

COHESIFY Researchers: “EU spending through Cohesion Policy makes a real difference to how citizens perceive and identify with the European Union”

Brussels, May 2018. A two-year, multi-disciplinary research project COHESIFY funded by the Horizon2020 Programme has found clear evidence of the impact of Cohesion Policy on citizens’ perceptions of the EU and European identity. A key finding, which has important implications for the MFF debate, is that spending through **Cohesion Policy improves recognition of the advantages of the EU and EU integration.**

The results of the study were presented at a Conference on 26 April 2018 in Brussels to the EU institutions, representatives of national and regional authorities and academics. The presentations drew on two years of research investigating the question of how EU citizens perceive Cohesion Policy and whether they identify themselves with the EU. In addition, the project analysed how effectively the results of Cohesion Policy programmes and projects are communicated to citizens.

The project applied an **innovative research approach** by combining:

- **desk research** on cohesion policy performance and communication in **17 case study regions**
- **215 in-depth interviews** and **an online survey of 400 policy stakeholders** in the regions
- **a large-scale telephone survey** covering more than 8,500 citizens;
- **47 focus groups with 240 citizens** in **17 regions** across **12 Member States**;
- a cross-national **media framing analysis** covering 6,700 news articles and 33,000 user comments to identify the dominant discourses on Cohesion Policy in the media ;
- application of **big data techniques to social media** covering more than 115,000 posts/tweets and comments on Facebook and Twitter to understand awareness and sentiment of EU Cohesion Policy.

The study is ground-breaking in providing a new and much more comprehensive view of how a crucial area of EU spending - Cohesion Policy, accounting for a third of the EU budget - is perceived by citizens on the ground.

According to **Prof. John Bachtler**, lead COHESIFY researcher from the **University of Strathclyde** and responsible for coordinating the 10 project partners:

“Cohesion Policy spending and communication makes 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.”

The first session of the conference was dedicated to the results of the **47 focus groups** conducted in the 17 regions across Europe. **Dr. Andreja Pegan** from **Trinity College Dublin** explained that

“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 Cohesion policy for addressing regional disparities and improving the quality of life, but feel they are



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inadequately informed. They want to have more say on how funds are allocated or governed in their area and expect the responsible authorities to improve their communication on Cohesion Policy."

Only a minority of the focus group participants considered that Cohesion Policy has had a direct impact on their European identity, although many supported the principles of the policy (especially the need for common EU action to address regional differences in economic development) and positive views were expressed about the impact of Cohesion Policy on the development of their region or city. While Cohesion Policy can also have negative effects on European attitudes and identity if it is not perceived to be addressing local needs, COHESIFY Project Manager, **Dr Carlos Mendez** (University of Strathclyde) said::

"Overall, the findings provide clear evidence of the impact of Cohesion Policy on individual perceptions of the EU and European identity. The survey of more than 8,500 citizens in the 17 regions demonstrate that awareness and visibility of the ERDF and Cohesion Fund, and the perceived benefits for citizen's daily lives and for their region's development contributes significantly to citizen identification with the EU."

However, the results show the importance of EU spending being regionally and local differentiated – and seen by citizens to be addressing the needs and development challenges that matter to them. At present, citizens feel that they are inadequately informed about Cohesion policy. Communication strategies therefore need to be given a higher priority to inform citizens better about what the policy does. *"But it needs to be a two-way process,"* Ms. Pegan stressed, *"citizens want to have more say on how funds are allocated or governed in their area."*

The second part of the conference was dedicated to the **media framing analysis** of articles from various media outlets in all case study regions. The results show that Cohesion Policy is framed by the media in various ways, a fact that helps to shape the way the EU is understood, interpreted and evaluated. **Dr Vasiliki Triga** from the **Cyprus University of Technology** underlined that:

"indeed Cohesion Policy frames are rich and diverse and overall positive since the two dominant frames describe the positive economic effects of Cohesion Policy for Member States as well as the positive impact on the citizens' quality of life. Despite the positive news valence, the use of the European dimension is not employed frequently, though, Cohesion Policy being more associated with the national rather than the European dynamics and processes."

The analysis also brought to the fore a difference in how regional media frame Cohesion Policy in contrast to the national media. More precisely, regional media frame more positively the effects of Cohesion Policy whereas national media focus more on criticism of national governments and/or authorities regarding the implementation of Cohesion Policy.

The COHESIFY researchers have sent their **key recommendations and results to EU policy-makers** including the Commissioners in charge of Cohesion policy just in time to be taken into consideration for the **upcoming multi-annual financial framework (MFF)** to be announced in early May 2018.



Background information on the COHESIFY project

Started in February 2016, the project consortium comprises **8 universities** and **2 SMEs** from a variety of disciplines who over a period of 2 years tried to understand 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 **17 case study regions** are: Cyprus; Baden-Württemberg (DE); Thüringen (DE); Central Macedonia (EL); Andalucía (ES); Castilla y León (ES); Nyugat Dunantual (HU); Southern and Eastern Ireland; Lombardia (IT); the Province of Flevoland (NL); the Province of Limburg (NL); Podkarpackie (PL); Pomorskie (PL); Zahodna (SI); Scotland (UK); and North-East England (UK).

COHESIFY partners: University of Strathclyde, Glasgow (UK); Central European University (HU); Cyprus University of Technology; Delft University of Technology (NL); Politecnico di Milano (IT); Trinity College Dublin (IE); Universität Mannheim (DE); Uniwersytet Warszawski (PL); Regioplus Consulting (ES) and Old Continent (BE)

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