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# 'Co-Funded by the EU' vs 'From the American people': Refreshing the communication on EU Cohesion Policy

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## **ABSTRACT:**

The authors review the communication agenda on the EU Cohesion Policy. In recent years this issue has attracted unprecedented attention, in particular in the context of the debate on the future of the EU budget. Strengthening the communication of cohesion policy can help to boost support for the EU, given that it represents the most tangible expression of EU solidarity on the ground. Consequently, it has become a priority, with both the European Parliament and the Council calling for more efforts. In this paper the authors review the actual regulatory framework and go beyond the provisions to make 10 proposals for improving the communication and visibility of the funds.

**KEY WORDS:** European Identity; communication; Cohesion Policy; European Union.

**CLASIFICACIÓN JEL:** R10, R85, D83, N94.

## "Cofinanciado por la UE" frente a "Del Pueblo Americano": Refrescar la comunicación sobre la política de Cohesión de UE

## **RESUMEN:**

Los autores revisan la agenda de comunicación de la política de cohesión de la UE. En los últimos años, esta cuestión ha atraído una atención sin precedentes, en particular en el contexto del debate sobre el futuro presupuesto de la UE. El fortalecimiento de la comunicación de la política de cohesión puede ayudar a impulsar el apoyo a la UE, dado que representa la expresión más tangible de la solidaridad de la UE. En consecuencia, se ha convertido en una prioridad tanto el Parlamento Europeo como para el Consejo. En este documento, los autores revisan el marco regulatorio actual y van más allá de las disposiciones para hacer 10 propuestas para mejorar la comunicación y la visibilidad de los fondos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** identidad europea; comunicación; política de cohesión; Unión Europea.

**CLASIFICACIÓN JEL:** R10, R85, D83, N94.

## **1. INTRODUCCIÓN**

Cohesion policy is the main investment policy of the EU, accounting for a third of EU budget, and a central pillar of the European integration process. It finds its legitimacy in the Treaties whereby the economic, social and territorial cohesion is established as one of the key objectives of the EU action (TFUE, art. 174).

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In over 30 years, Cohesion policy has supported hundreds of thousands of projects all across Europe through three funds: European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF) and Cohesion Fund (CF). Its effects are thus visible everywhere in the EU, especially in the less-developed Member States where the volume and intensity of funding has been higher (Begg, 2008; Pellegrini et al. 2013). For these reasons, Cohesion Policy plays a significant role in building the European identity and the attachment of the EU citizens to the idea of European integration (Mendez and Bachtler, 2017; Capello and Perucca, 2017).

A number of studies have found a statistically significant and positive impact of cohesion funds on support for the EU (Brinegar et al., 2004; Dellmuth and Chalmers, 2017). However, this effect depends upon a variety of factors such as the level of education (Osterloh 2011). In fact, there are notable cases where the potential positive impact of cohesion policy on public opinion has been countered by other dynamics at play. In the Brexit referendum, for instance, several areas among the biggest recipients of the funds (e.g. Wales, Cornwall) voted to leave the EU by a large margin. In the same way, big net recipients such as Hungary and Poland have seen rising support for nationalist parties with a rather Eurosceptic stance<sup>1</sup>.

In light of this, it is not surprising that the communication of cohesion policy has attracted in recent years unprecedented attention, in particular in the context of the debate on the future of the EU budget. The main reason behind this growing interest is the acknowledgement that cohesion policy is particularly well positioned to help boost support for the EU given that it represents the most tangible expression of EU solidarity on the ground. Another key aspect is that its implementation is entrusted to or closely involves local and regional authorities, the most trusted level of government in Europe<sup>2</sup>.

Strengthening the communication of cohesion policy to improve its visibility has thus become a priority, with both the European Parliament and the Council calling for more efforts<sup>3</sup>.

Awareness of regional funding is still relatively low. According to the latest Eurobarometer, it stood at 35% in 2017, barely one percentage point up from 2010. Unsurprisingly, countries where the amount and the intensity of the funding are higher, often representing a significant share of public investments, fare much better: 80% in Poland, followed by most of the Eastern and Central European countries where awareness is over 60%<sup>4</sup>.

At the same time, 78% respondents say that regional funding impact on the development of their cities or regions has been positive (up 3 percentage points from 2015), with a peak of over 90% in Ireland, Poland, Malta and Estonia, and, on the other hand, a staggering 43% in Italy.

A different survey carried out in 15 countries accounting for 85% of the EU population, found that less than half of the respondents (45 per cent) have heard about regional policy (Charron and Bauhr, 2018). By comparison, awareness of Common Agricultural Policy, the other largest heading of the EU budget, is much higher, standing at 67% according to the latest Eurobarometer<sup>5</sup>.

These figures highlight a paradox: although there is more evidence than ever about its importance and added value, cohesion policy is still little known by the public. Breaking this paradox (Mendez and Bachtler, cit.), as we point out in this paper, demand a series of actions that build on the regulatory context but should go beyond it in order to better communicate on the role the EU plays in delivering solidarity and reducing disparities.

<sup>1</sup> The EU Spent a Bundle to Unify the Continent. It's Not Working, Wall Street Journal, 08/08/18, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-eu-spent-a-bundle-to-unify-the-continent-its-not-working-1533743729>

<sup>2</sup> Standard Eurobarometer 88, Public Opinion of the European Union, Autumn 2017, <http://ec.europa.eu/comfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2143>

<sup>3</sup> European Parliament, REPORT on increasing engagement of partners and visibility in the performance of European Structural and Investment Funds (2016/2304(INI)); Conclusions of the General Affairs Council, 25/04/2017.

<sup>4</sup> Flash Eurobarometer 452, Citizens' awareness and perceptions of EU regional policy, June 2017

<sup>5</sup> Special Eurobarometer 473, Europeans, Agriculture and the CAP, February 2018

## 2. THE REGULATORY FRAMEWORK: FROM PUBLICITY TO VISIBILITY

Information and communication provisions have been gradually strengthened throughout successive programming periods, evolving from simple publicity to a more encompassing concept of communication and transparency and, most recently, visibility.

In the first periods, the rules were weak and rather unspecific, though containing *in nuce* most of the elements that were later expanded into more detailed obligations. The regulation 1994-1999 generically required implementing bodies to “provide adequate publicity” of the funding opportunities<sup>6</sup>. The obligation for the beneficiaries of the funding to put up plaques highlighting the support of the Community was also included since the onset.

A major step forward was made with the 2000-2006 period. For the first time a specific regulation on ‘information and publicity measures’ was introduced, featuring a series of new elements: communication action plan, person in charge of communication, an informal network on communication, more detailed rules on billboards and plaques<sup>7</sup>.

The following period (2007-2013) further reinforced these provisions, introducing new requirements such as the publication of a list of funded projects/beneficiaries, the annual reporting on information measures, a communication plan approved by the Commission, a major annual information activity and the results of communication<sup>8</sup>.

The current period (2014-2020) marks the culmination of this process with a regulatory approach that fully acknowledges communication as a strategic function of the programmes (Mendez et al., 2016). This is reflected in a new obligation to draw up a communication strategy for each operational programme, while the responsibility for the approval was devolved to the managing authority and the monitoring committee. Compared to previous programming periods, major emphasis is also given to the professionalization of the communication efforts, to transparency and open data and to the communication of the programmes’ results or achievements. This translates into the compulsory designation of a communication officer for each programme and a new obligation to publish examples of projects. The setting up of a single portal per country became mandatory. Finally, the communication provisions are featured for the very first time in the main regulation of the European Structural and Investment Funds and not in an implementing act<sup>9</sup>.

The provisions proposed by the European Commission for post-2020 (under discussion in Council and the European Parliament) upholds the approach adopted for the period 2014-2020. However, they also seek to strike a balance between increasing the responsibilities of member states/managing authorities and beneficiaries on communication and lightening the regulatory burden on them. On the one hand, a greater effort is demanded to the implementing bodies in terms of transparency and accessibility, for instance through a new obligation to release relevant information on the funding calls at least one month ahead of their official publication. On the other hand, a series of minor obligations, such as organising an annual event, are dropped reflecting the simplification effort that is a key feature of the whole new legislation<sup>10</sup>.

## 3. GOING BEYOND THE PROVISIONS: OUR 10 PROPOSALS

Despite the reform of the information and visibility provisions in the last programming periods, empirical evidence points to persisting shortcomings in the communication of the funds on the ground. First of all, it is not guaranteed that the provisions are implemented smoothly everywhere. Desk analysis conducted by the authors in July 2018 found that a non-negligible number of ERDF/CF programmes failed to comply fully with

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<sup>6</sup> Regulation (EC) No 3193/94

<sup>7</sup> Regulation (EC) No 1159/2000

<sup>8</sup> Regulation (EC) No 1828/2006

<sup>9</sup> Regulation (EC) No 1303/2013

<sup>10</sup> Proposal for a Regulation COM(2018) 375

the current communication requirements, although no serious deficiencies were detected. For instance, 33% of programmes had not yet fulfilled the obligation to publicise examples of projects at the time the research was carried out. Half of the surveyed programmes had not yet complied with requirements in regards to the list of operations.

This highlights the need for more guidance and specific support from the European Commission in the future. Any further actions should also look beyond the regulatory framework. Information and visibility provisions are obviously instrumental to a good communication as they set the minimum conditions under which it should take place. Their importance is positively acknowledged by managing authorities, according to a survey by Perceive project (Barberio et al., 2017). However, they have a limited impact on the quality of communication efforts (representing only minimum requirements).

For instance, ongoing research by the authors has detected issues in regards to the accessibility of relevant information in several programmes' websites that nonetheless are fully compliant with the regulation. In addition, excessive technical and formal requirements may at times become an obstacle to an effective communication, as it has emerged from the Perceive survey. In light of this, we suggest 10 ideas for improving the communication and visibility of the funds.

### **I. Communication is not packaging, but part of decision-making**

Communication functions should be prioritised by the organisations involved in the management of the funds. A profound cultural shift in the way cohesion practitioners regard the communication of the funds is still to happen. A lasting bias, looking to communication as a somehow minor feature compared to other aspects of the implementation, appears to be wide-spread in many institutional contexts working with cohesion policy. A large number of managing authorities tend to give low priority to the central role played by communication in the delivering of the funds. To put it more clearly, there is not enough awareness about the fact that a good communication may actually affect the performance of programmes. Communication should be an integral part of the decision-making process of the programmes and of the project management cycle. It cannot be simple packaging, nor the last detail to think of.

### **II. Communicators are not second-tier staff, but professionals**

Another issue concerns the professionalization of the communication officers. Communicators are not second-tier staff. They should be professionals in communication or be trained to perform communication-related tasks. Unfortunately, in many public organisations officers in charge of communication have still an insufficient background in communication or are under trained. The requirement to designate a communication officer for each programme is meant to help tackle this problem. Unsurprisingly, it has had only a limited impact. Nor has it prevented the appointed communication officers from being given other tasks within the managing authority, which keep them from working full time on communication.

The Leaders' Report, a global analysis carried out in 2018 by PR consultancy WPP, has identified capability and skills among the top challenges faced by the public sector in terms of communication<sup>11</sup>. Most of the public servants in communication functions interviewed for the report feel insufficiently equipped to face the fast-changing and fragmented nature of the communication environment. Nearly one in five (19%) respondents was transferred into government communication from elsewhere in government and lack formal training; 14% of respondents receive no training in communication; 22% receive less than two days communication training each year; 43% report being in post for more than 10 years; few have built up modern communication skills in that time.

With this in mind, it is evident that the professionalization of communication officers working with cohesion policy is paramount. It should be pursued in a more systematic way.

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<sup>11</sup> The Leader's Report, WPP (2017)

### **III. Communicate the EU brand, not the single programmes**

A greater simplification effort should also take place in the communication of the funds. In this respect, two key areas where more simplification would be needed are: a) the way the support of the EU is communicated, b) the language employed in the communication actions.

As regards the first point, we see far too often different services competing to get through their own message on specific policies. In many instances, they are also offering a hyper-specific and technical communication. Uncoordinated communication on the EU, which is somehow a natural consequence of having in place a wide range of funding instruments, produces overlaps and fragmentation to the detriment of the impact of communication efforts.

The communication on EU and its funding should be much simpler and consistent. For the average citizen it is not important to know from which programme and fund the money come. In this sense, the new proposed rules on communication for the post-2020 period would be simpler and more coherent, setting out common provisions across the funds, leading amongst others to a single branding. In practice, when acknowledging the EU support, project beneficiaries will only need to display the EU emblem, without the need to refer to any fund or instrument, but adding the writing "co-funded by the EU".

### **IV. Use plain language, clear and simple**

Language is also an aspect with important implications. Cohesion policy actors often tend to use terms in their communication actions that are perceived as too technical or bureaucratic, and ultimately not understood by the public. Most managing authorities appear to be aware of the problem. The complexity of language is indicated as the single biggest barrier to communication, according to a survey among implementing bodies carried out by Perceive (Barberio et al. cit.). The issue has two different facets. The first one pertains to the peculiar jargon of the policy as such. In this respect, it would be advisable to start a reflection on the specific terms in use with a view of simplifying or suppressing part of them. On the other hand, bodies involved in the delivery of the policy should make a greater effort in using a simpler, less bureaucratic language when communicating with external audiences. Avoiding acronyms and jargon is central but not sufficient. Commonly used terms such as 'operational programme', 'managing authority', 'absorption', 'thematic objectives', probably even 'cohesion policy' means nothing to the average citizens and should be avoided. The same applies to funding calls, which need to be written in plain and simple language. If the call is not clear or too difficult, a potential beneficiary is deterred from applying to it

Using jargon or technical language is deeply rooted in the communication culture of EU institutions and the managing authorities, to the extent that even social media accounts, websites or logos – where an extra effort for clarity would be required - are often officially called 'Operational Programme X', 'Managing Authority Z', etc. On the contrary, some countries (France, Poland, Slovenia) have invested to create a single brand, used by the communication actors at the different level, in all communication materials. France has developed the brand 'L'Europe s'engage en' ('Europe invests in'), with the regional declinations: 'L'Europe s'engage en Bretagne', etc. The message resonates with the public and help to make recognizable and palatable the topic of EU funding and affairs.

### **V. Involve the political level and search for third-party endorsement**

Local and regional politicians are strong multipliers, followed by many citizens and enjoy wide media coverage. If they do not take all the merits for the success while blaming 'Brussels' for the unsuccess, they are a very strong amplifier and multiplier of the message.

For instance, very recently, the President of Tuscany in Italy embarked on a regional tour to discover and promote 100 projects funded by cohesion policy. The initiative drove a peak in media and public attention to the topic of EU funding, and the relationship between the region and the European Union.

Besides, programmes do not have to speak and please themselves; they should let credible external people do it for them. The best ambassadors are the project beneficiaries, people with whom citizens can easily identify.

For instance, France rolled out a remarkable campaign ‘L’Européen d’à côté’ involving the beneficiaries to tell their stories about the results attained thanks to the support of EU funding. Beneficiaries were filmed and short clips were broadcasted on France3, the public national TV with regional branches, just before the evening news. The campaign generated over 60 million contacts.

#### **VI. Increase cooperation among cohesion policy actors**

A more impactful communication of the funds relies on the concrete will to deliver a higher degree of cooperation among all the actors. There is a need for more vertical and horizontal cooperation: more vertical cooperation among the institutions (EU commission, member states, regional and local authorities); more horizontal cooperation with economic and social partners and civil society to give full application to the partnership principle. Multilevel governance and the partnership, two core principles on which cohesion policy is built, should become a strength, not a weakness in terms of communication.

#### **VII. Communication is functional for the success of a programme**

As argued above, communication can affect the performance of the programme in many ways. For instance, an effective dissemination of the funding calls leads to reaching a wider audience of potential beneficiaries. This could improve the impact of the operation with a more efficient allocation of resources, thanks to increased competition given the higher number of applicants. More broadly, enhanced transparency around the projects co-funded by cohesion policy would trigger more public pressure on the implementing bodies to deliver.

#### **VIII. Monitor and evaluate better the communication activities**

The current regulation makes an explicit reference to the evaluation of communication. It lists among the mandatory elements of the communication strategies “an indication of how the information and communication measures shall be assessed in terms of visibility and awareness of policy, operational programmes and operations, and of the role played by the Funds and the Union”.

However, empirical evidence suggests that such assessments are carried out only to a limited extent. This is owing to several factors: the evaluation of communication in public policies is a relatively new topic; up to now, no guidance has been developed by the European Commission; there is modest awareness towards these issues within the ranks of managing authorities.

There are strong arguments in favour of promoting a strengthened focus on measuring the effectiveness of the communication of cohesion policy. It would help managing authorities identify possible flaws and subsequently adjust their actions in order to: a) improve the effectiveness as well as the outreach of their communication, b) reinforce the engagement with the public and c) have a more efficient allocation of the communication budget. It would also enable the Commission to gain a better insight on the impact/performance of communication activities at programme/Member State level in order to assess the need for more guidance in the implementation of communication provisions 2021-2027.

#### **IX. Exploit the goldmine of open data**

Managing authorities and governments collect a broad range of data when implementing programmes (e.g. the list of beneficiaries/projects). The 2014-2020 regulation made compulsory to publish these data in open format. This leads to the development of initiatives for data experts, researches and journalists, data visualization contest for graphic designers, hackathons, and set-up of dedicated websites.

Since 2013 the Italian National Government organizes an education challenge for high-school students (‘A Scuola di OpenCoesione’<sup>12</sup>). Students are invited to discover on the national portal the projects that are funded by the EU, carry out researches and on-site visits and meet policy-makers to discuss the finding of their investigations.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.ascuoladiopencoione.it/about-opencoione-school/>

Projects of this kind should be expanded and exported in other countries: engaging with students and citizens through open data, trigger the civic monitoring of the projects, support the journalists in their investigative work should be one of the priorities for cohesion policy communication.

At the EU level, the open data platform of European Structural and Investment Funds play this role: by providing a trusted source for journalists and researchers, putting peer pressure on the programmes, and making the EU institutions transparent and accountable to citizens.

#### **X. Be innovative, be creative, be bold.**

In a world of communication overload, standing out of the crowd is hard. Standard institutional communication does not make headlines and struggles to create engagement. Citizens expect from public communication, the same quality they get from private companies. The boundaries between private and public spheres are blurred, and only an innovative and trustful communication bears long-lasting fruits. Excellent examples are out there, but still limited in numbers. Portugal ran a 'Did you know campaign?' on EU projects on 5 million sugar packets. Hungary and the Brussels Region organise a successful half-marathon about EU-funded projects. The regions of Thessaly in Greece and Nouvelle Aquitaine in France hired popular comedians to accompany students to discover projects and to humorously explain the cohesion policy communication rules. INTERREG organizes projects' slams. In the Netherlands, potential beneficiaries are invited to pitch their projects in a popular contest. In Lithuania, a prime-time TV show was based on want-to-be entrepreneurs using EU financial instruments to set up the business. And the list can continue.

However, these remarkable initiatives are often not connected and integrated in a consistent communication strategy. Therefore, they result as a good one-off campaign, more than structural action in a re-defined plan.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) implements assistance and development projects in low-income countries. Beneficiaries and partners of the projects must use the USAID logo with the underneath writing 'From the American people'. According to the Agency website, "it represents the goodwill of the American people in providing assistance"<sup>13</sup>.

Between the austere "co-funded by the EU" and the emphatic "from the American people", there is a sea to navigate through for communication experts.

In a public sphere that has been radically transformed, public communication is currently confronted by enormous challenges.

In a context where the choice on what to give attention to is immense, the media clutter offers an excessive amount of messages. Therefore, new approaches are required to pass the message. Strive for conversation (two-way engagement) and the ability to let citizens express their thoughts and to interact is paramount.

Social and digital media have brought communication to a new level, enabling organizations to engage with people and, at the same time, to better track the target audiences via detailed metrics.

Thus, the new competences for public communicators should be to plan, test, measure and adapt the communication actions based on analysis and metrics.

At the same time, public institutions should regain the trust of citizens by providing simple and digestible information while using the right dose of creativity, switching from exclusively rational arguments to emotionally engaging with the public.

The 10 ideas proposed for cohesion policy communication aims to contribute to the discussion in this direction.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.usaid.gov/branding/gsm>



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