



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



PERCEIVE

TITLE

**GUIDELINES ON COHESION POLICY
COMMUNICATION**

29/07/2019

INTRODUCTION

This report conveys a number of guidelines to support an effective communication of Cohesion Policy.

The guidelines that we present in this document are grounded on a research process that is articulated in a number of interconnected activities. First, we conducted focus groups with field practitioners; second, we conducted an online survey with policy communicators; third, we designed and managed workshops with local management authorities; fourth, we organized a small conference with policymakers and implementers. These four activities were conducted in a sequence. In addition, we developed a number of statistical analyses to explore how structural fund allocation and communication budget are associated to citizens' awareness and appreciation of Cohesion Policy. Finally, we conducted an automatic text analysis of discourse on cohesion policy both on social media and on traditional newspaper. Through this analysis, we elicited a number of thoughts that regards how discourse is associated with European identity. In presenting the guidelines, we tried to balance synthesis on the one hand and contextual details on the other hand. In other words, we advise that the distinct aspects listed below are to be regarded as interconnected with each other. We organized our recommendations in different sections to help the reader, but we recommend that it is important to capture the connections among the different dimensions of the communication of Cohesion Policy.

EVIDENCES FROM FOCUS GROUPS, ANALYSIS OF COMUNICATION PLANS & SURVEYS

1. **The objective of communication.** The regions in our sample differ according to the explicit definition of more operational objectives alongside the general strategic ones. Three are recurring **strategic objectives**. First objective is the **awareness of operational programmes**. Many regions indicate this as the main communication goal. Second, objective is the **awareness of the role of the EU**. This emerges as a more delicate issue. Indeed, in some of the regions that we analyzed, the idea of raising the awareness of the role of the EU is explicitly stated, whereas in other contexts, there is no explicit statement regarding the importance of highlighting the role of the EU. A third recurring objective is **"transparency"**, which is addressed both in connection with the goal of reaching the widest awareness of the program and for granting equality of opportunities to access to all the potential beneficiaries and stakeholders.
2. **Communication style.** In most of the accounts collected, a recurring plea transpires for the adoption of a **non-bureaucratic language**. The adoption of a more direct language is felt as a necessary step to reduce the perceived distance between the EU communication style and the actual issues faced by citizens. On the other hand, respondents often suggest that the **usage of numbers and figures** may contribute to lessen this perceived distance between citizen and institutions: their role is to clearly inform citizens about what is happening. At the same time, beneficiaries are described as a core vehicle for communication and some respondents mentioned that the presentation of **beneficiaries' success stories** humanize figures and shorten the distance between institutions and citizens by the means of storytelling.
3. In analyzing how communication of ERDF and ESF programs is structured at national, regional and beneficiary level for the regional case studies under analysis, we notice a variety of experiences. We highlight three general considerations. First, countries vary in terms of their degrees of freedom in organizing and implementing the communication plans. Second, countries vary in terms of the articulation of organization lines of communication and command among different entities. Third, countries vary in terms of articulation and enactment of information channels to capture media opinions.
4. As for the structure of communication web, an issue that emerges from our research is the need to further investigating the notion of **'regional learning'**, that is, the knowledge transfer among regions. Some research team reported little communication among regions.
5. One of the theme investigated in our comparative analysis regards the way in which **success** in communicating regional policy is conceptualized by local managing authorities. The conducted highlights three distinct conceptualizations: (1) the achievement of **economic policy goals**; (2) the achievement of high **absorption rates**; and (3) the **impact on beliefs of citizens** about the EU.
6. In the focus groups, we addressed the **awareness and perception of EU guidelines** by local managing authorities. Our study highlights different attitudes between two extremes: (1) some respondents perceive EU central guidelines and directives as

- technical requirement** to be fulfilled as constraints; while others (2) consider guidelines as an **appreciated guidance** in the conceiving of their communication plans. Whilst some case studies described the compliance with EU directives as a mere technical requirement, others were eager to emphasize their appreciation.
7. In the research, we explored the **communication mix**. Here, cumulative evidence emerged, across the nine case studies, on the rather professionalized fashion communication activities are carried out by LMAs, also in interaction with other actors (i.e. journalists and local media). Beneficiaries, both current and potential, are the main target audiences and 'face- to-face' or 'live' forms of communication seem to be the main way to communicate with them.
 8. A further direction of our analysis is **storytelling**. In this regard, the most agreed-on way to narrate the accomplishments of regional policy entailed the use of **direct testimonies of beneficiaries** as vividly illustrated in the case of Burgenland that addresses **beneficiaries as 'ambassadors'**. In addition, a number of elements were repeatedly mentions in our interviews; (1) importance of visual and material aspects; (2) use of testimonies; (3) stimulating deeper thinking; (4) use of figures and data and (5) conveying emotions.
 9. **New/social media** is indeed perceived as most relevant communication channel in targeting young people. In general, the need to communicate through new/social media is perceived as **a necessary direction to take**.

EVIDENCES FROM STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

1. **Investment is still a fundamental mechanism for amplifying awareness and personal appreciation of EU policy.** As from our analyses, more structural funds allocated to regions translates into both more awareness and personal appreciation. The same, however, does not appear to be entirely true for **communication budgets** allocated by LMAs (measured as the allocations for "technical assistance" in operative plans). These latter still associate positively with citizens' awareness of policy, but the importance of such effect is smaller than the one of pro-capita structural funding in the regions.
2. While communication budgets **positively associate with citizens' perceived personal benefit** deriving from financed projects, they seem to have **unclear association with support for integration**.
3. In our statistical analysis, we found a **decreasing effect of communication impact**. That is, the closer in time communication investment, the higher the levels of awareness of cohesion policy among citizens. We label this evidence as the **memory decay effect**.
4. Our statistical analysis shows that the euro-enthusiastic versus euro-sceptic polarity of communication in "**local dialogues**" happening on social media (namely public servants interacting with citizens on Facebook homepages of LMAs) significantly associates with both citizens' support for EU integration and perceived personal benefit from the policy projects.

EVIDENCES FROM STATISTICAL AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

1. Our statistical analysis, in connection with the analysis of discourse, found a strong and significant relationship between identification with Europe and the tone of discourse about Europe in national and local newspapers. Specifically, the emphasis on newspapers on divisive matters is negatively associated to identification while the recurrence of discourses that highlight the consequences on society and economy of cohesion policy is positively associated with identification. Independently of the direction of causality, this finding suggests that the discourses occurring in newspapers reveal **attitudes towards Europe that are locally entrenched**.
2. Our analysis on the discourse on newspapers emphasises the differences in the way in which media, in different countries, talk about Cohesion Policy. Specifically, **in each country, the discourse on Cohesion Policy evokes and mobilizes a different panoply of topics that are deep-seated in the history and culture of the country**.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO COMMUNICATE COHESION POLICY

The general context of communication

1. Some respondents have highlighted the **overshadowing of cohesion policy by other EU issues** – i.e. migration or Brexit –. Until the EU won't provide a convincing and coherent answer to such issues, citizens would hardly be ready to focus on any other EU input. Here, the key implication is that the EU has to **strengthen its perception as a social actor in global scenarios**. The recommendation for improving communication is accordingly a high level of activity towards building the image of EU as an institution coping with main geopolitical challenges in an active and consequential way. We believe this would also help with related contextual issues such as the generalized lack of trust in institutions in certain regions. In general, we suggest that a **coherent narrative of Europe as a supranational actor** is needed.
2. Another important contextual element is **political opportunism** – politicians taking credit for accomplishments realized with EU support and blaming the EU for local and societal problems. The implication here is that it is important to **enforce even more the visualization of the EU presence in local contexts** and small projects as well. Accordingly, a recommendation is that the multiplication of logos (i.e. of the individual funds or agencies) is to be avoided. On the other hand, a strict and rigorous monitoring and enforcing of the obligation to clearly credit the use of EU funds is to be implemented.

The objective of communication

1. **Building awareness and appreciation** is still very important. A respondent stated that this represents a **“vaccine” against populism**. Results of the PERCEIVE survey shows that while a significant portion of European citizenship is to some extent aware of some aspect of the EU contribution to the development of their regions, improvements in this direction are possible. First, it is important to be clear about the mission of local management authorities. We have studied the issue of European identity in depth and came to the preliminary conclusion that it would make sense

for LMAs to have **identity building as a task if not a constitutive element** of their missions. Now, this point is strongly subject to misinterpretation. As we have seen in the conference with policymakers there is a subliminal threat of telling citizens what to think. This is not what is being advised here. The advice we give here is that, if the EU motto is “unite in diversity” that unity, and a related sense of belonging together should be stressed more at the local level.

2. We found that the analysis of local discourses reveals the extent of citizens' identification with European. Therefore, any attempt to address of the issue of European identity need to carefully interpreting the structure of local discourses and to consequently **calibrating and anchoring communication to local discourse**.
3. It is advisable the **development of a more standardized system of measurement of investments and results**. Results of our field level analyses and direct contacts with local management authorities of different countries/regions altogether confirm a high level of heterogeneity in the evaluation experiences. This is resulting in the impossibility of developing standardized and comparative approach as well as of the transmission of good practices based on factual evidence.

The organization of Communication

1. As of the organization of communication activities, a series of interrelated topics emerged which emphasize the importance of coordination and balancing between central and local units. One such topic concerns the circulation of data across levels so allowing for more **transparency** of the whole implementation process. This entails for the local implementation level the task of gathering implementation data and transmitting them to more central levels – i.e. national and European. For the central levels instead, the main task would be the redistribution and dissemination of these data with a level of disaggregation allowing understanding regional and individual project level stories. A European platform, similar to Italy's OpenCoesione portal, integrated with data on companies involved in projects, would provide a good example of policy's transparency and **e-government practice**.
2. An indication concerning the organization of communication coming from the analysed LMAs was that developed communication actions are too narrowly focused toward projects' communications and do not help making visible the idea of Europe. European Commission should **lead the role** of communicating Europe with centrally developed actions. At the same time, LMAs should be free to give more importance to the **overall global communication** than to the one linked to every project.
3. Finally, a set of emerged issues pointed to the importance of inclusiveness in regard to the involvement of external audiences. The issues of inclusiveness is to be interpreted from two perspectives. First, inclusiveness concerns the inclusion of **funds' beneficiaries in communication**; a mandatory dedicated chapter of their communication **activities** should be included in the application and evaluated during the selection process. Second, and more generally, inclusiveness call for the need **be inclusive of all stakeholders when building a call. More specifically, the idea put forward here is to try to build** bottom up the calls involving stakeholders in the preparation of the calls.

New communication channels

1. While LMAs acknowledge the importance of traditional channels and the role of educational institutions as multipliers, they still seem to fear, or not fully understanding, the potential of social media. In addition, traditional centralized control prevents from using effectively this channel. Low percentage of people are getting informed through social media. To increase the effectiveness of social media **it is important to have communication staff with up-to date skills on social media communication.**
2. In this respect, a key issue deals with the organization of the responsibilities and lines of command in LMAs. Namely, presence on social networks may require that a member of the organization constantly check ongoing discourse to intervene when appropriate. This requires the creation of profile that have the authorization to speak on behalf of the organization with relative autonomy. Thus, beyond the acquisition of new professional profiles and skills, **new organizational roles and processes may be necessary.**
3. To this extent, our empirical findings (i.e. deliverable 3.3) highlight the importance of communicating decisions and events, as in those circumstances the EU tends to emerge as an autonomous and coherent social actor. As an example, let us think to the highly resonant debate on EU membership (i.e. possible admission of Turkey and UK leaving the EU). Analyzing Twitter talks on Cohesion Policy, we have directly appreciated the importance of international meetings and events. More specifically we observed peaks in Twitter traffic corresponding to the 7th EU Cohesion Forum (i.e. the account @EU_REGIO being highly rewetted), or the shift at the head of the Committee of Regions (i.e. the account @EU_CoR being highly rewetted). These peaks are important in that create occasions for the news to cross the boundary between social and traditional media – i.e. the news reports about what happens in the social media. A useful indication emerged during the small conference with policy makers and practitioners involving the shift of mind from targeting the general public to building communities and interactions.
4. Our statistical analysis pointed at the emergence of a “local dialogues” happening on social media (namely public servants interacting with citizens on Facebook homepages of LMAs). The analysis as well highlighted how these local dialogues significantly associate with both citizens’ support for EU integration and perceived personal benefit from the policy projects. However, this relationship is highly complex and therefore major attention should be devoted to **developing advanced and up-to-date communicative skills at the local implementation level.** In particular, a core skill to be **developed is the ability of looking at social media as a mirror and thermometer of the public opinion** about the EU and its cohesion policy not just as an additional communication channel in the mix, but rather.
5. In sum, we highlight two key considerations. First, coherently with current technological and cultural trends, **one-way communication need to work in parallel with the development of social networks** in which LMAs’ officers, potential beneficiaries and different stakeholders are interconnected. Second, consequently, **LMAs need to invest to build know-how and skills for communicating with new media and to understand the logic of communication that inspires social networks.**

Tone, Messages and Targets of Communication

1. **Too many technicalities.** European Commission misses the shot in the communication strategy because there is a “lack of soul” in the communications, which are too focused on technical and economic aspects. Too many labels and acronyms - i.e. ROP, ERDF, ROP, ESF, CP, EU Regional Policy, EU Regional Funds – have the unintended effect of multiplying cognitive effort and complexity for the citizen. Here the advice is to let the beneficiaries talk as much as possible. In addition, the use of different, and often obscure, acronyms makes it more difficult to effectively enforcing the visualization of the role of the EU in funding specific projects.
2. Initiatives and competitions where the citizens autonomously produce the contents to be communicated are also advised. Use more data, but not necessarily more numbers (i.e. producing visually appealing representation of data) in communication to contrast the distance between quantity and quality of communication activities. Our survey revealed that, in many regions, while the awareness of cohesion policy is diffused among citizens, not necessarily the awareness is translated into appreciation or in identification with the EU. **Communication should be focused on the potential impact of CP on peoples’ life, not only on long term infrastructural development.**
3. According to a LMA representative, more effort should be put in communicating the aim and importance of cohesion policy in contributor countries. To this extent it is interesting that two of the regions in contributor countries lamented thin communication budgets and therefore the need to be mainly focusing on potential beneficiaries as targets – not on the general public. Along these lines, results of the PERCEIVE survey showed the importance of unemployment as the main perceived problem in many case study regions. A respondent commented that communication of policy results should in fact point more on jobs, which have been created with the funds.
4. Some participants pointed to the importance of distinguishing between two territorial levels of communication. First, at the **European level**, the communication process should be oriented towards CP objectives and target global (major) issues rather than individual needs of each region. Second, at **regional level**, the communication process should be better **anchored on local discourses** and to be focused on communicating an **integrated vision of regional development**. The aim is at citizens understanding the sense of interventions through funded projects.

A GENERAL MODEL TO UNDERSTAND POLICY COMMUNICATION

Beyond suggesting specific policy guidelines, we describe a general model of communication Cohesion Policy that, we suggest, may describe a logic of intervention to support policy makers in dealing with communication.

The model that we propose is grounded upon two concepts:

- **Collective attention** (which is articulated into **communicative attention** and **cultural attention**).
- **Discursive opportunity structure.**

Other authors, in different disciplinary contexts, have developed the two concepts. Yet, we mobilized and integrated the concepts in a communication model for Cohesion Policy. To

explore the consequences of the interaction among variables, we translated the qualitative theoretical account into a formal model¹ and we explored the behaviour of the model with computer simulations.

Definitions

Collective attention: the attention that a society gives to a certain issue. The collective attention is the sum of communicative attention and cultural attention.

Communicative attention²: the attention that a society gives to a certain issue through the oral transmission of information.

Cultural attention³: the attention that a society gives to a certain issue through the written recording of information.

Discursive opportunity structure⁴. A latent meaning structure of societies that influences the way in which specific themes are embedded in public discourse. For example, specific themes may be favourably accepted given 'the opportunity provided by salient discourses that are alive and have momentum at a particular point in time' (Cornelissen and Werner, 2007: 210⁵).

Key elements of the model

- We represent communicative and cultural attention as stocks that are filled through an inflow and are depleted by a process of decay. Any positive level of the stocks imply the existence of some kind of attention.
- Both communicative and cultural attention are depleted by at a certain rate (cultural and communicative attention rate of decay).
- Cultural and communicative attention rate of decay are different: the rate of decay of communicative attention is faster than the rate of decay of cultural attention. Cultural attention is more resilient.
- The stock of communicative attention is depleted as well when information is recorded to accumulate into the stock of cultural attention.
- The probability that an information is effectively recorded in the stock of cultural memory depends on the consonance between the framing of the information and the components of the discursive opportunity structure.
- **The level of awareness of Cohesion Policy depends on the level of communicative and cultural attention to Cohesion policy.**

¹ We developed our model grounding on the formalization presented by Candia, C., Hidalgo, C. A., Jara-Figueroa, C., Rodriguez-Sickert, C., Barabási, A. and C. A. Hidalgo. (2018). The universal decay of collective memory and attention. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 3, 82–91.

² Candia, C., Hidalgo, C. A., Jara-Figueroa, C., Rodriguez-Sickert, C., Barabási, A. and C. A. Hidalgo. (2018). The universal decay of collective memory and attention. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 3, 82–91.

³ See note 2.

⁴ Koopmans, R., and Statham, P. (1999). Ethnic and civic conceptions of nationhood and the differential success of the extreme right in Germany and Italy. In M. Giugni, D. McAdam, and C. Tilly (Eds.), *How social movements matter* (pp. 225–251). University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN. McCammon, H., J., Newman, H. D., Sanders Muse, C. and T. M. Terrell. 2007. Movement Framing and Discursive Opportunity Structures: The Political Successes of the U.S. Women's Jury Movements. *American Sociological Review*, 72(5): 725–749.

⁵ Cornelissen, J. P., and Werner, M. D. (2014). Putting framing in perspective: A review of framing and frame analysis across the management and organizational literature. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 8, 181–235.

The diagram illustrates the model of the development of awareness of cohesion policy. It features two main parallel processes: Communicative attention and Cultural attention.

- Communicative attention:** This process starts with *Communication effort* entering a valve symbol. The output goes into a rounded rectangle labeled *Communicative attention*. From this rectangle, one path leads to another valve symbol labeled *Decay*, which is influenced by the *Communicative attention rate of decay* (indicated by a dashed blue arrow). The other path from the rectangle leads to a valve symbol labeled *Recording*, which is influenced by the *Discursive opportunity structure* (indicated by a dashed blue arrow).
- Cultural attention:** This process starts with the *Discursive opportunity structure* entering a valve symbol. The output goes into a rounded rectangle labeled *Cultural attention*. From this rectangle, one path leads to another valve symbol labeled *Decay*, which is influenced by the *Cultural attention rate of decay* (indicated by a dashed blue arrow). The other path from the rectangle leads to the same *Recording* valve symbol as the communicative path.

Both the *Recording* valve and the *Decay* valves from both processes lead to the final outcome: *Awareness of Cohesion Policy*.

We show five simulations to give a flavour of what the implications are of addressing the interconnected issues of communication and awareness according to the logic of the model reported in figure 1.

List of simulations:

Simulation 5 – Scenario with improved analysis of local discursive opportunity structures

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Policy implications

1. The effects of communication effort decay over time: invest in education systems

As simulation 1 shows in figure 2, the effects of any communication effort decays over time. Notwithstanding the amount of the communicative effort, the attention given to information concerning Cohesion Policy are due to fade away after a certain time. The time depends on the decay of both communicative and cultural attention. The rate of decay of communication attention is faster than cultural attention. Therefore, to relent the overall rate of decay of attention, it is important that information concerning Cohesion Policy be recorded in the stock of cultural attention. Simulation 2 reminds that, by producing a strong communicative effort, for example in 2018, only produces a temporary peak in awareness due to erode over time. Yet, it is still possible to lift up the level of awareness that follows a specific communication campaigns. In simulation 3, we present a scenario in which we simulated an increased education level. More specifically, we simulated what happens when intervening on the number of people that, in a region, is able to acknowledge and interpret information concerning Cohesion Policy. Hence, we suggest that:

Policy-makers should invest in secondary and high schools to create an appropriate cultural terrain. The investment in education will increase the resilience of communication investments

Figure 2 - Simulation 1

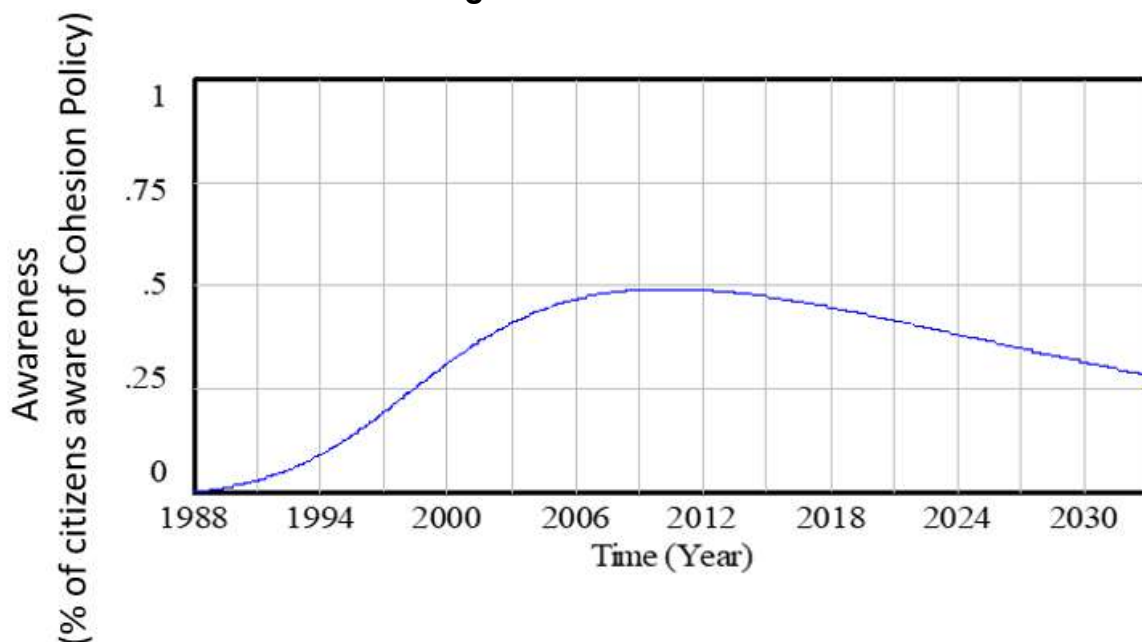


Figure 3 - Simulation 2

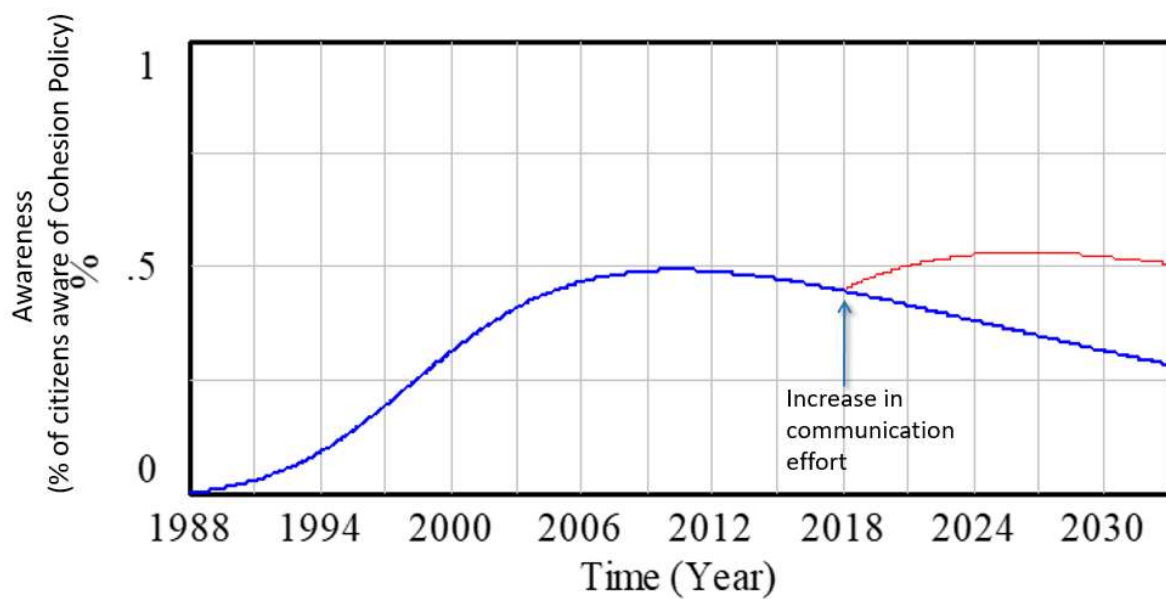
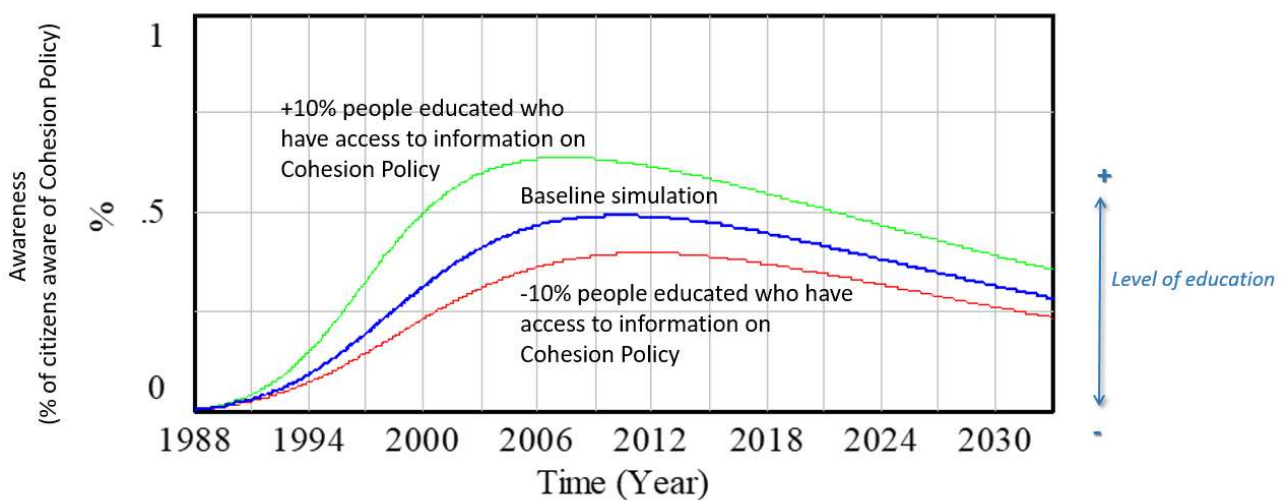


Figure 4 - Simulation 3

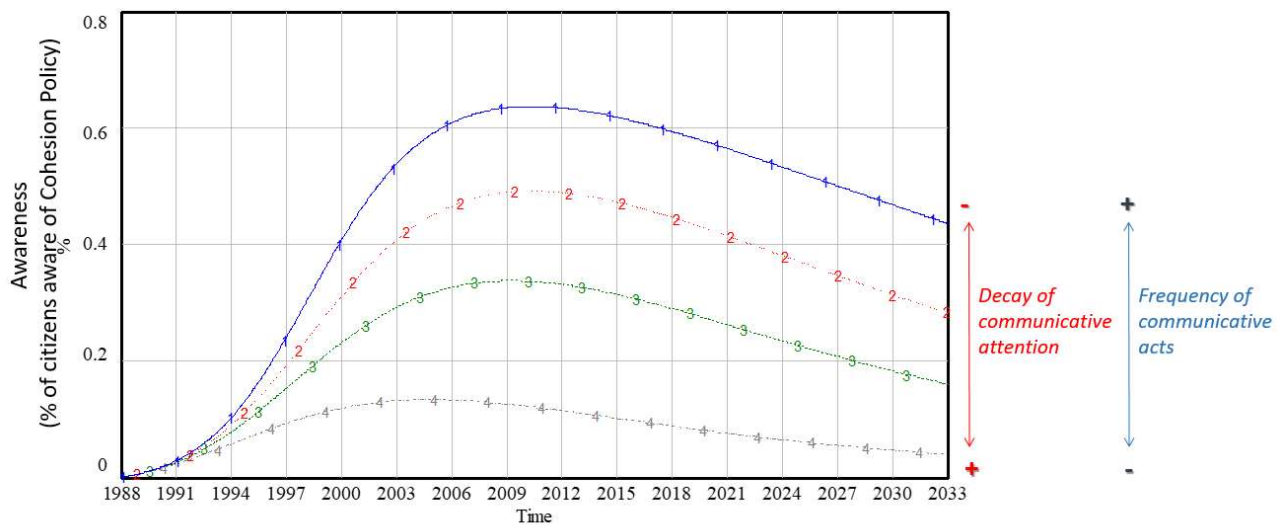


2. Increase the frequency of communication acts

Since the effects of any communication effort decays over time, policy makers need to consider that frequent communicative acts may obtain the result of counterbalancing the decay rate, thereby preserving the level of collective attention. More specifically, increasing the frequency of communication acts, the stock of communicative attention is preserved and this will facilitate the recording of information from communicative to cultural attention. Therefore, we suggest that:

the increase in the frequency of communication is as important as the magnitude of communication investment since frequency slows down the decay of communicative attention.

Figure 5 - Simulation 4

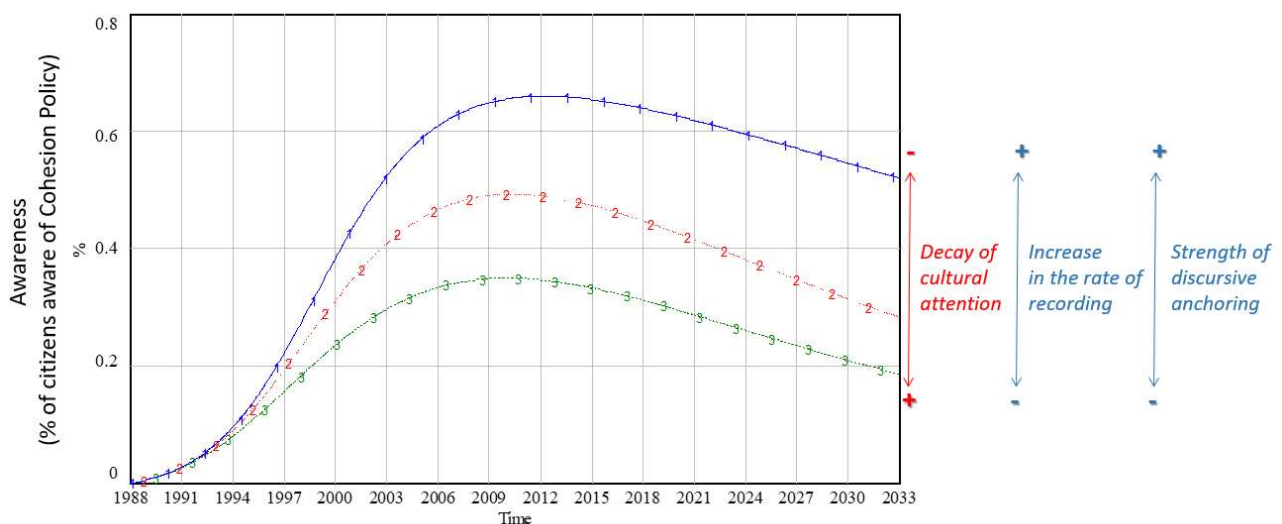


3. The importance of discourse and of the local discursive opportunity structure

In figure 6, we report simulation 5 in which we assumed different degree of the quality of communication. Specifically, we assumed different capability in reading the discursive opportunity structure of local media. Policy makers, we assumed, may be more or less able to anchor their discourse into local discourse. Flaws in the analysis of local discursive opportunity structures may result in communication that can be distorted, misinterpreted and politically manipulated. Simply, the information may fail to be recorded in the media. Thus, discursive weakness may result in a weak recording rate (the passage from the communicative to the cultural attention) or in an accelerate rate of decay of cultural memory. Thus:

To be resilient, communication needs to be anchored on a sound analysis of local discursive opportunity structures.

Figure 6 - Simulation 5



PERCEIVE is a 3-year collaborative research project on the Perception and Evaluation of Regional and Cohesion policies by Europeans and Identification with the Values of Europe. Researcher and practitioners from eight partner institutions across seven European countries worked on developing a comprehensive theory of “cohesion in diversity” and use this theory to create a better understanding of the channels through which European policies contribute to creating both different local understandings of the EU and different levels of European identification across profoundly different European regions. The research project also aims at both mapping and explaining inter- and intra-regional variations in: a) the experiences and results of cohesion policy implementation, b) citizens' awareness and appreciation of EU efforts for delivering cohesion and c) European identities and citizens' identification with the EU.

Building on a multidisciplinary portfolio of competences bridging socio-political, regional-economic and public-administrative backgrounds, PERCEIVE integrates the use of both qualitative and quantitative analytical methods such as surveys, semi-structured interviews, case studies, sentiment analysis, econometric modeling and analysis and simulation of large-scale computational models.

Among the outputs of the PERCEIVE project, we enumerate the ones referring to the present report:

- Qualitative report on the impact and effectiveness of communication strategies from the semi structured interviews with cohesion policy practitioners (including third-party partners in the consortium), written by each partner (D3.1).
- Qualitative report with main findings from the interviews (D3.2)
- Descriptive report on the specific role of new media in EU financed projects' communication strategies (D3.3)
- Report on the statistical analysis of communication efforts' impact and effectiveness on citizens' awareness and appreciation of EU financed projects (D3.4)
- Report with analysis of PERCEIVE Simulation Lab model behavior and scenario analysis (D6.3).

More details on the PERCEIVE project, its activities and research outcomes are available on www.perceiveproject.eu.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Perception and Evaluation of Regional and Cohesion Policies by Europeans and Identification with the Values of Europe (PERCEIVE)
COORDINATOR	Professor Edoardo Mollona, Alma Mater Università di Bologna, Italy edoardo.mollona@unibo.it
CONSORTIUM	Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna (UNIBO), Italy Goteborgs Universitet (UGOT), Sweden Institute of Agricultural Economics (IEA), Romania Instytut Ekonomiki Rolnictwa i Gospodarki Żywnościowej-Panstwowy Instytut Badawczy (IAFE-NRI), Poland Universitat de Barcelona (UB), Spain University of Portsmouth (PBS), United Kingdom Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien (WU), Austria Società Cooperativa BAM! Strategieculturali, Italy
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WEBSITE	www.perceiveproject.eu
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Contact: Edoardo Mollona (edoardo.mollona@unibo.it) Cristina Brasili (cristina.brasili@unibo.it)
FURTHER READING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Barberio, V., Kunc, I., Mollona, E. and L. Pareschi. (forthcoming). Institutional organizations' use of social media to communicate EU policy and the emergence of a European public sphere. <i>Investigaciones Regionales - Journal of Regional Research</i>.Cunico, G., E., Aivazidou and E. Mollona. (forthcoming). European Cohesion Policy performance and citizens' awareness: A holistic System Dynamics framework. <i>Investigaciones Regionales - Journal of Regional Research</i>.