 100% / 100%
Municipal level: 97% / 86%
City/town (urban) level: 74% / 77%
Commune (rural) level: 41% / 53%

Graph 2 – Comparative analysis of the experience vs. the intend regarding the Regio-financed project by the type of the administrative institution

The attitude towards Regio, for the whole sample, was predominantly positive. Thus, 66% LPA's respondents have a positive or somewhat positive attitude in regards of Regio, and only 4% have a negative or rather negative opinion. Almost a quarter of the respondents declared that they have not yet crystallised an opinion, be it positive or negative.
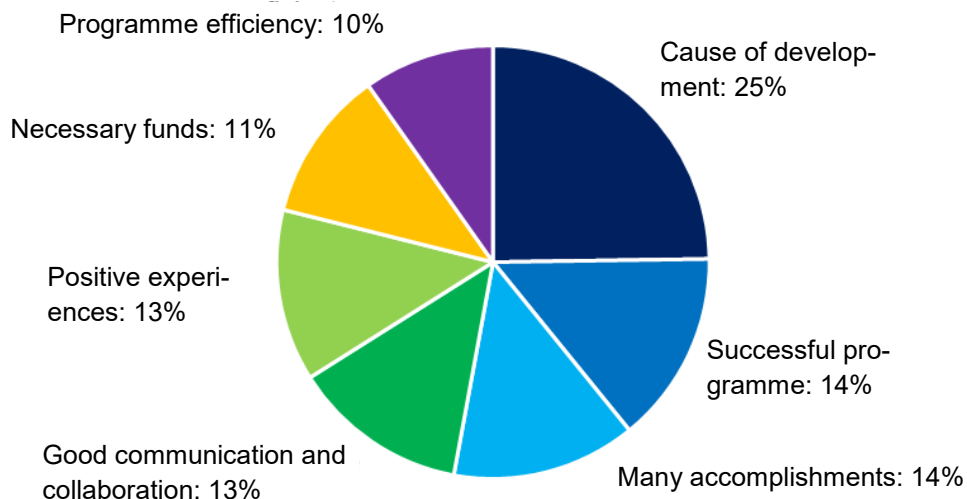
What is your opinion about Regio-ROP?

rather positive: 29%

neutral: 14%

rather negative: 3%

predominantly negative: 1%

no opinion: 12%

predominantly positive: 29%

Graph 3 – The general attitude towards ROP-Regio at LPA's level

Thus, it can be observed that there is a direct correlation between the positive attitude towards the Regio-financed projects and the experience with them. The higher the experience is, the more the positive attitude rises. To put in other words, the best communication instrument is the successful implementation of a project.

Those who have positive opinions towards Regio have a set of motivations that reflects exactly the success of implementing of a project as such: Regio funds are really helpful for the localities' development, or the fact that Regio is perceived as one of the most important instruments available to LPA's.

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The main reasons that of the positive attitude (as stated by the LPA's respondents) are based exactly on the success of the already implemented REGIO projects The best instrument of a persuasive communication is the successful project itself.
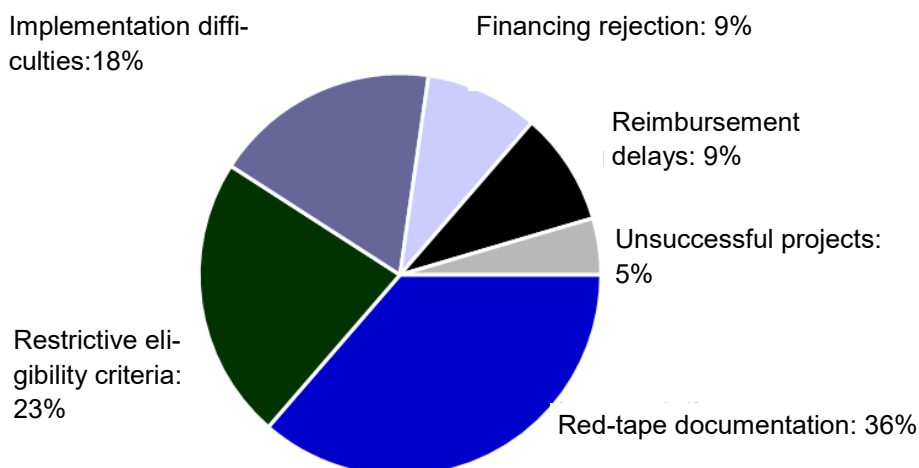
Positive attitude motivation

Programme efficiency: 10%

Necessary funds: 11%

Positive experiences: 13%

Good communication and collaboration: 13%

Cause of development: 25%

Successful programme: 14%

Many accomplishments: 14%

Graph 4 – Positive opinion towards Regio motivation

On the other hand, the argumentation for the negative opinions are oriented mainly towards the red-tape documentation, the eligibility criteria and that they exclude smaller localities in both urban and rural areas, at least on the financing lines that are currently open.
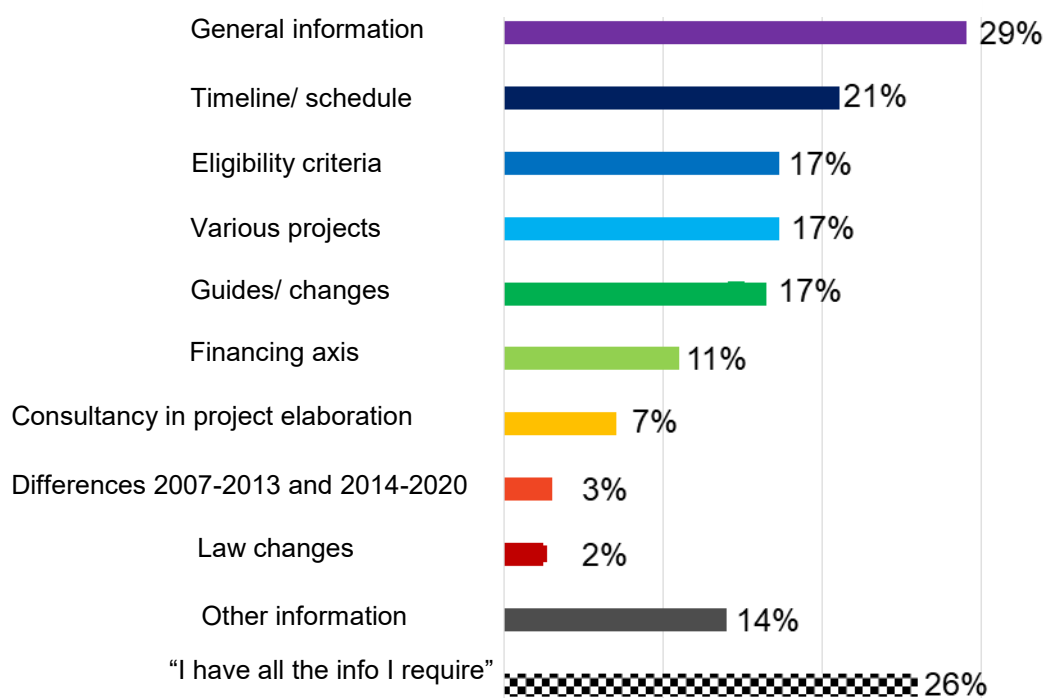
Negative attitude motivation

Implementation difficulties:18%

Financing rejection: 9%

Reimbursement delays: 9%

Unsuccessful projects: 5%

Restrictive eligibility criteria: 23%

Red-tape documentation: 36%

Graph 5–Negative opinion towards Regio motivation

The LPA's representatives, in their majority, perceive themselves as informed about the funding opportunities of the Regio—ROP 2014-2020. For the whole sample, the average score is 6.6 , on a scale from 1(not informed) to 10 (very well informed). However, this level is different for the various categories of LPA's. The weighed average was the highest for the representatives of the County Councils (8,3 points), followed by the municipal LPA's (8 points), then, by the urban localities (7 points), whereas the lowest value was for the commune/ rural LPA's (5,7 points).

The average score of the self-perceived level of information among the LPA's respondents is 6.6, from 1(not informed) to 10 (very well informed).

What are the most important things that you want to know/ be informed about, regarding Regio for the 2014-2020 period?
-cumulated percent-

Category	Percent
General information	29%
Timeline/ schedule	21%
Eligibility criteria	17%
Various projects	17%
Guides/ changes	17%
Financing axis	11%
Consultancy in project elaboration	7%
Differences 2007-2013 and 2014-2020	3%
Law changes	2%
Other information	14%
"I have all the info I require"	26%

Graph 6– Answer distribution (multiple-response quest.) regarding the information categories of issues, as they are perceived.

In terms of the information needs, approximatively one third of the respondents requested generic information, either by mentioning wide areas of interest, such as: "what are the opportunities of funding through Regio and what are the conditions to have access to the funds?", "Which is the value of the Programme, what is its strategy?", "how is Regio related/ correlated to other financing programmes?", "what kind of investments can be financed?", "what are the action directions in the programme", "what are the eligibility criteria for th programme" etc.; or by mentioning the modality of which they wish to be informed: "County level seminars", "a better access to direct information", "who is responsible to answer any questions", "more and better structured information", "clear and structured information, on the occasion of various local events", "direct information through the Regio communicators network", "training seminars at the local level", "unequivocal information, no places for interpretations", "a friendlier interface of Regio", "news alert" etc..

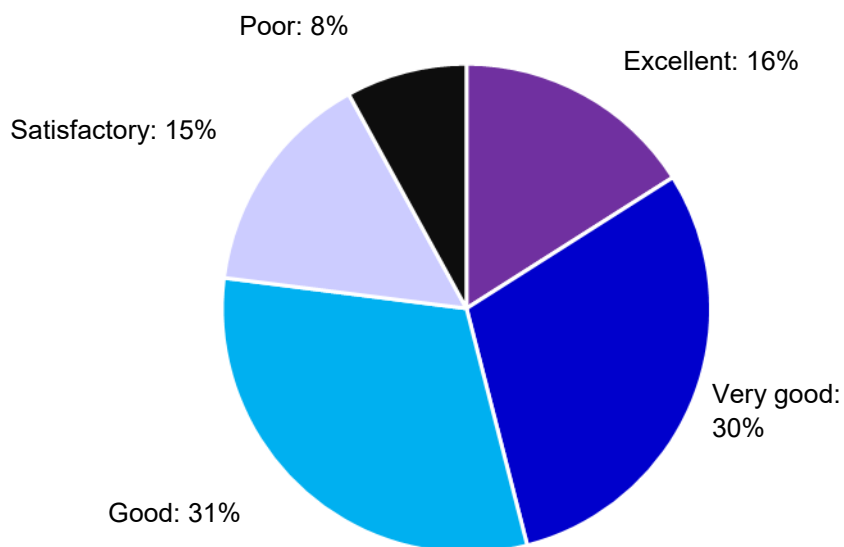| What information about Regio-ROP to you wish to access?	County	Municipal	Town/city	Town/ commune (rural)
General Info	40%	22%	26%	31%
Timelines/ Schedule	35%	34%	25%	12%
Various projects	15%	20%	14%	19%
Eligibility criteria	13%	14%	17%	19%
Guides/ changes	8%	22%	18%	15%
Financing axes	8%	9%	7%	14%
Consultancy in project elaboration	8%	8%	5%	8%
Law changes	5%	3%	1%	3%
Differences from ROP 2017-2013	3%	3%	3%	4%
Other information	18%	15%	15%	11%
I have all the required info	23%	22%	29%	27%

Table 5 –Interest themes and their distribution by the type of the administrative institutions.

The county councils representatives have places as main interests the information that have a general cover and also those regarding the scheduling, as well as the timeline of the future calls for applications (CfA's). At the level of the municipal administration, the main priority was also the generic information, the timeline for CfA's, as well as the new characteristics of the applicant guides, but also some good-practices examples. Smaller cities/towns administrative institutions were mainly focused on the generic information , the Regio calendar (and internal deadlines), the CfA's guide particularities, the eligibility criteria, whereas the institutions of the communes, rural localities are interested on the generic information, the eligibility criteria, good-practices models as well as concrete-problem solving solutions that could be provided by Regio projects.
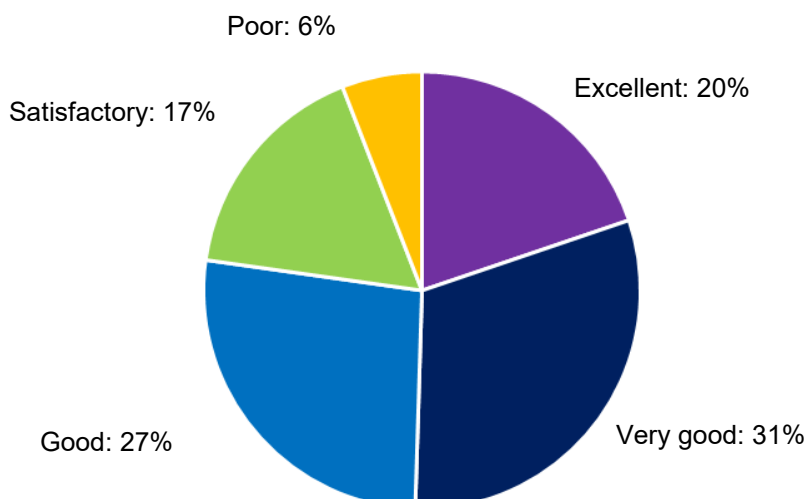
The respondents were asked afterwards to evaluate, on a scale from 5 (excellent) to 1 (poor) the communication (related to European funding projects) relationship that exists between the respondents' institution and another. The comparison between various types of actors of the LPA's show that the best communication with the territorial approval institutions was that of the County level authorities, whereas the lowest performance could be encountered at the commune level. It should be taken into account that there were frequent mentioning of the particular case of "the certificate that you don't need another certificate", respectively, the situation in which the applicants dossier requires an approval which cannot be legally given by the required authority, so that the applicant must require from the approval institution a certificate that no certificate, according to the legal framework, should be requested. The communication relationship with the County Councils was rated as "excellent" by 21% of the respondent, and 60% consider the County Council as a performant communication partner. The communication relationship with the Management Authority of the ROP and the Ministry was globally evaluated, both institutions being tightly related and communicated in the same manner with la LPA's, as Regio was concerned.

The relationship with ROP MA and the Ministry

Poor: 8%

Satisfactory: 15%

Excellent: 16%

Very good: 30%

Good: 31%

Graph 7–Assessing the relationship with the MA ROP and the Ministry

The relationship with the Regional Development Agency

Poor: 6%

Satisfactory: 17%

Excellent: 20%

Very good: 31%

Good: 27%

Graph 8–Assessing the relationship with the RDA

The main information channels are represented by the dedicated websites and the press releases of the Ministry and the RDA's. However, 6% of the respondents do not use any information channel. The info found on the Regio website, the local and regional level events and the direct information that are received through the Region Communicators Network are the main communication instruments for the LPA's. The Regio instruments are considered as being successful examples regarding the transmission of the information that are related to the operational programmes and the European funds instruments of financing projects.

Beneficiaries, other than the local public authorities

The vast majority of the potential beneficiaries have heard of Regio, its awareness level being high: 94%. A comparative analysis at the level of the potential beneficiaries categories, as presented in the following table, shows that the highest level of awareness is among the innovation and technological transfer infrastructures/ scientific parks and the business incubator and accelerators, with an overall awareness of the Programme, followed by the university level educational institutions and the social services providers (registered). A lower level was found at the religious institutions and the SME's in the rural areas. One should consider that, given our previous research experiences on this topic, the Regio awareness is very high across the country, this being the Operational Programme with the easiest to find identity elements, especially those of the visual identity. However, a high awareness should not be considered a high level of information about the Programme.

Mass media are the main instrument of generating a high level of awareness among these beneficiaries, followed by the internet, partnership direct communication, colleagues, consultants, acquaintances, as well as the direct experience of working in Regio-financed projects. The analysis of the ROP awareness items, as they were included in the interview guides, show the following:

- ✓ Most of the respondents (51%) consider the most specialised sources of information that they use as the priority (e.g. The Ministry), and the alternative sources only as secondary;

- ✓ Almost half (45%) of the respondents use a mixture of informational sources, combining mainly the information they received from the mass-media with those from the internet and from direct communication.

Did hear of Regio ROP 2014-2020?		
BENEFICIARIES	**Yes**	**No**
Registered social services provider	88%	12%
University level educational institution (state-owned)	97%	3%
SME's in the urban area	92%	8%
SME's in the rural area	88%	13%
Microenterprise in the rural area	96%	4%
Religious organisation/ institution	86%	14%
Innovation and technological transfer infrastructure/ scientific park	100%	0%
Business incubator/ accelerator	100%	0%
NGO's	91%	9%
TOTAL	**94%**	**6%**

Table 6 –Regio awareness by the beneficiaries categories

Analysing the dispersion of the information media, 3 categories of instruments were observed:

- ➢ *General information media* are mainly the mass-media (classic media, internet, outdoor) that the majority of the respondents combine;

- ➢ *Particular information media* are mainly achieved through direct communication (partner discussions, colleagues, consultants, acquaintances, class/ training attending, direct communication within the Regio Communicators Network), and are considered as sources of information by more than 40% of respondents;

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➢ *Specialised information media,* mainly from direct activities in a project, usually through some specialised institution (RDA, MA, City hall, Regio Network).

The Regio Communicators Network is present in two categories because the potential beneficiaries related to it from two perspectives: the direct communication (particular information) and institutional communication (specialise information).

From the perspective of the information that they can provide, the three instrument categories can also be clustered in three level of communication, structured by the complexity of the transmitted message:

Level 1– an information level that is used, especially, by the mass-media, (classical, internet, outdoor) and they offer general information;

Level 2– an information level that is usd directly and that offers information with particular characteristics;

Level 3– an information level that uses institutional communications, (specialised web-sites, email, communication networks) and that offers information on a specialised level, concrete and specifically addressed to the project personnel..

There is a direct correlation between the information types and the awareness level of Regio among the beneficiaries.. Respectively, among those that use the 3rd level of communication, the Regio awareness level is much higher than on the beneficiaries' categories that use mainly the level 1 type of communications instruments.

At the level of the entire sample of potential beneficiaries, about 42% of respondents stated that they have worked so far under a Regio project, the criterion of experience being a criterion for selecting the institution and the respondents. A significant methodological element is given by the difference between the individual experience of the respondent in this case and the institutional experience and the institution he represents, in the sense that the persons have in many cases more experience than the institution they represent.

Have you ever applied in any projects within Regio?		
Potential beneficiaries	Yes	No
Accredited social service provider	46%	54%
Business incubator and accelerator	71%	29%
Infrastructure for innovation and technology transfer / scientific and technological park	54%	46%
State-owned higher education institution , university level	56%	44%
SME's in urban area	35%	65%
SME's in rural area	38%	63%
Microenterprise in rural area	42%	58%
NGO	26%	74%
Religious institution	14%	86%
Total	42%	58%

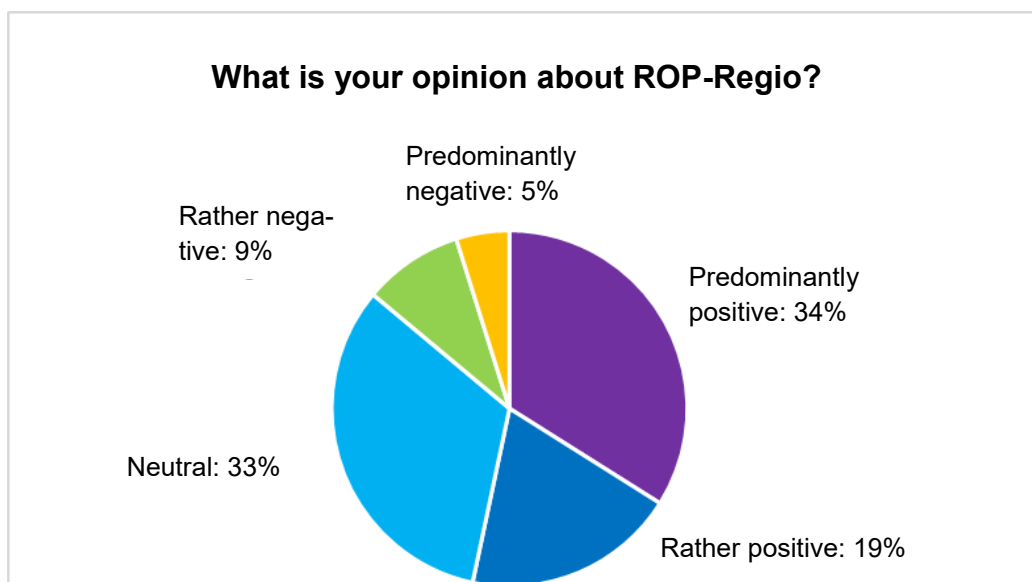*Table 7–Participation experience, by the beneficiary type*

Regarding the assessment of functional and dysfunctional aspects of communication, 87% of the respondents who had experience in Regio-funded projects mentioned at least one functional aspect of the program in terms of communication. 40% of experienced Regio respondents reported at least one dysfunctional issue. Of the respondents who positively assessed the communication relationship they had during their personal experience with Regio-funded projects, 19% felt that the relationship was "very good", appreciating the professionalism in communication, the promptness with which it was delivered in the process of the

exchange of information, and the speed with which the answers to the problems raised by the beneficiaries were offered. 77% of this category of respondents rated the communication as "good", appreciating the communication activities carried out by IO and MA, the communication relationship with RDA, the information provided by the www.inforegio.ro web site, the efficiency of the relationship communication, supportive character and complexity of the information received. 4% of respondents in this category rated the communication relationship as "average", positively appreciating that there were mechanisms to allow for correlation between IOs and beneficiaries and that the communication relationship also had an informal component, considered useful for the good implementation of the project. 40% of those who had experience with Regio projects also submitted a number of negative assessments. The majority of them (65%) considered the communication process to be difficult, transferring the predominant communication difficulties that belonged to other processes of the program implementation: large volume of documents and information requested by the beneficiaries by IOs, cumbersome guides, excessive bureaucracy (red-tape), delays, and too many changes during the implementation of the ROP 2007-2013, unrealistic time charts that could not be negotiated, difficult loading of documents in the electronic platform and lack of technical support to facilitate these electronic transfers, delays in the timetable implementation of projects, difficulties in communicating legal issues and inconsistency between the legislative framework and the requests in the guides, the lack of simplification processes, the reduction of bureaucracy and the diminishing of the suspicion of fraud that some of the respondents felt in relationships communication with implementing bodies. 21% of those who had negative assessments of the communication process considered that it also had weaknesses, especially considering the very few working meetings organized by RDA's with project beneficiaries, redundant answers when clarifications were requested, giving the same text from the guide without the required clarifications and the reluctance with which some of the potential beneficiaries felt treated by the representatives of the implementation and control bodies.

The 15% of the respondents who have identified dysfunctional communication issues considered it incomplete because no details were provided on the evaluation criteria, insufficient information on the procedures, information on the perspective from which the implementing bodies are looking at certain changes what can be brought in the projects, information on the financial corrections that can be made.

However, the majority opinion of the representatives of potential beneficiaries on the Regional Operational Program - Regio is positive. We note that general appreciation was requested for all participants in the survey, not just those who had experience with Regio-funded projects. 53% of those who wanted to express an opinion on Regio said they were positive or predominantly positive. One-third of respondents chose a neutral position and 14% said they had a rather negative opinion with Regio.

What is your opinion about ROP-Regio?

Predominantly negative: 5%
Rather negative: 9%
Predominantly positive: 34%
Neutral: 33%
Rather positive: 19%

Graph 9–General opinion on ROP-Regio

The categories of arguments that justified positive opinions can be grouped into two major classes: arguments on the impact of Regio at national level: ROP-Regio is a program that supports development at national, regional and local level (26%); provides the necessary funds for investment projects for which otherwise financial solutions would not have been identified (25%); targeting multiple areas of interest, from local infrastructure projects to school rehabilitation and social services (20%), the fact that Regio has reached many communities (4%) targeting different categories of beneficiaries (3%), being broadly a good project for society (3%). The second class brings together the arguments generated by the experience with Regio projects: successful experiences in implementing Regio funded projects (15%), good cooperation with implementing bodies, RDA, The Ministry (15%), good communication with the representatives of the management authorities (7%), good organization within the program (1%) correct selection in terms of usefulness of funded projects %), and for those with multiple experiences, performing better than other operational programs (3%). The main categories of arguments for the neutral view of Regio are the lack of information (54%), the lack of experience with Regio projects (12%) and the interest in such projects (8%). Another class of arguments addresses the characteristics of the operational program: restrictive conditions (12%) and excessive bureaucracy (2%). 10% of those who chose the neutral scale of the scale argued for choice through negative personal experiences (4%) or through communication skills recorded during the collaboration with representatives of the program's management authorities.

The arguments for expressing a rather negative opinion in relation to Regio originated mostly from the negative experience of the respondents in trying to access funds through this program. . One third of respondents in this category (37%) accuse too restrictive eligibility conditions, 32% consider that bureaucracy in the program is excessive, 23% argue through negative personal experiences in concrete projects, 6% accuse

the poor interinstitutional collaboration (IO, RDA, the Ministry, County Councils, county endorsement institutions) and 5% claim they have a negative opinion because of the lack of information about ROP-Regio.

Most respondents said that they have information on the sources of information on the 2014-2020 Regional Operational Program (60% of the sample) and on how they can get support in drafting an eligible project (54% of the sample). Informally deficient areas include: eligibility criteria, project evaluation and selection modalities, and the content of the funding dossier.

The information needs and information mechanisms for each category of beneficiaries are different from general program information that generates interest from potential beneficiaries and allows assessment of the opportunity for their organization to specialized inquiries to answer questions technical and sustaining involvement in Regio-funded projects. For each category of beneficiaries, not only the information needs are specific, but also the useful tools to convey the information are customized. The on-line communication required by all target audiences is effective for transmitting the program's specific details, direct communication is required to respond to a wide range of punctual questions, and media communication to identify successful models, potential partners, general program information.

Communication officials within the management structuresat the regional level and at MA-ROP and IO-ROP

Identifying the communication history of the Regio is an important dimension of the interview guide in assessing the current level of information and information needs for the next period as well as in making

a comparison between the communication process at Regio in the previous and the current stage. At the level of all development regions, we identified a positive history of Regio's internal communication relationship, with a trend that was perceived as negative in terms of the evolution from the previous stage, where it is considered to be more consolidated in terms of organization and more consistent in terms of communication. The internal communication within ROP 2007-2013 was classified as good and very good, the participants evaluating this process with grades above 8 on a scale from 1 (very low) to 10 (very good). The main positive aspects of the internal communication within ROP mentioned by the respondents were: frequent meetings from the previous programming period; training, specialization of members of communication teams and members of the ROP-Regio communicators' network; participation in Regio communicators' forums, which allowed the sharing of experience and the sharing of regional results; the quality of the materials sent to the beneficiaries; the frequency of meetings with beneficiaries; the frequency of meetings with representatives of the MA and the representatives of the Ministry; the quality of communication campaigns conducted; the professionalism of the RDA staff involved in the communication; the quality of the communication tools used. However, the most important positive aspect of the ROP internal communication was the activism, both at central and regional or local level, activism generated by the large number of projects implemented during the period 2007-2013. However, compared to the 2007-2013 programming period, the level of activism is much lower in the current programming period. Negative issues signalled by focus group participants include the following: (1) The major delays in the implementation of the operational program for the 2014-2020 period, which generated regression and dissatisfaction with the communication teams in the Regions provide satisfactory answers to potential beneficiaries; (2) The low level of the of the simplifi-

cation from the current programming line and too little use of the recommendations submitted to the Managing Authority by the local and regional specialists on how to strategically organize the program, the type of needs and projects that they should consider and how to relate to recipients. A significant part of the focus group participants noted that the ROP 2014-2020 is, despite the recommendations they made, as a result of the 2007-2013, more complicated, heavier, more restrictive, conditional assessment which the beneficiaries should meet.

The majority of participants appreciated that the investment in communication over the past 2 years was significantly lower than in the previous year, that the number of meetings within the Regio Communicators Network was very low, that there were very few visits to the MA in the territory, dedicated to communication were very rare. But the main argument behind this diminution of activity was the fact that the program started late.

RDA experts said they were receiving guidance at the same time as the beneficiaries, unable to provide answers to questions because of the lack of time needed to go through these guides, that they were not informed early on the changes made to these guides, that they were not consulted opportunities for changes made to the program's support materials.

The analysis of the internal communication relationship within the ROP was realized taking into account three types of institutional actors of communication: (1) Regional Development Agencies; (2) The ROP / The Ministry Management Authority; (3) County or local public authorities, members of the Regio Communications Network. The three actors participate differently in the internal communication process, they are perceived as having different responsibilities, being in different hierarchical positions and as needing different information. The communication relationship between RDAs and members of the Regio Communicators Network (County Councils, Prefectures, Municipal Mayoralties) is considered as good or very good, unproblematic from the point of view of the participants.

The solutions developed during the group discussions on the various problems identified in the internal communication process are:

- ✓ Publishing a newsletter by the ministry to run on all Regio substructures to ensure the permanent, effective and official dissemination of important information to the actors involved but especially of the Regio documents and legal changes with impact on the program;

- ✓ Organize tutorials for staff from local structures with the participation of The Ministry, to answer the main questions raised at these institutions and to present the mechanisms by which the main identified problems can be formally solved;

- ✓ Organization of several face-to-face meetings with representatives of MA ROP and The Ministry. Meetings with representatives of the central authorities were seen as the main means of optimizing the communication process;

- ✓ Organising periodic interregional meetings between local staff involved in implementing Regio (RDA, County Council, City Halls) and The Ministry specialists;

- ✓ Organisation of periodic video conferences with the participation of the staff involved in communication and implementation of Regio (MA, RDA, Communications Network) to communicate questions, problems and get immediate feedback .

- ✓ Organize a joint working group to develop guides made up of representatives of ADR, local government and other relevant actors to discuss and establish together how to write the guide, what are the language elements used to avoid being susceptible multiple interpretations later in the implementation and implementation phase and to identify possible inconsistencies in the application of the provisions from a legislative point of view.

- ✓ Organization of working sessions regularly held by the Ministry and MA ROP. It was mentioned the organization of such activities to find solutions to common problems;

- ✓ Live broadcasting of training and informing of local work sessions on specialized online platforms (Regio live);

- ✓ Simplification is seen as a solution to the greatest need in solving multiple problems: demonstration of eligibility conditions, content of guidelines, documents to be submitted, monitoring elements, etc.;

- ✓ Reducing bureaucracy, while simplifying the guidelines, also requiring a reduction in the number of documents to be submitted when filing the documentation for approval of a project;

- ✓ Solving technical problems of MySMIS. The program is considered useful, but the technical problems it has generated strong reactions of dissatisfaction;

- ✓ Supplementing the staff of the Ministry. Focus group participants felt that lack of staff was one of the important issues;

- ✓ Identifying more creative advertising solutions to promote Regio to increase attractiveness to potential beneficiaries;

- ✓ Improving communication with the press. Representatives participating in focus groups believe that a very close communication relationship should be established Ministry / RDAs and Press .

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Instrumente Structurale
2014-2020

Media Partners, journalists

Most journalists participating in the study consider themselves well informed or very well informed. The comparative analysis by types of media institutions does not reveal any significant differences between them in the general information items. Journalists who consider themselves well informed have generally mentioned at least one institution that has been given special loans in the information process. The main institutions mentioned are the RDAs, The Ministry, through the www.fonduri-ue.ro website and the European Commission Representation. However, about a third of the interviewed journalists do not consider themselves well informed. The reasons invoked come from the comparison with the previous programming period, the lack of interest from the ROP journalists and the perception of the low interest of the population for information related to the Regional Operational Program. The vast majority of journalists have appreciated the relationship with RDA representatives as good or very good. Most of the spontaneous arguments of positive opinions concerned the fact that information was received from RDA representatives at a prompt, when requested, periodic news letters and information events for journalists organized by RDA, press conferences and materials sent regularly. The strong points of the communication between journalists and the RDA focus on the following aspects: professionalism (24%) - understood as a general way of managing the communication relationship, addressing mode, clarity of the transmitted information; speed and promptness (18%) - very important features for press communication; 17% of journalists appreciated the communication tools used by the Agencies communication teams (site, news-letter, press events, press conferences, informative meetings).

Note that 10% of respondents have appreciated the organization of the communication teams within the RDAs and the fact that there is continuity in terms of personnel which allows not only to increase the level of professionalism but also to establish individual communication relations that correspond to the expectations of the journalists. A quarter of the journalists who participated in the survey considered that the communication relationship with the ADR in their region is medium or weak, the argumentation regarding the following aspects: the main means of information is e-mail, which does not allow proper development of the topics of interest, the low number of meetings with the beneficiaries in the current programming exercise, the lack of information on the projects implemented on the current funding line, the fact that no details about the rejected projects, the fact that the intensity of the communication and the receptiveness to respond to press requests have diminished significantly compared to 2007-2015, the fact that ADR no longer creates topics, press events, but awaits to be asked by interested journalists. The weaknesses of the communication relationship mainly relate to the low number of press events, the low number of tools used, and the low volume of information transmitted, especially in recent years. In addition, journalists consider it a weak point that the information transmitted does not focus on local projects and that information is also available on projects that have not received funding, on projects that have not been successfully completed or on potential beneficiaries, more chosen local governments that are not active in raising funds through Regio. About one quarter of the interviewed journalists expressed their willingness to receive "negative" information about how the program works, how to implement projects or how local governments perform.

The vast majority of interviewed journalists appreciated good or very good communication with the Program Authority, some of whom stressed that this was not done directly, but through the Regional Development Agencies and the County Councils.

Most journalists who have expressed a positive opinion have justified it by being informed in good time of the projects that have been approved, of the open funding lines and of the regional communication events in which central representatives are invited.

Half of the journalists participating in the research approach appreciate the relationship with MDRAPFE as good or very good. The arguments that justified the positive appreciation were that MDRAPFE is one of the best press ministries, the fact that the ROP targeted information requests received a timely response and that the two websites .mdrap.ro and www.fonduri-ue.ro are performing in terms of information provided and friendly in terms of the proposed format. In terms of sites, there has also been an appreciation of better informational correlation between the two sites, so that information such as the stage of absorption, signed contracts, regional situations are easily identifiable and not confusing. Some of those who have had negative opinions have argued themselves by: the too specialized language used in the ministry's communiqués. The communication standards applied on the ROP in the 2007-2013 period have led to a high level of waiting for journalists to communicate in the current programming exercise. The interest of journalists in information consists of three main questions: "What has been done so far?"; "Where?" And "Who are / were the beneficiaries of the funding?". The data gathered during the interviews showed an extra interest, especially for comparisons, ranking statistics to highlight differences between localities, between types of beneficiaries, between axes, between regions, etc. The second place in the hierarchy of information expectations is the detailed presentation of the program. Questions such as "What are the expectations of the Ministry regarding the implementation of ROP 2014-2020?", "What were the strategic reasons for the current ROP structure?", "What are the funding axes?", "What are the potential beneficiaries?", of projects finance? "are examples that outline this category of expectations.

An important segment of information refers to statistical and / or comparative statements. As mentioned above, this type of information is perceived by the respondents who proposed it to be prolific from a journalistic point of view to highlight on the one hand the strategy at the central level, on the other hand the dynamics at the local level and different degree of involvement by type of authority. What's new in the implementation of the program is a segment of generic information that defines the intrinsic nature of the media. The interviewed journalists said they wanted to find out "all the latest news", "cutting-edge news", "cutting-edge data". This set of information needs draws particular attention to the way in which information is presented by reporting "ultimate" character for new information.

A significant category of information expected by media representatives is targeted at beneficiaries of ROP-funded projects. "Who received funding?", "Where is the beneficiary?", "Where are the most beneficiaries?" Are examples of questions describing this category. Some journalists were interested in reporting to the beneficiary of European funding as a potential news item from the signing of the grant agreement to the end of the contract period, being interested in tracking the whole of the way. Correspondingly, a category of information of interest to journalists is that of the problems, difficulties and bottlenecks encountered by local and central authorities and by private beneficiaries in running the program and implementing the projects. In this regard, we have suggested solutions such as: publishing answers to questions from potential beneficiaries, publishing indexes of problems and difficulties encountered, by types of beneficiaries, publication of a "roadmap" by the central and regional authorities, in which to highlight, periodically the stage of program implementation.

Some of the interviewed journalists requested information on the timing of the launches, the calendar of events in the program, the calendar of events dedicated to the press, information specifically designed to facilitate the organization of journalistic activity and less the actual press information.

The main means of information for the interviewed journalists remains the press conferences, an instrument dedicated to communication with the media. The journalists who participated in the investigation have signaled the need for organizing more frequent press conferences and establishing a calendar in line with the other events of the Program. The Ministry's websites and those of the Regional Development Agencies are also very important media for journalists. They appreciate the existence of a dedicated section on the site, the marking of informational news, archives of video and audio documents from events and press conferences, as well as friendly, non-specialized language to facilitate understanding.

Conclusions and recommendations

To reach all categories of potential beneficiaries, there is a need for a mix of communication tools embracing the three major types of information transmission mechanisms: direct communication, on-line communication and media communication.

Given that the Regional Operational Program, in this programming exercise, opens to new categories of potential beneficiaries, capitalizing on previous experience in the communication process and beyond is the main mechanism for maintaining the high standards Regio has become accustomed to. Thus, we recommend that the glossary of terms such as terms, questions and answers, how to create beneficiary networks, the first steps in the design of a project, etc., are put in the information circuit. Priority, in this context, we believe that it is the capitalization of direct communication mechanisms at local and regional level by supporting events and communication actions in the territory.

In order to support direct communication as a component of communication that has made a major contribution to Regio's success in the past, we recommend promoting the two most useful communication tools for all categories of beneficiaries: the Regio Helpdesk and the Regio Communications Network.

It is necessary to increase the level of direct communication at the level of small communities. The use of on-line communication is less frequent in these communities, and local issues involve a series of questions that await a direct response, in a common language.

At the same time, there is a need to present successful models of examples of good practice, ways of solving local problems through Regio funding. Local expectations regarding access to "project portfolios" are significant, especially in small communities.

It should be considered (for improvement or even implementation, if and where it is needed) communication at the level of small communities in particular in less accessible, or "translation" into a glossary of terms of the main concepts used in specialized communication.

Some beneficiaries consider it necessary to increase awareness of the existence of Regio helpdesks, especially for administrations in small localities. This tool can provide direct communication support and increase the correlation between Regio funding and local communities' problems and needs.

Improving the inter-institutional communication relationship is an objective to be achieved, by creating better instruments correlated with the existing normative system and by providing informative support to the county approval institutions.

A significant segment of media communication expectations is about increasing direct communication between representatives of central authorities and journalists. Media representatives expect to receive from the authorities answers to punctual questions, explanations, details that provide an exclusive information character.

Contract: *Services of sociological studies in order to evaluate the information and communication needs, and the information and communication activities eficiency, according to the Communication Plan for the Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020;*

1st Stage – *Assessment of the information needs, levels, preferred channels among the potential applicants;*

Summary report

Bucharest, 2017 September

Research

We invest in you future!
This project is selected in the Regional Operational Programme and co-financed by the European Union through The European Fund for Regional Development.