

# COHESIFY: giving voice to the regions

Does Cohesion Policy have an impact on how citizens perceive and identify with the EU? And how effectively is the policy being communicated to the general public? These and related questions formed the basis of the two-year research project COHESIFY, the final results of which were presented to policymakers, other Cohesion Policy stakeholders and academics on 26 April 2018.

The past decade has seen a steep decline – and only a slow recovery – in the number of people who have a positive image of the European Union and trust its institutions. Populist and anti-EU parties are on the rise and the UK has voted to leave the EU altogether. The question is what difference do EU policies make, particularly Cohesion Policy which currently accounts for one third of the EU budget and is implemented at both the local and regional levels. Do people think that European Structural and Investment Funds have a major impact on their everyday lives?

This question was a starting point for the COHESIFY project which examined how Cohesion Policy is perceived by citizens in general. The project brought together a multi-disciplinary research team – led by the European Policies Research Centre (University of Strathclyde, Glasgow) – which included eight universities and two SMEs. The team applied an innovative methodological approach by combining case studies in 17 pilot regions across 12 Member States, stakeholder interviews and surveys, a large-scale telephone survey of 8 500 citizens, a cross-national media-framing analysis of over 8 000 news articles and more than 110 000 social media posts, as well as 47 focus groups including 240 citizens.

According to COHESIFY project director, Professor John Bachtler, of the University of Strathclyde, the main conclusion is that: “Cohesion Policy spending and communication make a real difference to how citizens perceive the EU and European integration and the degree to which they identify with the EU. If EU policymakers want to promote regional and local identification with the EU, Cohesion Policy is clearly an effective instrument – but only if it is properly communicated.”





## What do EU citizens think?

The project found clear evidence that Cohesion Policy does have an impact on citizens' perceptions of the EU and European identity. "The discussions in the focus groups showed that the citizens of the EU have an implicit and cursory knowledge of Cohesion Policy. Citizens recognise the importance of the Policy for addressing regional disparities and improving the quality of life, but feel they are inadequately informed. They want to have more say on how funds are allocated or governed in their area," explained Dr Andreja Pegan from Trinity College Dublin during the final event at the European Committee of the Regions in Brussels.

While Cohesion Policy often does not have a direct impact on the European identity of EU citizens, many supported the principles of the policy (especially to reduce the differences in economic development). There is also considerable evidence of positive perceptions of the impact of Cohesion Policy on the development of a citizen's region or city.

The results of the survey of 8500 citizens confirms these findings, according to COHESIFY project manager, Dr Carlos Mendez from the University of Strathclyde. "Citizens are aware of the projects funded by the European Regional Development

Fund and Cohesion Fund, and the perceived benefits for citizens' daily lives and for their region's development contribute significantly to how they identify with the EU."

The project also found that perceptions of the EU and specifically Cohesion Policy are influenced by the scale of funding as well as its performance and good management.

## Communicating Cohesion Policy

The COHESIFY results show the importance of EU spending being regionally and locally differentiated – and seen by citizens to be addressing the needs and development challenges that really matter to them. At present, citizens feel that they are not sufficiently informed about Cohesion Policy, and policy stakeholders acknowledge that communication has not been adequately prioritised. Communication strategies should give a higher priority to informing citizens about Cohesion Policy projects so that they appreciate the EU's contribution to their region's development.

Surprisingly, the researchers found that traditional media (in particular TV) and billboards are among the most-effective communication tools. Social media play a less important role than expected. ➤



## How is Cohesion Policy presented in the media?

Another part of the study dealt with the way Cohesion Policy is framed in the media. More than 110 000 media articles as well as posts and comments on social media were analysed. Dr Vasiliki Triga from the Cyprus University of Technology explained: “Indeed, Cohesion Policy frames overall are positive since the two dominant frames describe the positive economic effects of Cohesion Policy for Member States as well as the dominant impact on the citizens’ quality of life.”

The analysis also found territorial differences. Regional media frame Cohesion Policy more positively in terms of economic consequences in particular, while the national media tend to focus more on negative frames that are critical of the way Cohesion Policy is implemented.

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## COHESIFY

**Duration:** February 2016 to May 2018

**Lead partner:** University of Strathclyde, European Policies Research Centre

**Partners:** Central European University (HU); Cyprus University of Technology; Delft University of Technology (NL); Old-Continent (BE); Polytechnic University of Milan (IT); Regio+ (ES); Trinity College Dublin (IE); University of Mannheim (DE); University of Warsaw (PL)

**Programme:** Horizon2020 Research and Innovation Programme

**Funding:** EUR 2.4 million

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## Cohesion Policy post-2020

The key recommendations and results of the COHESIFY project were transmitted to EU policymakers to be considered for the debate on the 2021-27 Multiannual Financial Framework and legislative package for Cohesion Policy. The research shows that Cohesion Policy is effective in promoting positive perceptions and identification with the EU, but there is a need to emphasise decentralisation rather than centralisation in the governance of EU spending.

A key COHESIFY proposal is to introduce a more participatory, citizen-focused approach to the programming and communication of EU funds, which would radically transform citizen engagement and appreciation of both the Cohesion Policy and the EU. ■

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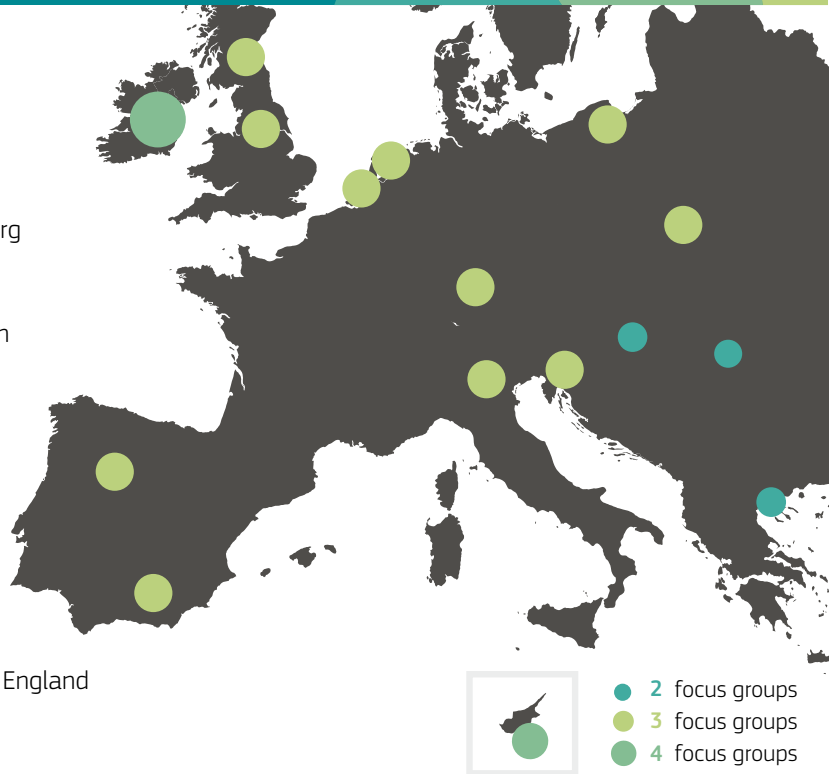
## FIND OUT MORE

[www.cohesify.eu](http://www.cohesify.eu)

# QUESTIONS ABOUT CITIZENS' KNOWLEDGE OF COHESION POLICY, ITS IMPACT AND CONTRIBUTION TO EUROPEAN IDENTITY

## WHERE DID WE INTERVIEW?

- Cyprus** – Cyprus
- Germany** – Baden-Württemberg
- Greece** – Central Macedonia
- Hungary** – Nyugat-Dunantu
- Ireland** – Southern and Eastern
- Italy** – Lombardy
- Poland** – Podkarpackie
- Poland** – Pomorskie
- Romania** – West
- Slovenia** – West
- Spain** – Andalucia
- Spain** – Castilla y León
- Netherlands** – Flevoland
- Netherlands** – Limburg
- United Kingdom** – North East England
- United Kingdom** – Scotland



## WHO DID WE INTERVIEW?

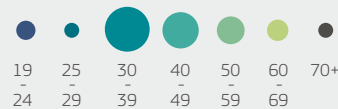
240 PARTICIPANTS



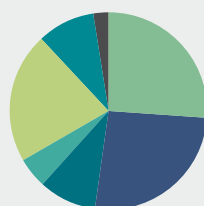
110 WOMEN



### AGE



## HOW DID WE RECRUIT?



- Snowball
- COHESIFY citizens' survey
- Social media
- External recruiter
- On location
- Research team's social network
- Adds on bulletin boards or newspapers