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EUROPEAN FUNDS SOCIAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY AND THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE EU FUNDS INFORMATIONAL AND PROMOTIONAL OPERATIONS IN THE SILESIA VOIVODSHIP MUNICIPALITIES

Abstract

The paper touches upon the question of using the European Union funds as perceived by the inhabitants of the Silesian Voivodship municipalities. Research on the recognizability of particular programmes, from which projects, enterprises and training courses have been financed, are presented in the course of the paper. The inhabitants of the municipalities were to indicate the areas of urgent needs which, according to them, could be financed or co-financed using the funds allocated for the realization of the Cohesion Policy.

Key words: European funds, support, municipality

Introduction

Poland is a member of the Community since 1st May 2004. Both in the pre-accession period, as well as after joining the EU structures, Poland has become eligible for using the European financial resources. As for local governments, Cohesion Fund and Structural Funds have become a significant source of financing the needs of local communities. One may thus propose a thesis that, in the times of a municipality inhabitants' increasing autonomy awareness, the level of knowledge of the funds, in the broad sense, is high. Such a thesis may be proposed particularly on the grounds that there is common availability of information about projects in progress. Every co-financed project is labeled by a noticeboard which defines its name, the operational programme the financial means come from, the sums of money coming from a particular operational programme, along with the share of the beneficiary's own funds. Similar information is always placed on the

materials used in the so called soft projects.¹ Taking the foregoing factors into account, one may propose a thesis that, after several years of active using the funds by Poland, the citizen's knowledge of the programmes which the needs of local governments are finance from is broad.

The research methodology

In order to either support or refute the thesis research has been carried out among the inhabitants of the Silesian Voivodship municipalities. The respondents were obliged to fill in a questionnaire (a direct survey). It had been assumed that an anonymous survey filled in by a respondent directly would provide greater reliability in the case of his or her lack of knowledge. The majority of questions was open questions, in order for the citizens' knowledge of the funds to be measured, therefore the results of the research oftentimes stand out from the European Funds systematics commonly established within both scientific and political communities. The research was carried out during the years 2010–2011 and it concerned the way of procuring and using the funds by the managements of Silesian Voivodship municipalities, as well as the way of perceiving the very process of introducing those financial means by inhabitants of particular municipalities. The results presented in the article constitute only a part of the research which had been carried out. As far as European Funds management is concerned, what appears to be the vital transformation in the present Programming Period is the partial decentralization of introducing the operational programmes financed from the Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund. Apart from the central (national) programmes, 16th Regional Operational Programmes were created, which replaced ZPORR (the Integrated Regional Operational Programme). ZPORR was managed on the national level, whereas its implementation took place mostly on the regional level [Bąk, Piotrowska, Chmielewski, 2008].

European Funds Communication Strategy

In Poland, European Funds informational and promotional operations within the years 2007–2013 are being conducted on the basis of European Funds Communication Strategy, which is, according to Article 2 of the regulation quoted above, a communication action plan compiled for all the operational programmes financed from European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund and Cohesion Fund. European Funds Communication Strategy should be perceived through the prism of the whole Community, nevertheless. The Funds are a tool

¹ All materials used in the realization of the projects within the Human Capital Operational Programme from the European Social Fund are labeled with the name of the programme and the name of the initiative.

for development solidarity and its primary objective is to aid those areas of the EU which do not reach the average development level with reducing the disparities. What is the primary objective, however, is not only the profit of individual countries which are given assistance, but rather the advantage for the Community as a whole. Thus, European Funds constitute a systems and strategy method for dealing with European Union's fundamental problem which is the question of co-operation and social intercourse among the Member Countries for the sake of domestic competitiveness and prosperity of each and every country, as well as for the sake of competitiveness and prosperity of the Community as a whole.² Nearly 2.3 billion euros have been planned to support the realization of the Regional Operational Programme for Silesian Voivodship in the 2007–2013 financial prospect, which is almost 340 euro per citizen.³ The year 2010 has been significant for the European Funds informational and promotional policy in Poland as it was a period of transition between the full availability of funds and the use of allocations for the most popular actions. It was also the year of a crucial change in communication – the time of preparations for the beginning of systematic assistance in accounting the grants directed at beneficiaries.

I. The respondents' structure

Research carried out in order to examine the citizens' recognizability and knowledge of the additional sources of financing the communal budgets allows to disprove the proposed thesis. The research was conducted during the years 2010–2011 among the inhabitants of the Silesian Voivodship municipalities. 312 respondents were polled, 45% of whom were female and 55% were male. Respondents at the age from 18 to 25 constituted 13%, respondents aged 26–40 constituted the biggest group, and respondents at the age from 41 to 60 constituted 36%; respondents over 60 constituted 5% of the group in question.

Figure 1 presents the characteristics of the respondents in terms of the place of residence.

People living in the municipalities with the number of inhabitants between 20000 and 50000 constituted the biggest group of respondents (42%). The next 25% of the pollees came from municipalities where the number of inhabitants is over 200000. Respondents whose place of residence is a municipality of 50000 to 100000 inhabitants constituted 16% of the group, whereas 9% of respondents were people who lived in municipalities of 5000 to 20000 inhabitants, similarly to the group of respondents from municipalities of 100000 to 200000 inhabitants; people from municipalities with the number of inhabitants up to 5000 were the smallest group (only 1%).

² European Funds Communication Strategy in Poland within the National Cohesion Strategy for years 2001–2013, a document admitted by the Council of Ministers' Economic Committee during November 27th 2011 committee meeting, accepted by the European Commission on October 15th 2008.

³ http://www.rposlaskie.pl/dzialania/49/informacje_ogolne_RPO_WSL [access: 11.11.2012].

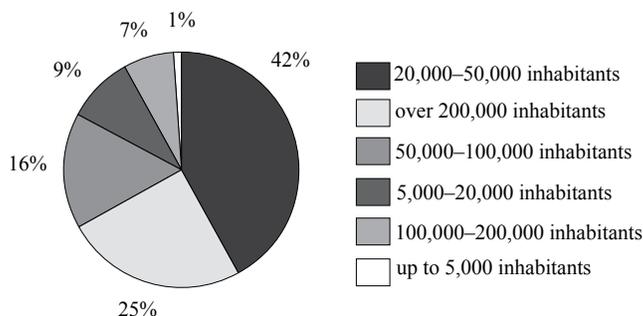


Figure 1. The structure of respondents in terms of the place of residence

Source: own work.

2. The municipalities inhabitants' recognizability of the funds

Despite numerous promotional actions in the media, as well as noticeboards naming and characterizing each and every project, the citizens, who appear to be the so called “end beneficiaries,” proved to have only rudimentary knowledge of the European Union Funds.

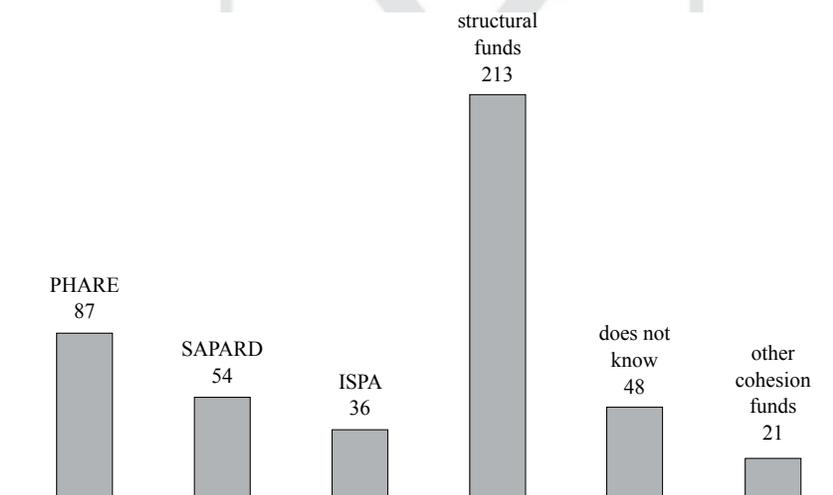


Figure 2. The structure of respondents' replies relating to the knowledge of funds which their municipality may take advantage of

Source: own work.

As many as 213 pollees indicated the Structural Funds as those used by their municipality. It can be assumed that the most recognizable sources of financial support are the pre-accession PHARE, SAPARD and ISPA funds. As many as 48 respondents were not able to name the kind of funds their municipality may use, although they were convinced that there exist some. The knowledge of the funds after Poland's joining the Community is rudimentary. Only 21 people enumerated other Cohesion Funds, such as the EOG Financial Mechanism Funds, Norwegian Financial Mechanism, Operational Programme "Human Resources Development" financial resources or Regional Operational Programmes Funds; funds allocated for particular project, such as building a road, sewage system or organizing training courses, were also mentioned.

3. The socio-economic life areas supported by the EU funds

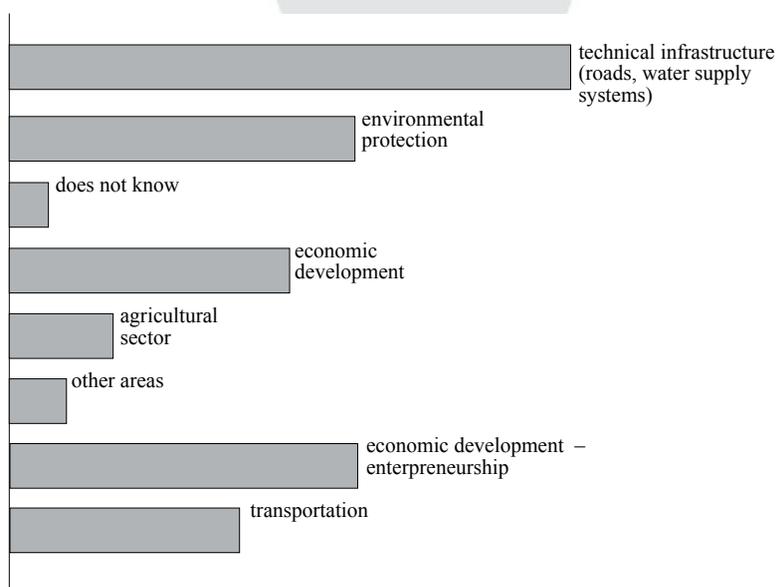


Figure 3. The structure of respondents' replies concerning the socio-economic life areas financed from the EU funds

Source: own work.

The respondents asserted that the funds their municipality took advantage of had been most frequently allocated for developing technical infrastructure (roads, water supply systems); then, in descending order, as follows: citizens' qualifications improvement, economic development (entrepreneurship), environmental protection, transport and agricultural sector development. Other socio-economic areas of life were pointed out, as well; those were: culture, innova-

tive economy and social assistance, tourism, sport, recreation, education and the Internet services. 15 respondents did not know what purposes were the EU funds allocated for.

- The areas in which particular projects had been realized in a municipality thanks to the EU financial support

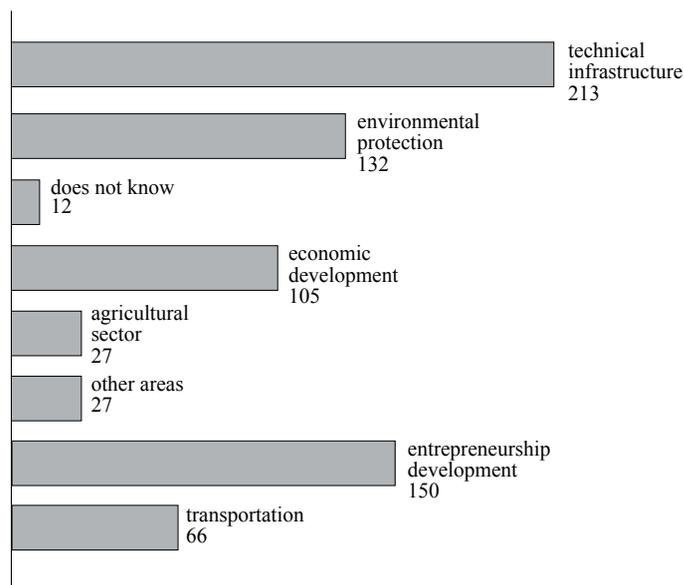


Figure 4. The structure of respondents' replies concerning the projects already realized in a municipality thanks to EU financial support

Source: own work.

The respondents appeared to be most familiar with the projects realized in their municipalities with the use of the EU funds in the field of technical infrastructure and entrepreneurship development support. 132 individuals pointed out the area of environmental protection; 105 of them had noticed the realization of the projects aimed at economic development, 66 respondents pointed out the transport development projects, and as few as 27 people indicated the projects concerning agriculture.

The respondents pointed out other areas of the socio-economic life which had been supported by means of the EU financial resources, as well; those were: sewage-drainage management, tourism, recreation, sport, education, the Internet services, training courses and human resources development. Only 12 respondents did not select any of the answers given, despite the fact that they were able to point out particular areas of the socio-economic life which the municipality allotted the European funds for. Therefore, it can be assumed that the municipality did not realize those projects, although the financial means had been sent to support particular areas of life.

4. The contemporary transformations within the category of municipality development evaluation

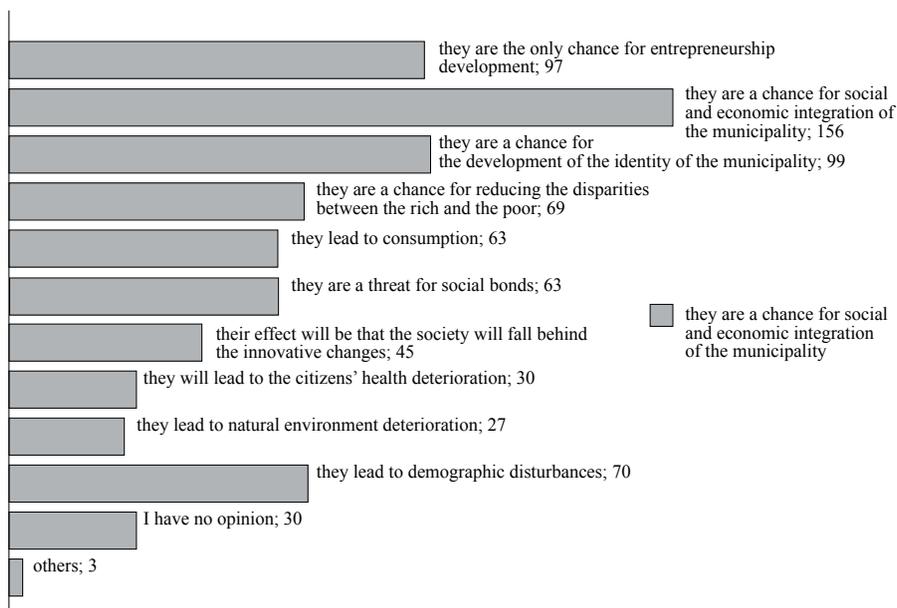


Figure 5. The structure of respondents' replies concerning the contemporary changes within the category of municipality development

Source: own work.

An unquestionable majority of respondents assessed the influence of the contemporary changes on the development of their municipality positively. Over a half of the respondents, i.e. 156 people, agreed that those transformations constituted a chance of social and economic integration for the municipality. Moreover, 99 respondents assumed that they were a chance for the development of the municipality identity, and for 97 people it was the only way for the entrepreneurship within the municipality to develop.

Among the negative effects of the transformations the following were most frequently enumerated: demographic disturbances, related to peoples' migrating to urban agglomerations and abroad (70 respondents), the loss of social bonds (63 respondents), and the changes leading to consumption (63 respondents).

- The socio-economic life areas in need of additional support from the EU funds

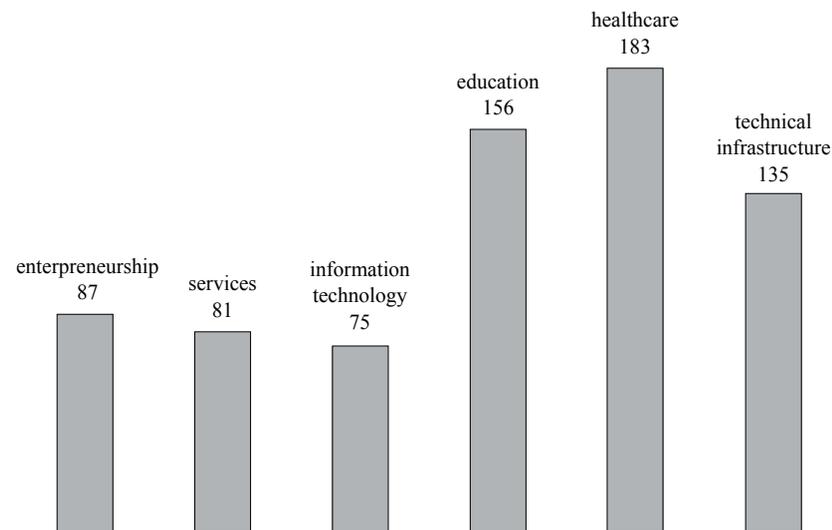


Figure 6. The structure of respondents' replies concerning the areas of socio-economic life which need support from the EU funds

Source: own work.

According to the majority of the respondents it is the healthcare services that needs additional financial support from the EU funds; such a standpoint was taken by 183 pollees. The area of education came in second. Less than a half of the respondents, i.e. 135 people, pointed out that technical infrastructure still needs financial support, in spite of the fact that it is the area of life which the European funds are most frequently allotted to.

Additional expenditures are also necessary in such areas of socio-economic life as entrepreneurship, services and information technology. 12 respondents also indicated their own suggestions as far as the areas which should be given additional financial support are concerned, and those were: environmental protection, sport, process innovation, cultural activities and the civil society development. Thus, it can be assumed that the respondents tend to point out those areas which has been known as “financially neglected” for years.

Final remarks

Since the beginning of the year 2007, i.e. since the Financial Perspective 2007–2013 was brought into effect, the Cohesion Policy support has been held through two Structural Funds: the European Regional Development Fund and the European

Social Fund, as well as the Cohesion Fund [Kawecka-Wyrzykowska, Michałowska-Gorywoda, 2012: 282]. The research carried out among the Silesian Voivodship municipalities concerning, in general, the perception of the EU funds by the citizens, brings results which are different from those by the National Strategic Reference Framework Coordinating Institution for information and promotion.

National Cohesion Strategy Implementation System institutions have carried out a number of diverse informational, promotional and educational projects devoted to the EU Funds and directed at numerous target audiences. The year 2010 was the time of the first part of the Programming Period recapitulation and its aim was the effectiveness of the informational-promotional actions evaluation, since the knowledge of European Funds and the Operational Programmes constitutes one of the communication effectiveness indicator. What appears particularly satisfactory is the fact that the percentage of people evaluating the transformations in their immediate surroundings after Poland's joining the Community favorably is increasing, as 61% of respondents proved to be positive about the changes in their voivodship, and 48% evaluated the changes in the everyday life in a similar way. 70% of the Polish believe that the quality of life is improving thanks to the EU Funds. These are particularly satisfactory transformations, since they follow the principles of the European Funds Communication Strategy. One of the goals of the strategies was to indicate the way the European Funds transform the immediate surroundings and the way they prove to be beneficial for the citizens.

While comparing the results of research carried out among the Silesian Voivodship inhabitants and those carried out in the whole country in an approximate period of time, the Silesian Voivodship seems not to present itself in such good light as Poland, in general, does.

The year 2010 was the time when the group of people who claimed that they had come across the very term "European Funds" increased (to 88%). The number of people who had not heard the term decreased from 35% in 2006 to only 9%. The group of people who not only had come across the term, but they also claimed to know its meaning (in 2010 such a statement was made by 57% of respondents, in comparison with 21% in 2006).

According to research carried out on a national scale, high recognizability of the names of particular projects has been obtained as a result of the full-scale promotional campaigns which started in 2007; the programmes the respondents claimed to be familiar with were: Human Capital Programme (50%), Eastern Poland Development Programme (34%), Infrastructure and Environment Operational Programme (28%), Innovative Economy Operational Programme (20%). The regular growth of the level of the most crucial indicators that can be observed within the area of Polish citizens' knowledge and awareness of the EU Funds proves the success and effectiveness of the informational, promotional and educational actions, which is presumably of great significance for Poland's position as a leader (among the Member Countries) in taking advantage of the opportunities coming from the Cohesion Policy. The research carried out on the Silesian Voivodship representative group, however, does not allow to arrive at such optimistic conclusions.

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