



Communicating Cohesion Policy: what is the impact on local audiences?

Insights from results of PERCEIVE Project

Societal outcomes of EU Cohesion Policy still remain less understood than economic ones. A major **challenge for policymakers and organizations** in charge of local implementation resides in “getting out of the ivory tower” and ultimately **becoming more in touch with local audiences**. This of course, among other things, is a matter of strategic communication. Accordingly, in order to better understand the reception of the policy, it seems of primary importance to inquire **the extent to which policy communication produces and amplifies meanings**, and the extent to which it affects the understanding of local audiences.

Based on the examination of previous research and direct experience acquired through interaction with practitioners of EU cohesion policy, we have looked at **“awareness”** of the policy and general **“appreciation”** of the EU as two related indicators of communication performance in the context of the implementation process. In simplistic, yet effective terms we assume that, even if not always the case, **those who are aware of the policy tend to appreciate EU developmental policies to a larger extent**, and, when these two conditions are matched, tend to feel more European.

Therefore, the empirically well documented (i.e. see EUROBAROMETER reports) existence of a gap between institutions and citizens indicates the need to better understand the **mechanisms and outcomes of communicating policy** in today's practice of policy implementation. In this vein, two main aspects of how communication might produce effects on audiences are dealt with in this report, namely:

- a) The extent to which the content of local communication is related to **internationally available meanings**;
- b) The **amount of structural funds** and specific allocation of **investments in communication**.

In order to better understand these aspects of the policy implementation we have produced an **international social media analysis**, as well as used **standard statistical analyses** inquiring several factors, which associate with awareness and appreciation across different regional settings. The main findings as well as a number of connected policy implications centred on communication are reported in the following.

Summary of Findings

1. Descriptive analysis of the Facebook page of implementing organizations (LMAs)

The landscape of organizations entitled to communicate the policy is highly varied. So-called **local managing authorities** (LMAs hereafter) **differ across regions and countries** in our sample along several dimensions. In some cases communication was managed at the level of local regional government (i.e. Extremadura and Emilia Romagna), in other cases communication efforts were more focused, revolving in fact around the ROP (regional operational plan) (i.e. Dolnoslaskie and Warminsko-Mazurskie). The observed **heterogeneity** (see table below) **creates issues for strategic policy communication**. For example, while smaller implementation units tend to have less capacity of generating traffic and therefore benefit less from externalities in terms of visibility, they might still benefit from a narrower focus than regional governments for instance and therefore display superior levels of community engagement (see the case of Calabria).

Table 1. Summary of Facebook data

	Facebook profile	First post	Posts	Comments	Page likes	Approx. post /year	Likes/ Post	Likes / Comment	Comments / Post
Italy	Emilia-Romagna	27/08/2009	3.379	5.210	41.132	422	27,45	0,60	1,54
	Calabria	12/05/2016	428	339	5.569	428	16,10	0,30	0,79
Austria	Burgenland	14/06/2014	578	68	268	193	3,76	0,40	0,12
Poland	Warmińsko-mazurskie	14/06/2012	1.777	8.319	24.527	355	30,93	0,53	4,68
	Dolnośląskie	10/06/2011	831	117	2.620	139	2,21	0,33	0,14
Romania	Agentia pentru Dezvoltare Regionala Sud-Est	10/08/2015	551	22	689	276	5,60	0,00	0,04
	Ministerul Dezvoltării Regionale / Fondurilor Europ.	10/10/2013	4.687	1.339	12.968	1.339	9,82	0,33	0,29
	National level: Ministerul Fondurilor Europene	07/02/2013	1.634	1.143	23.207	384	22,80	0,47	0,70
Sweden	Tillväxtverket	22/02/2012	540	380	2.879	108	10,04	0,87	0,70
Spain	Junta de Extremadura	20/01/2012	16.134	4.265	18.787	2.933	22,03	0,44	0,26

2. Mapping a EU public sphere

Digging deeper into the data we extracted from the Facebook pages of LMAs, we first reconstructed an **international space of meanings**. This is an important step because it allowed us to reconstruct the extent to which the same topics are internationally discussed at the regional level. This latter level is especially important not only given the nature of Cohesion Policy, but also because **regionalism** – as an attempt of community-building bypassing national identity barriers and crowded public spheres – is a **key driver of European integration in general**.

Using Topic modelling (a semi-automatic text analytical technique), for each LMA in our sample, we extracted a set of so-called topics (constituted by listings of words). Each of such cluster of words (co-occurring together more often than the others according to the used model) was then interpreted by PERCEIVE partners in their respective mother tongue and labelled as different communication topics. As a possible example, the table below shows the outcome of this procedure for a (Spanish) LMA's Facebook page.

Table 2. Topic modelling: Spain

0ES	1ES	2ES	3ES	4ES	5ES	6ES	7ES	8ES	9ES
EUROPEAN YOUTH POLICY IN EXTREMADURA	OPINION ON CULTURAL ACTIVITIES IN EXTREMADURA	CONGRATULATIONS (NOISE)	CONSTRUCTION SECTOR	EDUCATION	CULTURAL ACTIVITIES	CULTURAL ACTIVITIES	TOURISM AND EMERGENCY ALERTS	GOVERNMENT AGREEMENTS	BUSINESS SECTOR AND ENTREPRENEUR SHIP
young_boys	general	Thanks	promotion	education	Day	Badajoz	extremadura	extremadura	business
extremadura	director	Plus	works	centers	Merida	Awards	tourism	government	sector
institute	cultural	Best	euro	counseling	extremadura	Cáceres	Center	advice	business
foundation	culture	Good	households	training	next	Prize	cáceres	diary	innovation
youth	highlights	Earth	don	culture	theater	exposition	Fair	http...	extremadura
programme	heritage	Lifetime	counseling	course	festival	delivery	international	agreements	work_day
draft	extremadura	Congratulations	benedict	students	term	museum	Blah	vice_president	projects
european	sports	Spain	investment	school	edition	presents	Alert	direct	extremadura
activities	region	all	serene	educational	cáceres	nogales	province	november	gobex
young	importance	good	counselor	professional	week	extremadura	badajoz	september	businessmen
cooperation	garcía	town	cáceres	program	hours	Trinity	national	october	programme
sport	director	world	visit	educational	days	Sample	morning	regional	investigation
competition	extremadura	many	millions	teachers	presentation	Merida	Hours	december	forum

10ES	11ES	12ES	13ES	14ES	15ES	16ES	17ES	18ES	19ES
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES	HEALTH SYSTEM AND SOCIAL SERVICES	AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES	ECONOMICS AND SOCIETY	DATA IN THE REGION OF EXTREMADURA	AGENDA OF THE PRESIDENT OF EXTREMADURA	GENERAL COMPLAINTS	SOCIAL SERVICES	LETTERS TO THE JUNTA	SECURITY AND CIVIL PROTECTION
euro	health	medium	meeting	plus	president	years	Social	Plus	plan
helps	ses	rural	rod	extremadura	monago	nothing	social	Also	march
millions	box	farming	fernandez	year	extremadura	more	people	shape	meeting
announcement	hospital	ambient	extremadura	years	josé	well	public	communities	extremadura
doe	attention	sector	president	region	gobex	now	politics	Part	agreement
plan	greater	fire	guillermo	month	government	plus	administration	community	objective
publish	hernandez	development	indicated	wait	highlights	less	policies	Way	information
destiny	service	echávarri	economy	number	inaugurates	people	health	time	collaboration
plus	women	plan	outstanding	hundred	http...	Mr ...	services	First	consumption
projects	patients	countryside	region	first	antonio	see	law	meeting	gobex
recruitment	gender	adviser	equality	less	equal	money	adviser	possible	law
subsidies	plus	territory	gil	past	receives	rod	rent	Public	agreement
decree	system	agrarian	spokesman	extremadura	spain	things	labor	extremadura	protection

Then, in coherence with the aim of mapping cross-national analogies and differences in the ways cohesion policy is talked about, **we built semantic network models** out of the topic models for all case study regions in the sample. The similarity between any pair of topics has been measured as the number of words they had in common. The picture below shows a possible representation of the international meaning space we have reconstructed using this technique.

Table 4. Cluster: Euroscepticism

ID	NAME OF THE TOPIC	Sentiment	% post	% comments
1AT	ACTORS/SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS	0	0,050	0,044
11ES	HEALTH SYSTEM AND SOCIAL SERVICES	1,5	0,05	0,041
14ES	DATA IN THE REGION OF EXTREMADURA	0,8	0,048	0,048
16ES	GENERAL COMPLAINTS	1	0,024	0,173
17ES	SOCIAL SERVICES	0,4	0,046	0,042
1IT	GENERAL COMPLAINTS	1,1	0,018	0,080
3IT	HEALTH CARE ADMINISTRATION	0,3	0,040	0,055
4IT	INFRASTRUCTURES	0,5	0,037	0,047
7IT	DISINFESTATION	0,7	0,021	0,062
8IT	SPECIFIC COMPLAINTS	0,5	0,018	0,089
9IT	VACCINATION	1,8	0,019	0,064
14IT	YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT	0,5	0,053	0,046
0PL	BRIDGE	0,1	0,042	0,048
9PL	ELBLAG CHANNEL	0,2	0,032	0,059
16PL	HOTEL	0,1	0,058	0,051
18PL	DIVERSE EVENTS	0	0,033	0,049
2SE	SOCIAL ENTERPRISES	0,4	0,059	0,046
3SE	INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP	0	0,045	0,047
5SE	INVESTMENT IN GLASSWORKS	0,4	0,029	0,070
16SE	QUESTION FOR THE PUBLIC ON INFRASTRUCTURE AND SAFETY	0,1	0,028	0,087

This cluster comprises **topics from 5 out of the 6 countries in our sample**, being one of the less country-specific clusters. It is interesting to note that this cluster collects several topics related to **citizens' complaints**. This is the case with Spanish topic 16 (16ES), which is about general complaints, as well as 1IT, which collects public complaints generically directed at politicians. We also find 8IT here, which comprises complaints targeted at specific periods such as the way Emilia Romagna used European Funds for reconstruction work after the 2012 earthquake.

Generally speaking, the topics collecting complaints are found more often in comments than in posts. Interestingly, the topics that **express criticism are the most internationally distributed**. Together with complaints directed at European funds and their usage, this cluster collects topics characterized by **negative sentiment**. Topic 9IT, 'Vaccination' is characterized by the highest negative/positive vocabulary ratio. Indeed, this topic deals with a very heated debate in Italy, which followed the approval of a law to increase the number of mandatory vaccines for children. In this case, anti-vaccine followers were extensively using Facebook to support their case. Apart from the clustering of complaints, topics around social services and healthcare seem prevalent: that is in the case of Spain (health system, social services), and Italy (health care administration, vaccine, disinfestations). Also, social aspects in general are treated here.

3. Regression Analysis

In a third and last step of our empirical examinations we used standard statistical techniques in order to measure **the association between communication investment and contents** on the one hand and **policy awareness and appreciation** on the other hand. The main findings of this statistical analysis are listed below:

- The amount of **pro-capita structural funding** significantly and positively associates with **awareness** of the policy, **perceived personal benefit and political appreciation**

of countries' membership in the EU. This result is stable across several model specifications including different combinations of variables.

- The amount of **pro-capita communication investment in the current period (2014-2020)** related to regional operative plans significantly and positively associates with the probability for citizens to perceive a **personal benefit** deriving from the action of the EU through its policy. The association is negative for the case of political appreciation (i.e. country membership in the EU). This finding suggests **non-linearity in the effects of communication** (i.e. perceived personal benefit does not automatically translate into a higher level political appreciation) and at the current state calls for more investigation.
- The **pro-capita communication investment in the last period (2007-13)** only very modestly and positively associates with awareness, while it does not seem to have any effect on the probability for citizens to perceive either a personal benefit or express political appreciation. This result suggests decreasing effectiveness of communication in shaping the opinions of citizens over time.
- Higher **proportions of negative vocabulary** (i.e. potentially carrying negative sentiments) in online communication **significantly and negatively associate with lower probability for citizens to appreciate the impact of EU policy** interventions on both personal and political levels. This result is highly consistent across several model specifications, which include different combinations of topics discussed by local implementers on their Facebook pages.
- The amount of **use of negatively connoted topics** seems to generally lead to less **appreciation** in terms of both perceived personal benefit (i.e. see clusters of topics 3 and 6) and political appreciation (i.e. see cluster 2). Even though results are not always straightforward, the underlying methodology is quite innovative and holds potential in further developing our understanding of an eventual European public sphere.

The results of our statistical analysis together with other more descriptive results illustrated above have implications for policy implementation, especially with regard to communication. The main ones are listed in the following concluding section.

Policy Implications

A first and very general implication of our findings is that **more attention should be paid** by policymakers and researchers to **communication as a mechanism for amplifying awareness and especially appreciation of EU policy**. As from our analyses, more funding translates into more both awareness and appreciation. The same, however, does not appear to be true for communication budgets allocated by LMAs.

A second implication directly follows by further disentangling time dynamic aspects of the first. That is, while the budgets specifically allocated to communication by LMAs in the current

period (data from 2016) have an intuitive positive effect on personal appreciation for the actions of the EU, the funds allocated to communication tasks in the former programming period (data from 2014) have no impact on appreciation and only very limited impacts on awareness. The implication for policy development and implementation here builds around the **idea of a decreasing effect of communication impacts**. That is, people in regions having benefited of dedicated communication investment in the past might experience a drop in the levels of awareness and appreciation after receiving less amounts of structural funds or reduced communication budgets. It is suggested here that communication strategies should be used that specifically deal with **the objective of “sustaining” awareness and appreciation levels** in local territories once regions eventually advance to higher development levels (GDP-based) and therefore experience dropping levels of EU structural funding.

Our research proposes that social media discourse might affect awareness and appreciation of EU policy in non-linear ways. Therefore major attention should be devoted **to developing advanced and up-to-date communicative skills at the local implementation level**. As both citizens as well as policymakers seem to be embedded in collectively created structures of meaning (i.e. the post comment interaction on social media), their attitude towards the EU might depend on this embedding. In light of this, we suggest that the use of communication and reporting ought to be more inspired by recent advancements on the strategic use of language in order to re-shape agency in fields and foster institutional change as well as the diffusion of new concepts and social identities.