

## Connecting with citizens: challenges for Cohesion policy communication

**COHESIFY launch event at the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 17 June 2016**

**Host:** Committee of the Regions

**Organiser:** OLD Continent, European Policies Research Centre

**Chair:** Dirk Ahner

The seminar marked the public launch of the COHESIFY project, which aims to assess the impact of EU Cohesion policy on citizens' perceptions of and identification with the EU and the role of communication. The seminar brought together project partners, advisory board members and experts on Cohesion policy and EU communication to discuss:

- experiences in communicating the EU and Cohesion policy to citizens;
- communication tools deemed most effective for enhancing civic awareness and understanding of Cohesion policy and its impacts; and
- the effects of communication efforts on citizens' attitudes to and appreciation of Cohesion policy and identification with the EU.

The meeting was opened by Wolfgang Petzold, head of unit at the Communications department of the Committee of the Regions, who welcomed the participants. Dirk Ahner, chair of the event and the COHESIFY advisory board, introduced the seminar themes and provided reflections based on his experiences as a former Director-General for Regional Policy at the European Commission.

The first session began with a presentation of the COHESIFY project's rationale and goals by Carlos Mendez (EPRC, University of Strathclyde). EU institutional perspectives on the seminar topic were then presented by EU officials working on communication at the European Commission's DG REGIO of the European Commission (Tony Lockett), the Committee of the Regions (Wolfgang Petzold) and DG for Communication at the European Parliament (Aleyda Hernandez).

The second session turned to Member State experiences of communicating Cohesion policy on the ground in two national contexts (France, Netherlands) and one region (Brussels). Sandra Chaignon (General Commission for Territorial Equality, France) presented the French approach to Cohesion policy communication, focussing on the creation of a visual identity for the Funds and communication campaigns. In the Dutch case, Marianne Schrama (Ministry of Economic Affairs) focussed on the joint approach to communicating the ERDF and ESF and the yearly communication event (open days). Finally, Alfredo Corbalan (Urban Development Agency, Brussels-Capital Region) provided a sub-regional, project-level perspective on communicating Cohesion policy based on a successful urban marketing project in the canal area of Brussels.

John Bachtler (COHESIFY Project Director, EPRC) provided closing remarks and reflections, thanked the participants for actively contributing to the seminar and highlighted the importance and value attached to ongoing collaboration and sharing of knowledge among the group.

## Key issues

A number of key issues were highlighted in the speaker's presentations and discussions.

European identity is a complex and contested concept. Surveys suggest that a strong, exclusively European identity does not exist among citizens and that there are significant variations across member states. While the existence of multiple identities is recognised, European identity is found to be subordinate to other identities, with the feeling of attachment to one's city, town, village or country generally being much stronger than to Europe. Public support for European integration processes is variable and has fallen in recent years, with only 37% of Europeans having 'a positive image of the EU' in 2015.

In this regard, it comes as no surprise that the 'diversity' element of the EU motto is 'sold' better than 'unity', possibly appearing more appealing to people and reflecting the actual identity patterns.

A fundamental challenge to the emergence of a European identity is that the EU has historically been largely an economic project with a strong elitist bias rather than a project putting people at its core. Neither top-down European identity-building efforts, such as those encouraging a formation of an EU 'citizenship', nor co-creative communication techniques seem to be able to resolve this fundamental problem.

Another important factor constraining the accommodation of multiple – national and European – identities and greater support for the EU is that Europe is often presented to be in conflict with Member States in national and media discourse. If the EU seeks to be more appealing to citizens, it may need to present itself as protector of sovereignty rather than a threat

Recent crises have exposed the inability of the EU to solve issues that really matter to people. For a younger generation in particular, Europe is increasingly associated with austerity or failures in handling the migration crisis rather than security and prosperity.

The EU has recently made enhanced efforts to 'reconnect' with citizens. Effective and coherent communication strategies increasingly targeting citizens play a crucial role in this regard. It is recognised that due to its distinct nature, the EU cannot apply the same identity-building techniques as a nation state, and new approaches are needed.

In this context, EU Cohesion policy is seen to play a special role, presenting an important opportunity for the EU to reconnect with citizens. Cohesion policy is often seen as one of the EU policies that is closest to citizens with a strong value-based rationale based on solidarity. It presents an important tool to translate EU-level narratives and strategic orientations into tangible achievements on the ground and for connecting 'macro' high-level EU rhetoric, abstract messages and discourses - often meaning little to ordinary people - with 'local' contexts, needs and concerns, understandable messages, tangible results and human stories.

There is significant potential for making EU and Cohesion policies more visible, real and meaningful for people, and for increasing citizens' awareness and appreciation of the EU more generally. 'Success stories' may have a special role in addressing some of the criticisms over Europe, including

those related to the EU as an elite project, thus enhancing a positive image and bringing Europe 'closer' to people.

At the same time, there exist a number of challenges and uncertainties that hinder full exploitation of the existing opportunities and understanding what communication strategies are most effective.

Notwithstanding large variations across the EU countries in citizens' awareness and appreciation of the policy, the average level of awareness of EU regional funding across the EU is surprisingly low at 34% of surveyed citizens, given that Cohesion policy accounts for a third of the EU budget and is one of the policies that is closest to citizens.

Cohesion policy is frequently subject to criticism about its implementation, performance and added value, which often relate to broader criticisms over the EU and its legitimacy, accountability and effectiveness.

Communication of Cohesion policy achievements is sometimes viewed as EU propaganda. At a more fundamental level, the mere rationale for CP spending is sometimes questioned, especially in the current context of austerity policies.

EU communication is filtered by national or sub-national debates, which may lead to a re-interpretation of messages. The selectivity of media in covering specific aspects of policy (with frequent focus on flaws and scandals) may also compromise its image.

There appears to be a correlation between Cohesion policy funding intensity and levels of awareness of Cohesion policy (although with a number of notable exceptions). However, this does not necessarily translate into positive perceptions of the impact of EU funding or support of the EU more generally. The reasons behind this are not clear. Similarly, there are no clear-cut explanations behind significant changes in the levels of awareness or attitude towards EU-funded projects in individual MS over time.

To design effective Cohesion policy communication strategies, the speakers and discussions highlighted a number of important conditions and principles:

- **Locally-based stories with human dimension.** First, it was recognised that linking the macro dimension (in terms of policy objectives, narratives, institutions) with the local, individual, human dimensions is essential. In this regard, more emphasis is needed on personal stories and testimonies, local messengers and messages, focusing on what the EU has financed 'next door', 'around the corner', in someone's locality or area of interest to make Cohesion policy more meaningful, tangible and appealing to people.
- **Customisation of messages.** Communication messages should be adapted and made relevant to specific recipients of information. What matters to different groups, regions or localities should be taken into account.
- **Simple messaging, clear language.** Messages should be concrete and ideally transmitted in the local language. Any 'heavy' elements (abbreviations, specific terminology, 'institutional' jargon, etc.) should be avoided.

- **Specificity.** Focus should be put on concrete achievements of policy and results of EU investments rather than abstract messages about the value of Cohesion policy and the EU.
- **Visual storytelling.** The potential of visual tools and infographics should be fully exploited to make stories appealing and memorable. Coherence in storytelling may be advantageous, pursued through adopting a common template for visual messages at different territorial levels.
- **Integrated approach.** Communication efforts could benefit from increased coordination across territorial (EU, national, regional, local) levels as well as horizontally across partners and funds. Coherent messaging, also at EU level, is crucial for achieving communication objectives.
- **Range of tools to be exploited.** Various communication tools should be used, including social media, local/regional/national media, networks, promotional opportunities and digital campaigns, and their combination is important. The potential of the new media generation should be increasingly exploited, but it should not entirely replace traditional media.
- **Communicating Europe.** Europe appears to be a stronger brand than individual European funds or programmes. Therefore, one should communicate about Europe and its achievements.
- **Communicate results and avoid propaganda.** Evaluative judgements should be avoided since they might be perceived as propaganda. It is important to communicate results and successful stories and let people judge for themselves what that implies.
- **Quality over quantity.** Experience shows that more targeted communication might be a good idea. Instead of scattering attention among a large number of stories, focus on a limited number of successful, 'spotlight', projects may help rationalise the use of time and resources and achieve communication objectives more efficiently.
- **Co-creative communication.** Communication efforts should be co-creative. Top-down, institution-driven communication may be perceived as imposing specific messages and encounter non-acceptance.

Effective application of these and other principles may be constrained by a number of challenges, including the appropriateness and burden of legal rules, willingness of national or regional politicians and other stakeholders to recognise the merits of the EU and broader criticisms of the EU particularly in the current context of crisis.

The discussants recognised the high relevance of the project's research questions and expressed a strong interest in ongoing collaboration and the findings of the research. A number of issues that should be taken into account in the future COHESIFY work were also highlighted.

- There is a need for rigorous research on the effectiveness of different communication approaches and tools and how messages can be best customised to

different target groups. Coherence, clarity, and simplicity were highlighted as playing an important role in this respect.

- While the translation of macro-level narratives into locally-relevant messages, stories and testimonies was recognised to be important for enhancing the awareness and appreciation of policy, it is unclear whether this would support European identity formation processes particularly if the European dimension is lost during the translation process.
- It is important to take account of the broader context (linked to EU-wide narratives and strategic orientations), how much identity-building potential 'generic' narratives bear, and what balance between 'concrete' and 'generic' is more effective from communication and identity-building perspectives.
- The value of a 'co-creative' communication processes was underlined and comparative analysis with 'top-down' communication practices and their effects could be helpful to identify the relative effectiveness of different approaches.
- A distinction can be drawn between strategic narratives underpinning Cohesion policy (e.g. 'sustainable development', 'smart specialisation', 'low-carbon economy', 'digital society', 'innovation union' etc.), which may lack a strong value-based dimension and have limited identity-building potential, from the more value-based concepts of 'solidarity', 'equality' and 'inclusion' which may have stronger identity-building potential. The question is how to communicate this narrative to people in a way that would contribute to attitudinal and identity formation?
- More comparative knowledge is needed on the factors explaining variations in the levels of awareness and perceptions of Cohesion policy, as well as changes in awareness levels in individual countries over time.
- There is an absence of regional-level data on attitudes to and identification with the EU. Regional voter turnout in EP elections may be a useful proxy variable.
- Qualitative approaches to measuring Cohesion policy communication success and effectiveness may be more useful in the absence of quantitative data.
- It is important to be realistic about the impact of communication on identification with the EU. 'Europe' enjoys more popular support than the 'EU' even though communication efforts focus mainly on the 'EU' suggesting that communication cannot solve many of the underlying issues of trust in the EU as a political entity, dissatisfaction with policy performance or unwillingness to transfer loyalty to a supranational jurisdiction.