



Can social media build the bridge between the EU and its citizens?

Insights from early results of PERCEIVE Project

Introduction

We have inquired the role of **social media** as a tool for communicating **EU Cohesion Policy**. Practitioners in the field tend to agree on the need to increase the prominence and effectiveness of new media as key channels of strategic communication of both central institutions and national/local managing authorities¹.

Social media are usually associated with the possibility of reaching the youngest population (see for example the results of our interviews and survey in Barberio *et al.* 2017a and Barberio *et al.* 2017ab, PERCEIVE Deliverables 3.1 and 3.2). However, their **potential impact** on communication strategies goes much beyond this point and encompasses changes in the **segmentation of target audiences** (i.e. communities rather than the general public) on the one hand, and in the way Cohesion Policy '**stories**' are told on the other hand (i.e. interactivity with audiences).

In spite of the potential of social media on strategic policy communication, based on our experience in the field, as well as on a review of both academic and practice-oriented literature, we argue that **much is still to be learnt about how to realise this potential**. This is especially true given the scarce attention of academic research to the specificities of Cohesion Policy, among other public policies.

Therefore, we have empirically explored several aspects of communicating Cohesion Policy over two of the most used social media, **Facebook** and **Twitter**. In more detail, we aimed at providing an initial description of:

¹ See for instance the agenda of most recent INFORM meetings:

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/communication/inform-network/events/.

- 1) **Key actors'** (i.e. Local Managing Authorities, shortened to LMA in the following, and international institutions) presence on **Facebook**, including for instance:
 - a) the amount of activity (i.e. *posts*) and responses (i.e. *likes*) generated on their Facebook pages,
 - b) the contents of the most '*liked*' *posts* and *comments* on the same pages,
 - c) the opinions (i.e. sentiments) associated with the topics mostly used by the *posts* and *comments* respectively;
- 2) Cohesion Policy **discourse** on **Twitter**, including for instance:
 - a) the most popular (i.e. re-tweeted) tweets and users vs. the most active ones (i.e. tweeting more actively than the rest) or the most popular *hashtags* (keywords) vs. *mentions* (other users),
 - b) basic structural characteristics (i.e. strongest links and most central nodes) of the interaction network elicited from the re-tweeting behaviour of users,
 - c) events that correspond to high-points of time-dynamical usage (i.e. peaks in the distribution of daily tweets).

Main findings and policy implications

We collected all the posts and comments from the LMAs' Facebook profiles in our case studies regions²:

- **Italy:** *Emilia-Romagna* (first post August 2009) and *Calabria* (first post May 2016)
- **Austria:** *Burgenland* (June 2014)
- **Poland:** *Warmińsko-mazurskie* (June 2012) and *Dolnośląskie* (June 2011)
- **Romania:** *Agentia pentru Dezvoltare Regionala Sud-Est* (August 2015), *Ministerul Dezvoltarii Regionale, Administratiei Publice si Fondurilor Europene* (October 2013), and *Ministerul Fondurilor Europene* (February 2013)
- **Sweden:** *Tillväxtverket* (February 2012)
- **Spain:** *Junta de Extremadura* (January 2012)

Our findings span across several different aspects of communicating EU Cohesion Policy through social media and hold potential implications to improve existing communication efforts. Here, we briefly discuss the main findings concerning two core topics: a) LMAs communicating on Facebook, and b) the policy discourse unfolding on Twitter.

² The LMA in our case study region does not have a Facebook profile.

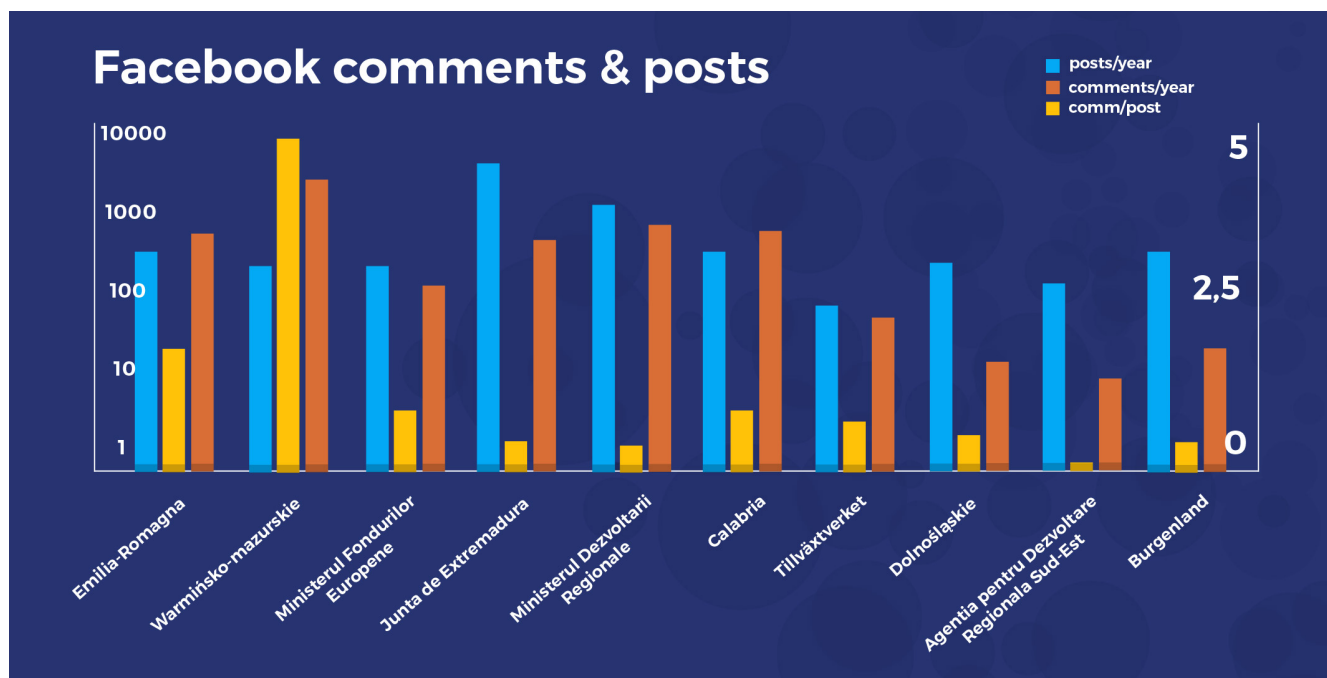
LMAs on Facebook

The following figure shows the **likes** collected by each Facebook profile, which is the number of people following a certain profile.



This number must be contextualized: while Emilia Romagna's Facebook profile was opened in august 2009, the one of Regione Calabria dates back less than two years ago.

The following figure shows, for each LMA, the **approximate number of posts and comments per year**, and the **average number of comments per post**. **Junta de Extremadura** and **Ministerul Dezvoltării Regionale** are the institutions that publish **more posts**. Yet we must note that the Facebook profile of the former is used for the whole **institutional communication** of Spanish institutions, and not only for communication related to European Funds. **Tillväxtverket**, **Dolnośląskie**, and **Burgenland** are the LMAs publishing **fewer posts** per year. Yet, as we saw in the analysis of cases, **fewer posts do not indicate worse communication**, as the number of posts does not ensure effectiveness. Warmińsko-Mazurskie has the most populated debate, collecting more comments per post. Then Emilia-Romagna too collects more than one comment for each post.



Regarding the average number of likes collected by posts and comments. **Warmińsko-Mazurskie** and **Emilia-Romagna** are the LMAs collecting **more likes per post**. Yet, the latter, exactly as Junta de Extremadura, denote a generalist Facebook profile. Profiles receiving **less likes** are **Burgenland** and **Dolnośląskie**. Tillväxtverket is the Facebook profile collecting more likes per comment, with an average of almost one. The second Facebook page in this ranking is Emilia-Romagna. The opposite extreme is occupied by **Agentia pentru Dezvoltare Regionala Sud-Est**: comments got so few comments, that the average amounts to just about zero likes per comment.

Our descriptive analysis of LMAs' Facebook pages indicates **heterogeneous results** regarding the extent and modalities of use across different national case studies. On the one hand, we have observed cases of **unrealised potential**: these include LMAs without a Facebook page at all, or without a Facebook page explicitly dedicated to EU Cohesion Policy's programs, such as ESF and ERDF. While communication in social media is not enacted in the former case, it is present in the latter, but diluted, mixed together with the many other topics present in the pages. **Yet, "coming out of the ivory tower" to embrace the 'emotional' logic and language of social media deals not only with "moving onto social media", but with "how" LMAs use this idiosyncratic channel. And from this point of view, experiences differ a lot.** Facebook pages of Emilia-Romagna and Junta de Extremadura, in example, are characterised by high numbers of comments and/or posts. They seem to function as places where discussions are launched and several comments are collected. Unfortunately, from our point of view, as these **Facebook profiles are not only devoted to the communication of Cohesion Policies, news referring to this topic tends to be obscured by other themes.**

Hence, a **first implication** to improve communication through social media concerns focus. In other words:



It seems fundamental for the **LMA** to have dedicated **social media** accounts focusing on **EU Cohesion Policy**.

In what is probably the **‘best case’ observation of our study**, there is not only a dedicated account, but also a **dedicated organisational unit** for **Cohesion Policy and social media**. This is the case of **Regione Calabria**: here, a new Facebook profile was created recently, which is used to specifically inform on projects related to Cohesion Policy. The page is not meant to be a unidirectional channel of communication, where the LMA informs citizens. Quite the contrary, it is considered as a **short channel of communication** with dedicated employees, overcoming more time-consuming administrative communications. The page is parsimonious in publishing posts, but **discussions** that arise are effectively **focused** on **calls** and managing issues.

However, **having a dedicated Facebook page does not ultimately lead to success**. In fact, many cases we have studied showed that LMAs have dedicated Cohesion Policy accounts, but they use them in the **sense of a ‘static website’** in the **spirit of web 1.0** rather than in the sense of social media. So, in spite of the fact that LMA Facebook pages can certainly be informative regarding the policy rationale or accomplishments, they seemingly **fail to activate interaction with external audiences**. This is typically the case in Facebook pages where the number of posts largely exceeds the comments, or where the amount of likes is rather low.

The three profiles that seem to **perform less well** are the ones of **Burgenland, Dolnośląskie**, and **Agentia pentru Dezvoltare Regionala Sud-Est**. Citizens in Burgenland do not engage with a page that is more devoted to the management of the LMA than with the management of European funds. Dolnośląskie’s page focuses mostly on Cohesion Policy, but fails at creating a fan base: it is one of the cases where posts receive less likes. Agentia pentru Dezvoltare Regionala Sud-Est, finally, uses Facebook as press office, publishing press releases. They are informative, but do not ask for engagement: indeed, this page is the one receiving fewer comments per post.

The case of **Warmińsko-Mazurskie** is **very interesting**: it is the page that receives more comments per post. The page itself has a large fan base, defined by the page likes. Yet, several posts are **touristic postcards**, which Polish people comment out of pride. It seems that this traffic, generated by the page, does **not really convert into interest in Cohesion Policy**. **Ministerul Dezvoltării Regionale, Administrației Publice și Fondurilor Europene** on the other hand receives mostly comments focused on Cohesion Policy-related issues. This page publishes a high number of posts, and receives an average number of likes and comments. Probably it is legitimised as a **page where it is possible to discuss Cohesion Policy**.

Here is the second implication for policy communication enhancement:



From informing the public to greater focus on active **community-building** and interaction.

A particular case is that of LMAs targeted by **complaints** regarding fund management or various other concerns. This is **not to be understood as a negative condition a priori**, but it is important for policy communicator to be **aware of how to deal with 'bad publicity'** in the specific context of social media. After all, the **use of social media** is not merely associated with advantages, but **comes at a certain cost**, in which **Euroscepticism** in connection with the safety of anonymity or physical remoteness might pick up steam on Facebook (or Twitter).

This is the case of **Ministerul Fondurilor Europene** and **Tillväxtverket**: in both cases **comments are mostly complaints**, which tend to focus on what is not working. Yet, their similarities end here: while Ministerul Fondurilor Europene receives negative comments because of problems with the process of managing funds, Tillväxtverket receives negative comments because only related to one case of supposed misuse of taxpayers' money.

Another important aspect concerns the differences in terms of sentiments characterising different discussion topics. Our results in this area highlight a **different the tone of communication between LMAs and their external audiences**. In more detail, the language of LMAs seems to be less characterized by sentiments and more positively connoted than those of external audiences. On the contrary, words used by external audience tend to be more emotionally charged. In particular **LMAs' external audiences that comment on Facebook are more likely to use vocabulary that potentially expresses negative opinions about topics concerning them**. Also, we noticed that the ratio of neutral vocabulary was higher in cases in which LMAs dealt with relevant external criticism when compared to cases not exhibiting complaints.

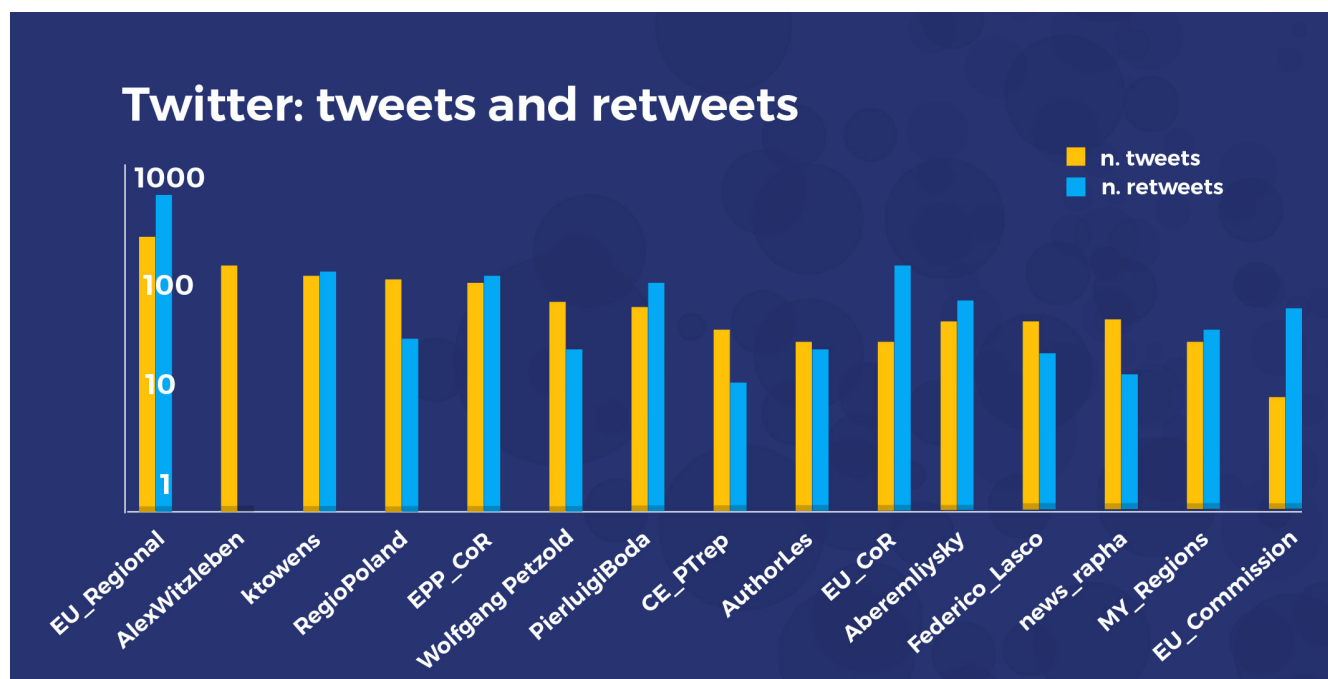
A limitation to be associated with this result comes with the fact that the topics that constitute the Facebook discussions did **not always** seem to perfectly centre on **EU Cohesion Policy**. Still, as results are derived by discussions taking place on the LMAs' Facebook pages, their general **relevance to our argument remains**.

In this vein, we suggest that **for the EU to get "out of the ivory tower"** important steps would have to be taken regarding **embracing the 'emotional' logic and language of social media**. This, of course, is a complex topic potentially linked to the very identity and perceived societal role of institutional organizations, both of which rest on the values of **neutrality and impersonality**. While the solution of this issue goes beyond the scope of this report, it is still worth mentioning that **more efficient solutions** must be found for traditional institutions when dealing with emotional communication unfolding in the social media sphere. **The observed use**

of neutral vocabulary in cases where major complaints emerged might very well head into in this direction.

Cohesion Policy discourse on Twitter

The following figure displays the top **15 'tweeting' users** by showing both the amount of original tweets and re-tweets: **@EU_Regional** (EU Regional and Urban Policy) denotes the most active channel in terms of tweets sent, while the amount of re-tweets posted is the highest in the sample too. The European Commission (**@EU_Commission**), by contrast and despite their active role as 're-tweeting' user, is less of a 'tweeting' user. The European Committee of the Regions (**@EU_CoR**), similarly to @EU_Regional, is an active user both in terms of tweets and re-tweets. A particularly interesting case is visible in the second top ranking actor (@AlexWitzleben). This account appears to belong to an economic historian interested in EU competitiveness, the economic crisis, promoting Europe, start-ups, smart and innovative green policies. So, while his profile matches the field characteristics and he seems to be **very actively contributing to the discourse** about Cohesion Policy and the future of Europe in general, **he does not receive re-tweets**, at least in the considered observation period. @ktowens, the third most active account belongs to an advisor working for the European People Party group in the EU Committee of Regions. Other active private citizens are also present, @Federico_Lasco's profile for example reads: "Economist, Public Manager and Executive, enthusiastic for Open Innovation and Innovative Public Administration", while @news_rapha's reads: "Lawyer. Environmentalist. Democrat. Weltretter. Tweeting in English, German and sometimes in French. #Sustainability #FutureofEurope #ruleofLaw"



We analyzed also **the top 10 most popular hashtags** as well as **the top 10 most popular mentions**. While hashtags (#) comprise keywords or phrases facilitating the aggregation of texts with similar topics, mentions (@) tag other persons or organizations in the post.

The most popular hashtag used was **#FutureofEurope** with 2192 occurrences, followed by **#ESF** (1620) and **#CohesionPolicy** (1126). In line with the most popular (most re-tweeted) texts, **#FutureofEurope** was used for discussions concerning the near and more remote future of the European Union. Related topics included calls for action, the inviting of **citizens to participate** in the debate, the announcing of change, or the picturing of a generally positive **upbeat mood**. **#ESF** (also used as acronym for non-Cohesion Policy-related posts) and **#CohesionPolicy** on the other hand account for more general hashtags. The same is true for the general usage of **#Interact** (also used in non-Cohesion Policy-related tweets), **#EU**, or **#ERDF**. **#EUinmyRegion** comprises discourse on the **very EU-wide campaign** designed to encourage EU citizens to **explore EU-funded projects** around them.

As regards mentions, the most popular account mentioned was **@EU_Regional** (with 1417 occurrences), closely followed by **@EU_CoR** (1408). Both accounts denote **official EU institutions**. **@interregeurope** (representing an EU programme encouraging territorial cooperation in Europe) was closely followed by institutional accounts of the European Commission (**@EU_Commission**), as well as its Commissioner for Regional Policy, **@CorinaCretuEU**. Further representatives include **@CoR_President** (held by Karl-Heinz Lambertz at the present time), **@JunckerEU**, and **@jyrkikatainen**, the Vice-President of the European Commission.

In a first instance it is rather intuitive in the context of Twitter, to think of centrality as a simple count of re-tweets received by a focal account (the scientific name of this measure is *in-degree centrality*). The table below shows the **10 most central users** in this sense and makes clear that we can think of in-degree centrality as a proxy for popularity of an account in this setting. **@EU_Regional**, **@EU_CoR**, **@CoR_president** and **@RegioInterreg** result very in-degree central in the network including only top-retweeted actors. **EU_Commission** is again not re-tweeted as much even if its contents provide the base for most of the popular re-tweets.

Rank	Agent	Value	Rank	Agent	Value
1	EU_Regional	339.0	6	CorinaCretuEU	41.0
2	EU_CoR	110.0	7	InterregYouth	40.0
3	CoR_President	98.0	8	WolfgangPetzold	38.0
4	RegioInterreg	76.0	9	RegioEvaluation	32.0
5	RegioPoland	45.0	10	EU_Commission	30.0

@EU_Regional, the twitter account for Regional and Urban Policy, reached its peak on June 26 with a total amount of 466 re-tweets. The date corresponds to the **7th EU Cohesion Forum** taking place in Brussels. The second highest peak was reached on June 1, in line with numerous events around the beginning of June. The peak for the European Commission's twitter handle **@EU_Commission** on June 17 is not clearly linked to an event, but makes use of the hashtag **#FutureofEurope** as well as **#EUdialogues**. The latter refers to a series of events connecting citizens with European Commissioners across the European Union. **@EU_CoR's popularity**

increase on July 13 (with a total amount of re-tweets of 152) is due to the **Presidency** of the European Committee to the Regions handed over from Markku Markkula to **Karl-Heinz Lambertz** and the meeting of the #CoRplenary.

Prior descriptions have indicated a prevalence of event-related discourse, while **the top 3 most popular hashtags** suggest a more general usage of hashtags. In this sense, the most popular hashtag was #CohesionPolicy, with the peak on June 26 again corresponding with the **7th EU Cohesion Forum** (240 occurrences). While the usage of #CohesionPolicy clearly reaches its high-point during the Cohesion forum, #FutureofEurope is used in a broader context and experiences multiple peaks. The maximum peak occurs on June 28 (146 occurrences), followed by June 7 (129). In the case of June 28, multiple references are made towards the EU budget and a published reflection paper on the future of EU finances linked to the #FutureofEurope. In the case of June 7, references are made to the joint EU defense pact. The hashtag #ESF is used in a more general sense by default.

As regards Cohesion Policy discourse unfolding on Twitter, many of our jointly interpreted results indicate that **the dialogue potentially remains rather 'closed' and 'self-referential'**. The boundaries of social discourse remain quite clearly defined by institutional accounts. In other words, the **most active actors producing and reproducing contents are institutional organisations or their spokespersons**.

On one hand, simple descriptive statistics on account activity levels indicate a highly skewed distribution of tweeting and re-tweeting behaviours; on the other hand, **the re-tweet social network is constituted by almost exclusively institutional actors** (i.e. central EU institutions and financed international programmes). In a similar vein, also when looking at **the top 15 most popular tweets**, we observed that nine of them were re-tweets of contents originally produced by the European Commission.

Here, a crucial point in order to enhance communication through social media concerns the identification of practices and events helping social media to **push the boundaries of the institutionally defined field** (i.e. officers and practitioners only) to involve **more private citizens and organisations** as well as traditional media³. Particular mentions should be made regarding the **absence of national and regional politicians** in differently determined clusters of the most active actors.

On the bright side, there seems to be **potential to expand the number of actors more actively involved** in discourse about EU Cohesion Policy. This can be accomplished by mobilising the large base of 'occasional' contributors to the debate. In fact, we found that more than 60% of Twitter users in our sample only tweeted once, while 90% of them tweeted less than 10 times.

³See for instance the recent feature of a tweet by the European Commission on CNN:
<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/20/europe/poland-eu-punishment-judicial-reforms-intl/index.html>.

Therefore, a policy indication would be moving:



From **top-down** communication
departing from institutional centres
to **community-building** communication
departing from **influencers**.

Also, it seems that the importance of **private citizens with an interest in EU Cohesion Policy has been overlooked so far**. Indeed, we believe that changing the boundaries of this system of roles in which institutional actors do not engage with private individuals entails another important step. However, we also see the **potential drawbacks for institutional accounts** engaging in a social media debate – i.e. re-tweeting other institutional actors might grant ‘political correctness’ not given with private accounts. Still, further viable ways of engaging can be thought of – i.e. asking and answering questions instead of the more passive act of re-tweeting.

As regards time dynamics we have observed that **peaks of activity** (both in view of tweeting and re-tweeting) are often linked to **EU Cohesion Policy-related events**. While they often comprise a diverse audience of stakeholders, **many of them are not openly available to the general public**. Regarding the largely institutional networks (i.e. re-tweets largely linked to institutional actors referencing one another), **communication might profit from opening up the discussion and increasing (re-)tweeting activities around more citizen-centred events**.

The current use of social media however certainly shows **potential to ‘build the bridge’ between the EU and its citizens**. In fact, twitter activity around the **7th EU Cohesion Forum** from June 26-27, 2017 for instance has lead to #CohesionPolicy trending in Belgium – potentially reaching citizens who had never heard about Cohesion Policy, structural funds, or benefits to their region before.

Sources

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