



Designing new communication strategies for Cohesion Policy

Insights from early results of PERCEIVE Project

1 million jobs created, 4.900 kilometres of roads built, and 1.500 kilometres of strategic railway constructed across the EU¹ - Cohesion Policy's accomplishments in the 2007-2013 programming period can certainly be described as more than presentable. And yet, Flash Eurobarometer data² suggests the everyday European citizen is seemingly **unaware of the impact that Cohesion Policy** has on their territory. Considering the policy's self-imposed benefit to every EU region, could it be that the issue is **none of 'doing good' but of 'talking about it'?**

[7 international research teams](#) have grappled with questions over the **multi-level communication efforts of EU, national and regional implementers** over the course of three consecutive steps within the PERCEIVE project. Building on the in-depth analysis of Local Managing Authorities' formalised communication strategies, comprehensive interviews with practitioners and experts of the field, and an online survey spread across the EU, this **summary report** gives insight into first findings and key take-aways.

Summary of Findings

1. Successful communication

The success of communicating policy might be defined in different ways. And in fact, interviews with Cohesion Policy practitioners indicated **contrasting viewpoints** on this matter. More specifically, different perceptions of successfully implemented communication activities largely depended on the definitions of **roles that Managing Authorities play within communication**: are Managing Authorities sole provider of information to prospective project beneficiaries, or contributor to building awareness, appreciation for and identification of the European citizen with the EU?

When asked about the most important role in communicating Cohesion Policy, the subsequent online survey indicated definitions of Managing Authorities as **assisting project**

¹ Markkula (2017). Cohesion Policy is not just about money. It's about Europe's future. *Politico* of May 18, 2017 <https://www.politico.eu/sponsored-content/cohesion-policy-is-not-just-about-money-its-about-europes-future/>

² European Commission (2015). *Flash Eurobarometer 423 (Citizen's awareness and perceptions of EU regional policy in 2015)* https://data.europa.eu/euodp/data/dataset/S2055_423_ENG

beneficiaries with communication activities, and conveying Cohesion Policy achievements to various audiences as the most chosen options. Less importance was assigned to Managing Authorities as directly involved in building citizens' awareness, and increasing identification with the EU – suggesting that the fostering of a sense of EU identity is not part of their institutional mission.

Most important role in communicating Cohesion Policy



Key take-aways:

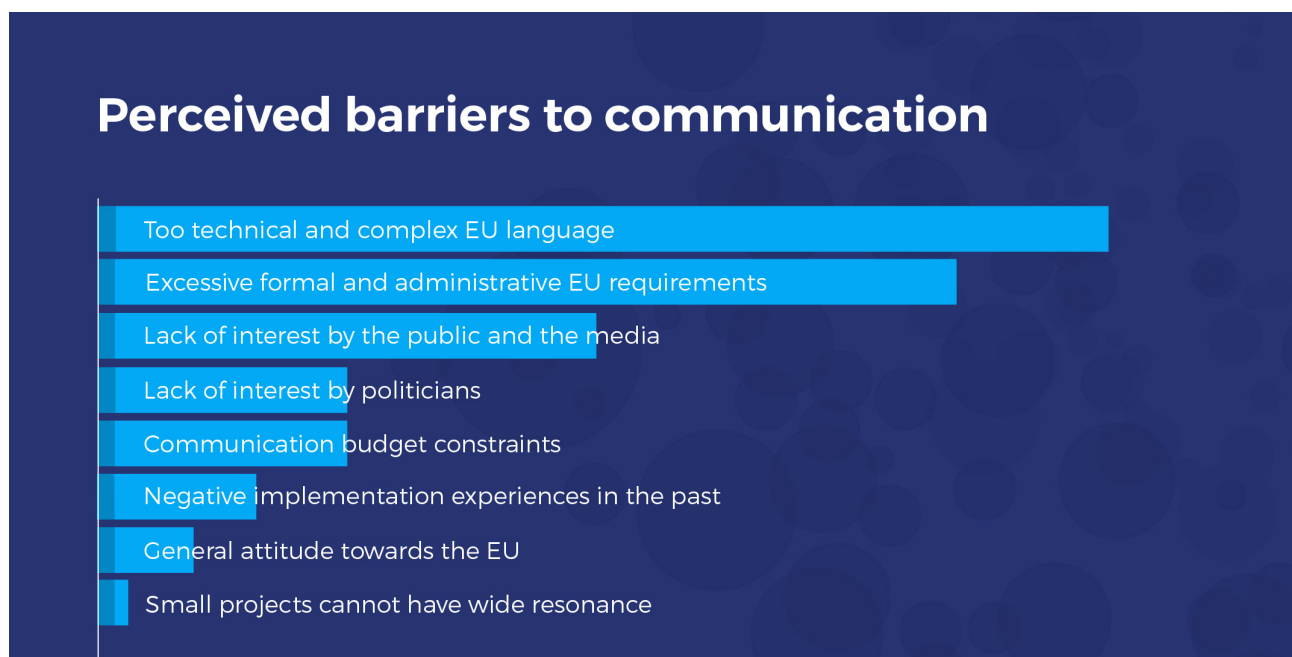
- **In light of the EU actively pursuing to “bridge the gap between the citizens of the Union and its institutions”³, what is the role of Managing Authorities within the multi-level interplay of communicating Cohesion Policy? Do Managing Authorities cater to current project beneficiaries, prospective beneficiaries, or the general public?**
- **Is the objective to create awareness, or to increase appreciation for and identification with the EU?**

2. Barriers to communication

Potential communication barriers might affect the communication strategy put in place by policy communicators and impede the successful distribution of information. Indeed, the interviews held indicated perceived barriers as linked to the technical, at times **complex EU language**, by using acronyms and requiring a background understanding, **limited communication budgets**, and a **general lack of interest** both by the media and the general public.

³ European Commission Regional Policy Directorate-General (no date), p.2. *Practical guide to communicating on the structural funds 2000 to 2006* http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/country/commu/2000-2006/document/guide_art46_en.pdf

Building on the interviews conducted, **60%** of the respondents of the online survey agreed that **Cohesion Policy communication is inhibited by communication barriers**. More specifically, **respondents confirmed difficulties** with the technical and bureaucratic language used in EU communication, as well as excessive formal requirements imposed on Managing Authorities, shortly followed by the lack of interest by the public and the media. Less importance in this regard was given to communication budget constraints limiting the scope of actions.



Key take-aways:

- **Would simplifying the EU language lead to more interest by the general public? How could the language used be simplified?**

3. EU communication guidance

Beyond addressing the general public itself, the EU makes efforts to support and provide guidance to Managing Authorities and Member States. While all interviewees maintained awareness of guidance provided, perceptions thereof varied: most of the respondents perceived **compliance with EU legislation as technical requirement**, others were appreciative of help provided. A number of respondents however valued **best practices emerging from the national/regional level**. As regards viewpoints on more or less centralisation (in the sense of a more uniform appearance), contrasting perspectives emerged.

The survey conducted confirmed the importance of best practices in the sense that the **INFORM network of communication officers** was deemed the most helpful support tool from the EU. Perceptions of EU input as mere technical requirement were expressed in notion of **EU publicity and visibility requirements** as second most helpful tool. When asked about

whether or not communication implementers wished for an entirely EU-made toolkit for specific communication campaigns, **67%** of respondents expressed the desire to receive and further distribute such **pre-fabricated publicity measures**.



Key take-aways:

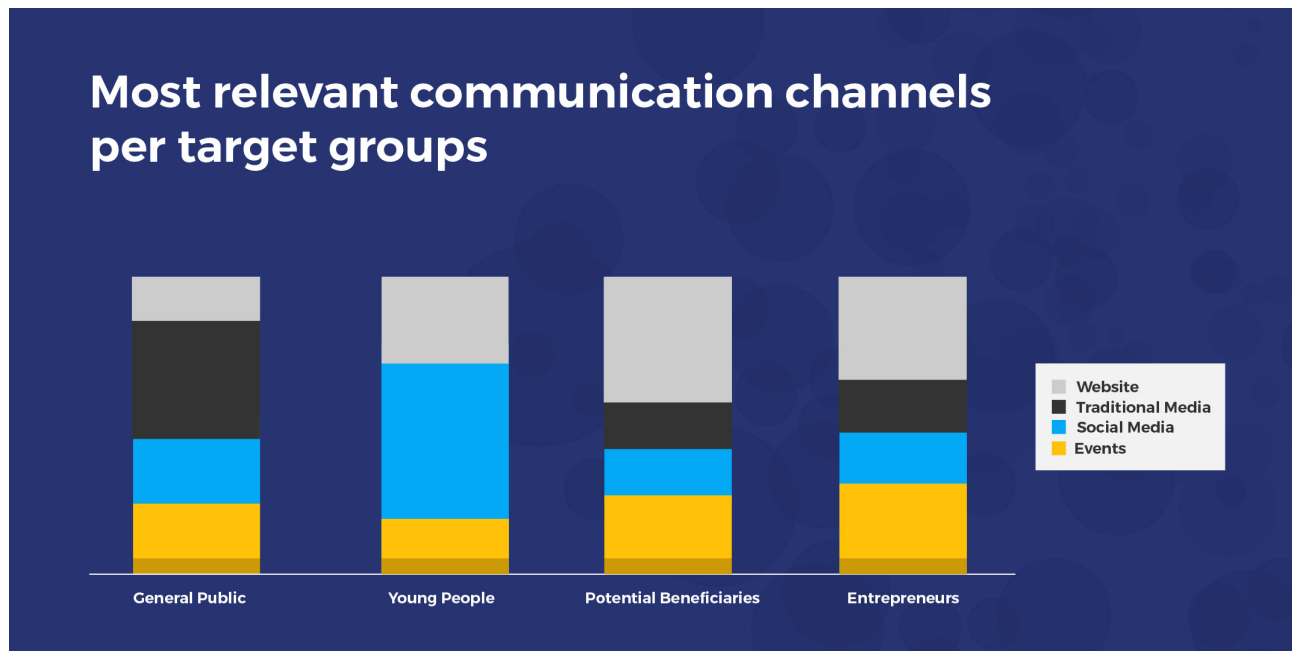
- **What is it that communication officers value in network meetings? Is the learning process of best practices as formalised in EU guidance material of use? How could ‘horizontal learning’ from other communication implementers be enhanced?**
- **Does a uniform approach to communicating Cohesion Policy object to regional adaptation; especially in view of the territorial aspects of the policy?**

4. Communication mix

The use of the right communication channels for the right communication target groups is an essential aspect of communicating policies. A comparison of this so-called communication mix as chosen by Cohesion Policy communicators indicated similarities with a view to the **primary target group being project beneficiaries**, and a further special focus on entrepreneurs, the general public, and young people. The primary communication channel (in terms of universality) was centred on **live-events of various sorts** (as instanced by fairs, workshops, or lectures held at schools), followed by the Managing Authority’s website. While **traditional mass media and regional press remain important channels, social media was largely described as catered to young people**. Less importance was given to NGOs as well as universities and research centres as communication target.

The subsequent online survey conducted seemingly reaffirms the findings made: while face-to-face communication was deemed the most relevant communication channel (in terms of

universality), social media was largely described as aiming at young people. When asked about further essential communication target groups, survey respondents pointed to politicians with a view to local representatives especially, and the media – highlighting the **significance of both (local) politicians and the media weighing in on the matter of EU policies**. Interestingly, universities, and NGOs especially were mentioned rather scarcely.



Key take-aways:

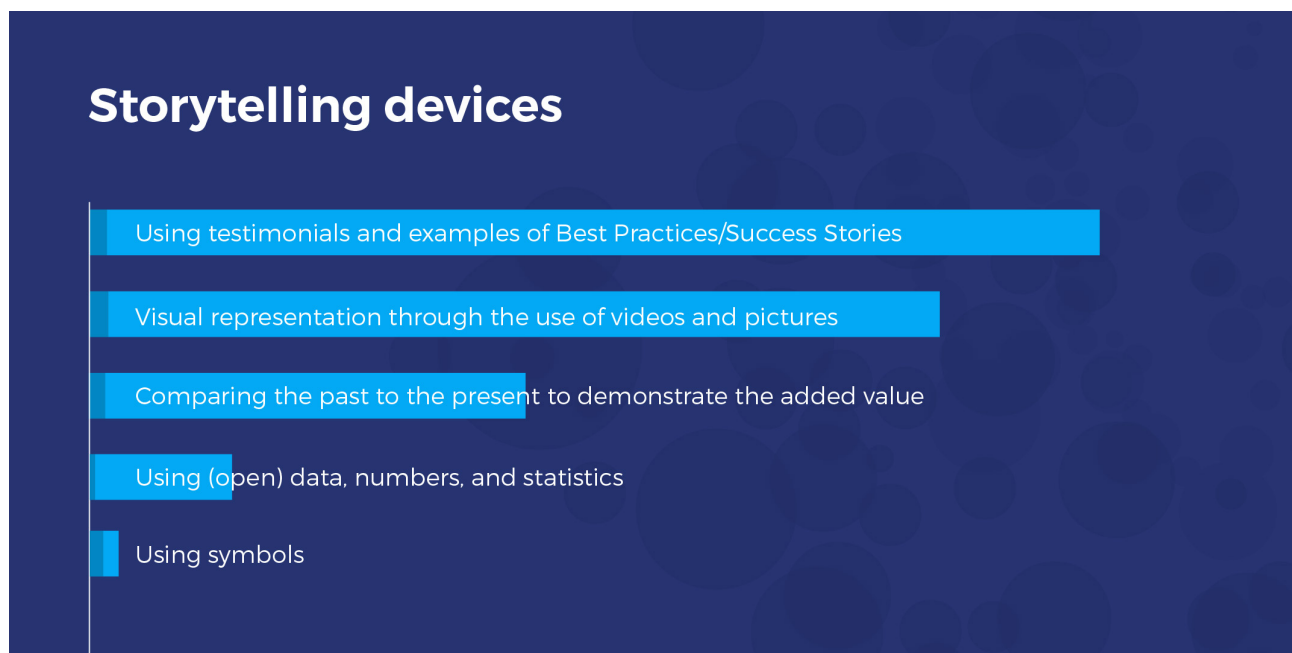
- **The present importance of traditional media cannot be disputed. Taking a step into the (near to mid-term) future and considering that forms of online communication might further gain in importance: is social media solely a matter of young people? How do citizens of higher age groups make use of social media? How do journalists make use of social media?**
- **Do communication officers pro-actively target universities? How could universities as networking platform of future entrepreneurs be made use of? How could universities as research institutions be made use of?**
- **How dangerous is EU-sceptic political and media discourse on the national/local level? Should the EU defend the European project more strongly?**

4. Storytelling

Building awareness and approval of policies depends, among other factors, on the narrative ability of communicators – the telling of a good story about the accomplishments of the policy in question. With a view to the **importance attached to storytelling within recent EU publicity measures** (see for instance “Europe in my Region Blog contest – Storytelling and EU

projects”⁴ or EC conferences on “Telling the story: Communicating European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2010”⁵), the aim in first interviews with Cohesion Policy practitioners was to understand the general acceptance of storytelling as relevant communication tool. In fact, **different viewpoints emerged** ranging from fully incorporating storytelling in publicity measures, to not using it at all. Respondents making use of storytelling however emphasised the importance of carefully choosing projects to convey Cohesion Policy, and the interplay of different aspects of storytelling; namely the balanced use of figures and data, and emotional factors.

Within the online survey, the **majority of respondents maintained using storytelling** either somewhat (60%) or to a large extent (22%). Respondents affirming the use of storytelling agreed on the use of testimonials and examples of **best practices/success stories** and the visual representation through the **use of videos and pictures** as most effective storytelling devices.



Key take-aways:

- **Which stories are worth telling? How do communications representatives choose the projects they display using storytelling?**
- **What is the objective of storytelling? What are communications representatives trying to say when displaying a successful project? When has a project been successful?**

⁴ European Commission (2017). *Europe in my Region Blog Contest – Storytelling and EU projects*
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/communication/euinmyregion/blogging/storytell/

⁵ European Commission (2017). *Communicating European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020*
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/conferences/telling-the-story/

Now what does this mean?

The findings made are still at an early stage, while additional research (for instance on the role of new media in communication strategies, or emergent topics in identity-relevant discourse), will help us to further our understanding of Cohesion Policy communication, the expertise of communication implementers is most welcome. If you have any questions, feedback, or wish to stay informed, please visit our [website](#) or find us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). For more detailed information on the respective Deliverables, click [here](#).

Data and methods

Data was gathered in consecutive and complementary steps, starting off with the **analysis of formalised Cohesion Policy communication strategies** (for the 2007-2013 programming period) of Managing Authorities in nine EU regions, and **in-depth interviews with Cohesion Policy practitioners** and experts using semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews. Building on this understanding, an **online survey** was designed aiming at consolidating and deepening our first understanding of Cohesion Policy communication.

All in all, **101 Cohesion Policy practitioners** and experts were interviewed between February and March 2017. Spanning over **7 EU Member States** (Austria, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, UK) and **9 regions therein** (Burgenland, Calabria, Emilia-Romagna, Dolnoslaskie, Warminsko-mazurskie, Sud Est, Extremadura, Norra Mellansverige, Essex), 77 participants were interviewed in focus groups, while 24 additional interviews were conducted individually.

Another **62 communications representatives** largely representing Managing Authorities and Joint Secretariats (the others being consultancies, or intermediate bodies) were questioned using the online survey. Following the invitation to indicate their identity, **13 Member States** (Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, the Netherlands, Wales) and **8 regions** (therein) could be located. For the sake of anonymity, these are not further described here.

Sources

Barberio, Vitaliano; Kuric, Ines; Mollona, Edoardo; Pareschi, Luca. 2017. *“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”* Deliverable 3.1 PERCEIVE project, GA nr. 693529

Barberio, Vitaliano; Kuric, Ines; Höllerer, Markus; Meyer, Renate; Mollona, Edoardo; Pareschi, Luca. 2017. *“Qualitative report with main findings from the interviews”* Deliverable 3.2 PERCEIVE project, GA nr. 693529