



Final Evaluation of the 2015 – 2020 Communication Strategy of the European Committee of the Regions

Executive Summary

November 2019

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Disclaimer

This executive summary accompanies the report prepared in the context of contract No. COR/16/2019 *Final Evaluation of the 2015-2020 Communication Strategy of the European Committee of the Regions* under the inter-institutional framework contract Framework Contract n° PO/2016-06/01 Lot 1 on the *Provision of Impact assessment, Evaluation and Evaluation-related services in the field of Communication activities* between the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), Coffey, A TetraTech company and Deloitte.

The views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the CoR. Fieldwork was carried out by Coffey between September and November 2019, and the report finalised in November 2019.

More information is available at: <http://cor.europa.eu/en/about/Pages/cor-communications-re-connecting-citizens-with-europe.aspx>

Cover: Official building of the European Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 2019. © European Committee of the Regions

Executive summary

1.1 Introduction

The **final evaluation of the 2015-2020 Communication Strategy of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR)** builds on a baseline evaluation carried out by the CoR in 2015 and a mid-term evaluation performed by an external contractor in 2017.

The purpose of this evaluation was to **examine the impact of the CoR's communication tools and activities between 2015-2019** against the baseline and mid-term evaluations; suggest how the CoR should position its communication in the upcoming period 2020-2025 and identify operational aspects of the CoR's communication activities that could be enhanced to maximise the impact of the Communication Strategy.

To implement the **evaluation activities between September and November 2019**, the evaluation team used both qualitative and quantitative methods. The methodology included a significant desk research component, taking stock of the large amount of quantitative and qualitative existing evidence-base generated by the monitoring and evaluation system established for the Strategy. In addition, the evaluation team completed 25 semi-structured interviews to collect stakeholders' perceptions of the Strategy, covering staff working on communication from key stakeholder categories, and analysed the responses to a large online survey of stakeholders which collected over 350 replies.

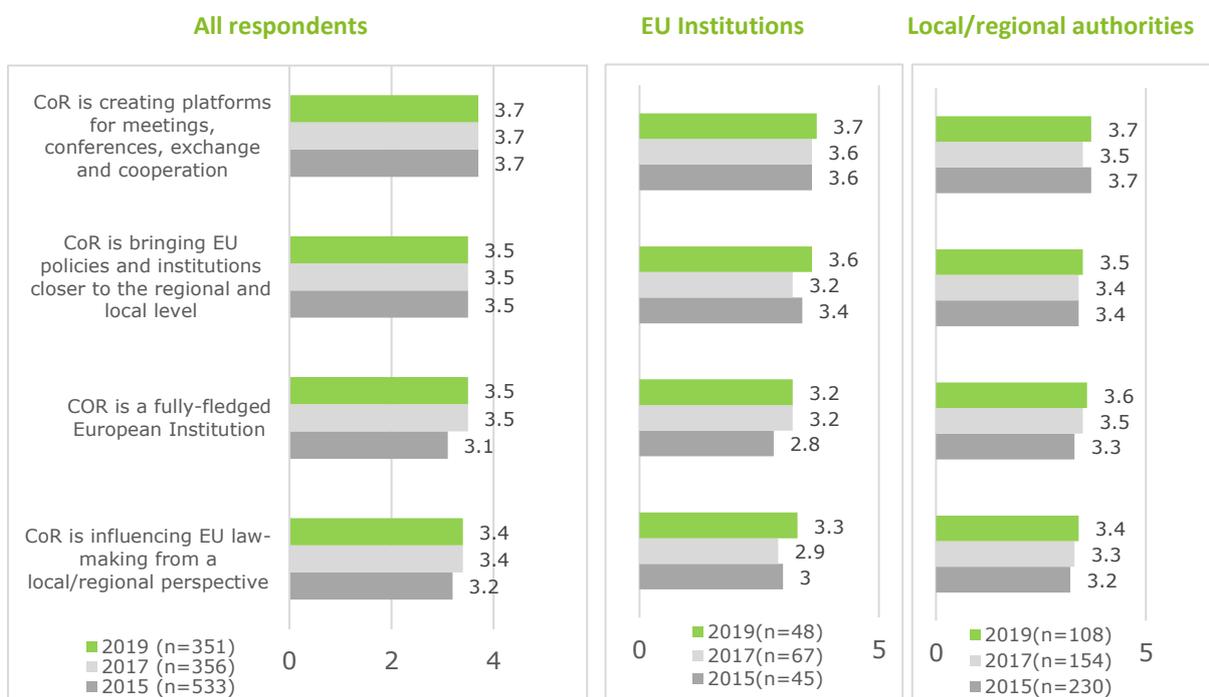
Throughout the lifetime of the CoR's Communication Strategy, **stakeholders have remained positive in their perception of the overall impact** of the CoR's communication and it is plausible that the latter years of the Strategy's implementation have contributed to keep the ratings steady. The CoR is somewhat successful in drawing from a broad range of tools and methods to fit the various needs of its stakeholders, but the portfolio could be honed further. **The communication mix operates channels and tools, which are respectively suitable to the heterogeneous target groups** of the CoR. Overall, it appears that outputs and outcomes of the communication channels and tools justify the costs incurred and correspond to the various needs to which the Strategy aims to cater.

The **conclusions** drawn from the evaluation results as well **the set of recommendations provided at the strategic and operational levels** are presented below to assist the CoR in the positioning of its communication in the upcoming period 2020-2025.

1.2 Conclusions

1. The **overall quality of CoR communication mostly meets audience needs and is effective**. However, responses to the survey indicate that there is still scope for improvement.
2. **The Communication Strategy has been successful because the CoR’s key stakeholders have a positive perception of the institution**, notably owing to the sustained, planned, effective and strategic approach to communication resulting from the Strategy’s implementation. Also, despite the relatively modest budget, the CoR implemented a **broad portfolio of tools and methods including communication campaigns** to meet the various needs of its stakeholders.

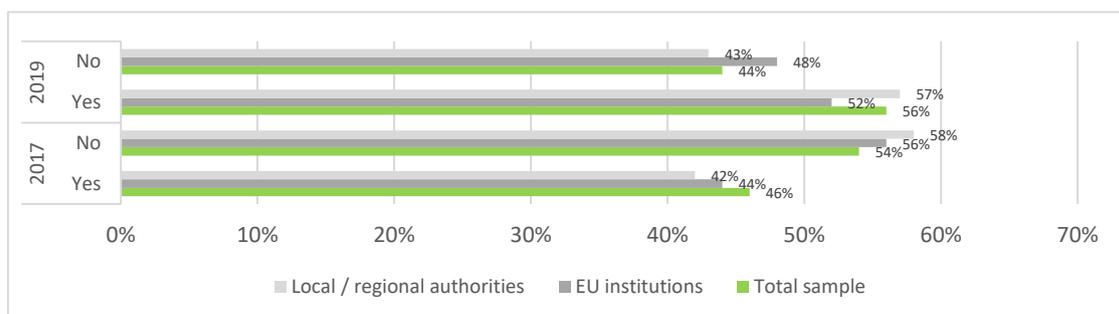
Stakeholders’ perceptions on image and role of the CoR, 2015 - 2019



Source: “How do you see the actual role of the European Committee of the Regions (1= fully disagree; 5 = fully agree)?”. Stakeholder surveys 2015, 2017 and 2019.

3. **Stakeholders’ awareness of the CoR’s communication campaigns has increased among key target groups of the CoR, but there is still room for improvement.**

Stakeholders' awareness of CoR communication campaigns, 2017 – 2019



Source: “Are you aware of the CoR communication campaigns? Yes / No”. Stakeholder survey 2017 (n=356): EU institutions (n=44), Local/ regional authorities (n=154). Stakeholder survey 2019 (n=351): EU institutions (n=48), Local/ regional authorities (n=108).

4. **Over the timeframe of this Strategy, the CoR had some significant communication successes.** The big hits of CoR communication are the Citizens' Dialogues with the European Commission's DG for Communication and the CoR's own local dialogues, the flagship events "EuroPCom" (European Conference on Public Communication) and the "European Week of the Regions and Cities" and other physical / face-to-face interaction. The success of the CoR's **own local dialogues, under the campaign *Reflecting on Europe***, supports its core purpose of a **listening organisation**
5. **There is a lack of clarity and some confusion about the strategic purpose of CoR communication.** The CoR needs to focus on its core mission, which is supporting the dialogue between the regions and the EU institutions, as well as show and tell the regions about this dialogue. This implies a need to amend the stated communication mission: *"Reconnecting Europe with its citizens; establish a dialogue between the local and EU levels"*.
6. **The CoR should better integrate communication when it defines the politics and policies on which it will advise the EU institutions** and reflect about the communication potential of its works from the beginning instead of using communication tools as an afterthought or as a way to beautify CoR activities.
7. **There is scope to reinforce communication planning by setting SMART¹ communication objectives in the Strategy and in the Annual Communication Plans² and to develop detailed intervention logics.** This would help the CoR to understand its communication performance at a greater level of detail and support choices about where to focus going forward.
8. With regards to the **cost-efficiency of the CoR Communication Strategy**, the potential reach of its tools and channels is relatively high for the costs incurred.
9. **There is room to improve the approach to reporting on Communication Plans and results and the way that this is linked to budgets.** The evaluation highlights the current difficulties in carrying out a detailed analysis to allow a better understanding, which is linked to a large extent to a lack of standardisation and fragmentation of reporting on staff, communication costs, activities, outputs and target group reach by channel and tool on a year-on-year basis.

¹ **Specific:** The objective should clearly define the expected outcome and should answer questions such as who is involved what will be achieved and where. A specific objective will help define activities.

Measurable: The objective should include an indicator of progress and should answer questions such as how often or how much. This will determine whether the objective is achieved.

Attainable: The expected change defined in the objective should be realistic within the given timeframe and with the available resources.

Relevant: The objective should contribute to achieving the overall program goal. This will support developing activities that are important to the programme.

Time-bound: The objective should include a timeframe for achieving the desired change.

² SMART objectives are already being set for specific communication campaigns.

10. **There is a lack of clarity in Communication Plans as to which communication messages and content should be directed towards which of the CoR's two target groups (group 1: regional stakeholders, group 2: EU institutions) via which multipliers, communication channels and using which budgets.**
11. **There is a need to re-define the communication role/s and information flows at regional and local levels.** Evidence from this evaluation confirms the need to enhance the CoR's approach to two-way communication, listening to and representing the voice of the regions to Brussels.
12. The CoR's approach to research by consulting stakeholders and making adjustments where possible in real time **supports its core purpose of a listening organisation**, which also follows up on what it has heard. Yet **there is scope to reinforce data collection and research to further support the implementation of the CoR's Communication Strategy and Plans.**

1.3 Recommendations

The recommendations are provided at the strategic and operational levels.

Strategic recommendations

It is recommended to:

1. **Recast the CoR's overarching mission so that it says what the CoR does.** This would mean clearly stating that the CoR is about supporting / ensuring and / or strengthening the dialogue between regional and EU politics.
2. **Take steps to make communication an integral part of the CoR's political priorities for the 2020-2025 period.** Communication needs to be viewed as a strategic function, which is professionally managed and integrated within the organisation.
3. **Conduct an internal strategic exercise to confirm the key communication outcome** that the CoR would like to achieve. It is important to note that a desirable outcome for CoR communication is not to reinforce awareness of the CoR or its status as an EU advisory body. It should instead focus on outcomes which relate to the work that it does (e.g. raised awareness on certain issues, appreciation and / or trust).
4. **Develop a detailed intervention logic and set SMART communication objectives to support the CoR communication for each Annual Plan.** Communication objectives should seek to match the communication interests and needs of target groups with the CoR's needs and interests.
5. **Differentiate the approach to communication planning by target group.** This means a two-pronged approach with an intervention logic for each of the two key target groups, describing their specific needs and interests for CoR communication as well as suitable communication objectives, messages, channels and tools and multipliers.

6. **Make dialogue supported by the CoR more visible and tangible** by defining communication and multiplier role/s, developing templates to support communication flows and mapping current and potential information and listening architecture and processes at local, regional and EU levels.
7. **Continue to build communication partnerships and cooperation with local, regional and European organisations and communication units of the EU institutions** to identify more joint activities and synergies.
8. **Focus the CoR's organisational culture on resilience and continuous learning**, accepting that adjustments need to be made to the approach to communication while it is being implemented. Generating significant impact in communication is difficult on a modest budget such as the CoR's as communication does not happen in block and is influenced by politics and current affairs outside the control of the CoR.

Operational recommendations

It is recommended to:

1. **Build on the success of the CoR flagship events by:**
 - **increasing opportunities for stakeholders to “touch” and see** the CoR in physical space, such as events at which stakeholders can talk to representatives and physically see evidence of the work the CoR. This can include conferences, exhibitions, symposia and forums;
 - **having ‘satellite’ events concurrently to EuroPCom.** Some local events could be “roadshows” and European Commission / CoR “pop-up” events in the Member States; and
 - **supplementing physical events for engagement and listening with online regional consultation websites** – i.e. websites that invite ideas, comments, feedback, etc.
2. **Continue the current approach to communication campaigns**, which is valuable from a planning and organisational perspective, and avoid diluting or diverting into multiple other priorities beyond the maximum of three annual communication campaigns.
3. **Bank on the success of personal interactions with CoR staff as a way to communicate effectively with local / regional stakeholders.** In the context of routine travels to the regions of Europe, CoR staff should maximise the opportunities to attend events, meet with local / regional organisations and stakeholders to “put a regional face” to the CoR.
4. **Enhance the collation and analysis of cost data, budgets and reach by channel and tool by developing a standard template or dashboard for on-going use** by different communication units, especially in the context of assessing cost-efficiency.

5. **Going forward, make use of cost-benefit analysis (CBA) instead of cost-efficiency analysis (CEA).** While CEA takes results (i.e., outcomes) into account, CBA seeks to identify the value of benefits compared with costs and paints a better picture of the advantages versus the disadvantages of communication channels and tools.
6. **Consider streamlining further the current approach to press and media, as well as the approach to publications and graphic support.** Regarding press and media, this could be done by **intensifying existing discussions with journalists to specifically investigate how to further increase the effectiveness and efficiency of relations.** There may also be ways to streamline the current approach to publications and graphic support by testing materials in discussion groups at events or with the two key target groups of the CoR.
7. **Reinforce research insights by:**
 - **collecting “real-time” target group feedback** as this is much more insightful than ex-post feedback;
 - **running a short series of focus groups** to understand CoR Members’ communication needs and possibilities for multiplying CoR messages and to understand if and how CoR may support local partner communication needs; and
 - **revising the questions in the stakeholder survey**, which should focus on collecting more specific information about which content is of most interest to different partners and how useful they found specific communication channels and tools.