

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OBJECTIVES

COHESIFY is a multi-disciplinary project funded by the Horizon 2020 Framework programme for Research and Innovation which aimed to assess the impact of EU Cohesion policy on citizens' perceptions of and identification with the European Union. The project also investigated how effectively the results of Cohesion policy programmes and projects are communicated to the citizens (www.cohesify.eu).

Started in February 2016, the project consortium comprises 8 universities and 2 SMEs from economics, political science, geography and communication disciplinary backgrounds who over the 2016-18 period investigated what citizens think of Cohesion Policy and what is needed to improve people's understanding and appreciation of Cohesion Policy.

The main research questions focused on:

1. how European identity and perceptions of the EU and Cohesion policy vary at national, regional and local levels;
2. the impact of Cohesion policy on citizens' perceptions of the policy and identification with the EU;
3. whether and how Cohesion policy communication strategies affect perception and identification;
4. what is needed to make Cohesion policy more effective in terms of people's perceptions of the policy and the EU more generally.

The project applied an innovative methodological approach by combining case studies with desk research, stakeholder interviews and online surveys; a large-scale telephone survey (of more than 8,500 citizens); a cross-national media framing and computational text analysis to identify the dominant discourses and tone of Cohesion Policy news coverage in the news media and social media (covering 6,700 articles and over 115,000 posts/comments on Facebook and Twitter); as well as 47 focus groups with 240 citizens in the 17 case study regions across 12 Member States.



The 17 case study regions include Baden-Württemberg (DE); Thüringen (DE); Cyprus; Central Macedonia (EL); Andalucía (ES); Castilla y León (ES); Nyugat Dunantual (HU); Southern and Eastern Ireland; Lombardia (IT); Flevoland (NL); Limburg (NL); Podkarpackie (PL); Pomorskie (PL); Zahodna (SI); West Romania; Scotland (UK); and North-East England (UK).

CONCLUSIONS

Key messages:

EU spending through Cohesion Policy can make a real difference to how citizens perceive the EU and European integration and the degree to which they identify with the EU. In particular, spending needs to be regionally and local differentiated – and seen by citizens to be addressing regional and local needs and development challenges. A more citizen-focused approach to the programming of EU funds is needed with a significantly upgraded role for communication.

1. The starting point is the problematic stature and image of the EU among citizens over the past decade. **The image of the EU among the public (what the EU does and how it affects people) has deteriorated over the past decade**, a trend which is especially evident in Southern Europe. Importantly, though, attachment to the principle of European Union remains either neutral or positive.
2. **There is clear evidence of the impact of Cohesion policy on individual perceptions of the EU and European identity.** The survey analysis results demonstrate that awareness of the ERDF and of the Cohesion Fund in particular, Cohesion policy communication, and perceived benefits for citizen's daily lives and for their region's development contributes significantly to citizen identification with the EU.
3. **Spending through Cohesion policy improves recognition of the advantages of EU integration.** Focus groups show that people recognise the importance of Cohesion Policy for convergence – narrowing differences in quality of life – and common action to address regional and local development problems. The representative survey of citizens shows that the vast majority of people think that the economic impact has been positive on their region or city.



4. **Perceptions of Cohesion Policy are influenced by exposure (the scale of funding in a country/region),** the effectiveness of the policy (what it does and achieves), and the quality of its management (regularity, efficiency, transparency).
5. Perceptions are also affected by the **coherence between citizens' perceptions of development needs/challenges and how the funds are deployed.** Focus groups show that many citizens believe that Cohesion policy needs to be more focused on the perceived needs of their region or city.
6. **Perceptions of Cohesion Policy are influenced by communication and the media.** Citizen awareness and perceived effectiveness of Cohesion policy are determined by media exposure and communication of EU funding. Regional and local news are generally more positive towards the EU than national news, although the EU dimension is frequently absent. There are marked variations in media tone with particularly low (but still positive) news in Romania, Hungary and in the European media. Social media activity is growing but is dominated by the policy community circulating factual/objective information that does not engage citizens. While there is evidence of public interest and engagement in Cohesion policy related news through user comments, the topics usually related to politicised EU issues with negative tone.
7. The significant territorial differences in media coverage of cohesion policy and in attitudes to and identification with the EU between and within countries means that both **the use of EU funding and its communication need to be regionally differentiated.**
8. **Communication strategies are improving but are failing to rise to the challenge** in terms of a focus on citizens and their daily lives, clarity in presenting EU funding, sophistication of methods, effective use of both traditional and social media and local differentiation. Focus groups with citizens show that they are inadequately informed about Cohesion policy and want to have more say on how funds are allocated or governed in their area.
9. **A new, more citizen-focused approach to the programming and communication of EU funds is needed involving experimentation with participatory democratic tools.** Further, the role of communication in programming and implementation should be significantly upgraded to connect more directly with citizens and increase their appreciation of the EU.



RECOMMENDATIONS: A NEW COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

1. Programming for people: integrate citizens into programming of funds

- Introduce 'open programming' as a principle and opportunity for genuine dialogue with citizens in designing interventions – not as consultee respondents.
- Translate open programming into practice by piloting participatory democracy tools to connect with citizens. A share of EU funding should be earmarked to participatory budgeting combined with deliberative consultative fora and tools (citizen juries, panels and deliberative polls). This would have a profound impact on increasing citizen engagement throughout the policy cycle.
- Use communication tools, especially social media, to promote direct information, awareness, understanding and *involvement* (not just consultation) in programming.
- Priorities need to strike a balance between *effectiveness* (what experts think is needed) and *utility* (what people consider to be needed).

2. SMART communication programming

- Mainstream communication in programming and implementation. At the outset, communication strategies should be developed at the same time and interactively with programme documents and not as an add-on at the end of the programming process. The strategy or a summary should be included in the programme, similar to the 2000-06 approach where it was included in the Programme Complement.
- Communication performance indicators (especially outcome indicators) should be a regulatory requirement for all strategies at EU and national level, including quantified targets and baselines.
- A minimum percentage of EU funding in programmes should be earmarked to communication activity. A detailed specification of 'indicative' costs for different activities should be provided in programmes and communication strategies, including HR resources devoted to communication based on an EU-defined common method to enable aggregation and comparison across programmes.



- A stronger role for the Commission in overseeing communication planning is necessary to ensure minimum standards are applied. This should involve introducing an ex-ante conditionality on communication specifying minimum standards and criteria to be fulfilled before payments can be made to the programme.
- Professionalisation of communication is required at all levels (EU and national) through specialist communication training and capacity building for communication officers and other management staff.

3. Project selection to exploit communication impact

- Require project selection to include a criterion on the effectiveness of projects to exploit and disseminate results, especially for major projects (> €50 million) where the Commission has greater decision-making authority. Territorial instruments (ISUD, ITI) could also be required to include a dissemination chapter in the required strategy content, given the strong focus on bottom-up development and citizen engagement. This will ensure that major projects and territorial instruments take communication more seriously when designing and implementing interventions. Moreover, it is already standard practice in other EU funding streams (such as Horizon 2020) involving smaller scale projects.
- The project selection criteria document approved by the Monitoring Committee should clearly specify communication criteria to enable assessment of their usage, comparison across programmes and spread of best practice.

4. Evaluation – accounting for communication results

- More impact evaluation of communication should be required. Evaluations should focus on the results and impact of communication strategies and of specific communication actions/tools, instead of providing broad summaries of all communication activity using activity (output) indicators.
- Upgrade methodologies for evaluating communication. This could involve encouraging the use of citizen surveys across regions that tap not only into Cohesion policy awareness and perceptions but also into EU attitudes (such as the image of the EU) to allow cause-effect relationships to be investigated; using participatory evaluation methods, including focus groups with citizens to understand what citizens think about Cohesion policy and to assess utility; and more use of news and social media monitoring tools including the application of big data techniques.



- At EU level, continue DG REGIO communication webpage upgrading and develop: a Policy learning platform (with a communication good practice database); a centralised repository for EU and national/regional evaluations on communication including executive summaries in English to spread learning on evaluation good practice and what works; and establishment of a single Communication programming, monitoring and evaluation guidance document for Managing Authorities, including methodological guidance on communication performance (outcome) indicators and impact evaluation.

5. Raising the visibility of EU Funds, institutions and projects

- Increase visibility of EU FUNDS brand rather than specific funds (ERDF, ESF, CF) to ensure a consistent and jargon-free identity for citizens
- More direct EU presence in regions, involving coordinated actions between managing authorities, EU representation offices in the member states, elected officials (MEPs and national/local elected officials) and Commission officials.
- Upgrade project databases at EU and national levels with audio-visuals, testimonials and human interest stories

6. Media Strategy – a proactive and territorially targeted approach

- Recognise that countries and regions differ in the way Cohesion policy is framed and design media strategies with reference to these local frames. This requires enhancing positive frames and actively challenging (rather than ignoring) negative frames such as concerns about competence.
- Build longer term narrative focused on these frames linking individuals stories, communications with a *fil rouge*.
- Diversify and upgrade social media activity and provide guidance/toolkits and training for stakeholders/beneficiaries to increase usage.

