

HORIZON 2020 PROJECT: COHESIFY

What has the EU ever done for us?

Does EU funding make a difference to how EU citizens perceive the European Union?

From the evidence of the recent EU referendum in the United Kingdom, it would seem not. Regions like Cornwall and West Wales and the Valleys, two of the poorer EU regions which have received millions of euros from the ERDF and ESF, voted predominantly to leave.



Media and opinion polling research identified a range of factors to explain this apparent paradox. Communication may be one factor: the BBC noted the lack of visibility of EU signage and general awareness about EU funding in Cornwall¹. But other factors also played a part, with the perceived benefits of EU funding in Wales and elsewhere being outweighed by concerns over budgetary contributions, sovereignty, immigration or the economic situation in the UK and Europe².

The question of whether people think that EU funding has been good for their region's economic development and whether it influences their attitudes to the EU and European identity are at the heart of a new Horizon 2020 project called COHESIFY. The study will undertake the first in-depth research on the interrelationship between European identity, EU Cohesion Policy and communication in regions across Europe. It forms part of wider Horizon 2020 agenda which is exploring how to reconnect EU citizens with the Union and foster a common European identity to underpin EU legitimacy and European integration.

Public opinion post crisis

Eurobarometer survey data shows that European identity among EU citizens declined in the years after the economic crisis in 2007/8 but then recovered to pre-crisis levels in 2010.



¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36054645>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/25/view-wales-town-showered-eu-cash-votes-leave-ebbw-vale>



^ Cornwall, one of the UK's poorer regions, has received significant ERDF and ESF funding

It reached an historical high in 2015, with over 50% of the citizens identifying with both their country and Europe for the first time. Political support for the EU has also recovered in recent years, although citizens' trust in the EU remains well below pre-crisis levels, and the impact of Brexit on the EU and public opinion remains to be seen.

While Cohesion Policy accounts for a major share of the EU budget and has been a key tool in addressing the effects of the crisis, less than 50% of EU citizens are aware of the European Regional Development Fund or Cohesion Fund and only a fifth of these consider that they have benefitted in their daily lives from EU-funded projects.

Professor John Bachtler, director of the European Policies Research Centre (University of Strathclyde) which is leading the COHESIFY consortium of 10 EU partners noted that: "Many Europeans consider that the EU is remote from their concerns. Policy decisions are taken in Brussels and funds are allocated via national and regional capitals in ways that are hardly understood by the citizens. If the EU is serious about re-connecting with its citizens, it needs a much better appreciation of what people think of the EU and its policies."

His colleague, Dr Carlos Mendez, COHESIFY project manager, added: "This study will involve talking to ordinary citizens in countries across the EU to find out what they think of the EU and the money it spends in their country, region or town."

Research methodologies

The COHESIFY consortium, comprising eight European universities and two SMEs, will conduct interdisciplinary research over two years and will apply different research methodologies, including focus groups and a representative survey among citizens; online surveys and in-depth interviews with Cohesion Policy stakeholders and communicators; content analysis of political party manifestos; and (social) media analysis. In addition, the current communication strategies or activities conducted by Member States and Managing Authorities will be analysed.

The research will be steered by an advisory board made up of communication and policy experts from DG Regional and Urban Policy, the Committee of the Regions, the Free University of Berlin and the Club of Venice.

In addition to developing new knowledge on the relationship between Cohesion Policy and European identity, the project aims to provide substantial policy recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of EU communication on Cohesion Policy. Initial results will emerge early in 2017, with the project ending in 2018 with the final reports, including publication of a handbook for EU communicators. ■

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www.cohesify.eu