PERCEIVE
Guidelines

on the European Cohesion Policy implementation and communication

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The PERCEIVE project

Does Europe feel European?

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Does Europe feel European?

PERCEIVE is a three years research project part of Horizon 2020, the biggest Research and Innovation Programme of the EU. The project investigated, in different European regions, how much do citizens feel European and how do they perceive the implementation of the European Cohesion Policy.

Researcher and practitioners from 8 partner institutions across 7 European countries worked on developing a comprehensive theory of "cohesion in diversity" and used 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 aimed at both mapping and explaining inter- and intra-regional variations in: the experiences and results of Cohesion Policy implementation, citizens' awareness and appreciation of EU efforts for delivering cohesion and 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 integrated the use of both qualitative and quantitative analytical methods such as surveys, semi-structured interviews, case studies, sentiment analysis, and econometric modeling.

Do European Citizens know what Cohesion Policy is and what does it do for them?

How well does the European Union communicate its policies and positive results?

Why do Europeans, in different regions, have significantly different sense of belonging to the EU?

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University of Gothenburg
Romanian Academy
Institute of Agricultural Economics
Institute of Agricultural and Food Economics
National Research Institute
University of Barcelona
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Governance and Implementation Guidelines

A deeper look at the European Cohesion Policy's governance and how the implementation process at local level can affect its effectiveness and long-term impact.

A

Introduction

> **Domestic factors profoundly influence the way the Cohesion Policy is shaped and the effectiveness and impact of its funding.**

Since its introduction, **Cohesion Policy** has been the primary tool for the reduction of economic, social and territorial disparities across regions of Europe and the key redistributive mechanism in support to the less developed areas. Despite the statistical indicators register a trend towards European convergence, **disparities** of many different kinds between regions remain wide (European Commission, 2014) and the EU enlargement reinforced the regional territorial imbalances (Bartkowska and Riedl, 2012). The effects of the Cohesion Policy on the convergence processes have been thoroughly investigated (Islam, 2003; Farole et al., 2011) and policy evaluations hold mixed results about the magnitude of its impact with great **heterogeneity** depending on the country – or the regions – of implementation (Rodríguez-Pose and Fratesi, 2004; Cuadrado-Roura, 2010). Notably, there is increasing agreement on the fact that **domestic factors** profoundly influence the way the Cohesion Policy is shaped and the **effectiveness** and **impact** of its funding. Weaknesses in terms of social and economic development, territorial capital, political stability, quality of institutions and government, administrative capacity, and national legislative framework might have limited the effectiveness of the Cohesion Policy (Surubaru, 2017; Milio, 2007, 2014; Rodríguez-Pose & Garcilazo, 2015; Fratesi and Perucca, 2018).

> **When individuals think of Europe, they usually do it from a local point of view and they are influenced by the direct observation of Cohesion projects in their territories.**

Since its introduction, **Cohesion Policy** has been the primary tool for the reduction of economic, social and territorial disparities across regions of Europe and the key redistributive mechanism in support to the less developed areas. Despite the statistical indicators register a trend towards European convergence, **disparities** of many different kinds between regions remain wide (European Commission, 2014) and the EU enlargement reinforced the regional territorial imbalances (Bartkowska and Riedl, 2012). The effects of the Cohesion Policy on the convergence processes have been thoroughly investigated (Islam, 2003; Farole et al., 2011) and policy evaluations hold mixed results about the magnitude of its impact with great **heterogeneity** depending on the country – or the regions – of implementation (Rodríguez-Pose and Fratesi, 2004; Cuadrado-Roura, 2010). Notably, there is increasing agreement on the fact that **domestic factors** profoundly influence the way the Cohesion Policy is shaped and the **effectiveness** and **impact** of its funding. Weaknesses in terms of social and economic development, territorial capital, political stability, quality of institutions and government, administrative capacity, and national legislative framework might have limited the effectiveness of the Cohesion Policy (Surubaru, 2017; Milio, 2007, 2014; Rodríguez-Pose & Garcilazo, 2015; Fratesi and Perucca, 2018).

Although the extant literature is not conclusive, and any causal implication should be avoided, the empirical evidence seems to point toward some significant positive relation characterized by a "learning effect" (Dall'Erba and Fang, 2017). Nevertheless, the effect may vary conditional on specific regional characteristics, the amount of EU funds allocated and the distribution of the socio-economic groups. All in all, we believe that the efficient use of the Structural Funds allocated to a region can indeed favour a more positive **perception of the EU** both directly and through its positive effect on economic growth. Overall, this framework suggests the adoption of a European strategic approach to regional development which builds upon the **differentiated territorial characteristics in a multidimensional perspective**. In the end, the strategic approach should translate in a tailored policy-mix based on integrated programmes — in terms of funds, objectives and governance level — to help maintain the sustainability of the policy action through long-term development.

B

Evidence and Analysis

What can PERCEIVE research tell us about Cohesion Policy's life cycle and its impact on citizens' attitude towards the EU?

Cohesion Policy and the citizens' perception of the EU

> When deciding on the benefits of the EU membership, individuals take economic arguments into account.

Theoretical arguments suggest that regions recipient of Cohesion Policy funds can benefit directly or indirectly from the policy as long as the EU funds contribute to alleviating the deficits of the local economies. However, in academic literature, the evidence so far is partial and inconclusive. Our analyses confirm a **positive association** between the measures of the economic situation of the region and the indicators of support for European integration. These results suggest that when deciding on the benefits of the EU membership, individuals take **economic arguments** into account. Differences in the amount of Structural Funds expenditures could explain the variation across regions in the proportion of people that believed that the country benefits from EU membership, and in the proportion of the regional population that trust in the EU. Nevertheless, they do not seem to have a significant contribution when it comes to explaining the changes over time in support and attitudes towards the EU, thus suggesting that beyond the logic of economic evaluation, **social identities** and **collective meanings** about integration and being European might play a role[1]. Despite the absence of a significant correlation between the rate of absorption of the Cohesion Policy funds and the indicators of EU support and attitudes, our study seems to suggest that an efficient use of the Structural Funds allocated to the region can contribute to improve **support** and stimulate **positive attitudes** towards the EU[2].

These results might be due to the more appropriate allocation of resources to solve the problems of the region, leading to a more positive perception of the policy by the region's population. However, it could also capture the effect of the quality of local and national institutions, and the entire socio-economic system in the region. As extensively argued in the scientific literature (among the others, see Wostner, 2008; Rodríguez- Pose & Garcilazo, 2015; Fratesi and Perucca, 2017; Surubaru, 2017), institutional deficiencies can hinder the appropriate management of the allocated resources. In this regard, the effect of the **quality** of the regional institutions on support for the EU seems to be different from that on **citizens' attitudes**. While there could be a positive correlation for the former, results on trust and a positive image of the EU are generally negative. By contrast with a complementary effect on EU support, citizens in regions with weak local institutions would tend to trust more the EU and have a more positive image of it (Munoz et al., 2011). Funds allocated to the region can contribute to improve **support** and stimulate **positive attitudes** towards the EU[2].

[1] For further elaborations about the relevance of a social constructivist approach in explaining the citizens' perception, see the PERCEIVE Deliverable 5.1.

[2] We proxy the efficiency of Cohesion Policy through the speed at which the EU funds allocated to the region are spent during the programming cycle. For a comprehensive analysis, see the PERCEIVE Deliverable 2.5.

B

The Cohesion Policy cycle: from design to evaluation

1. The programming phase: focusing on local needs

Political vs. technical process

The role of political actors and how they interact with the administrative bodies is essential to disentangle whether the policy design is inspired to a comprehensive strategic approach to regional development. In fact, episodes of «pork-barrel politics» (Surubaru, 2017) might occur where political **opportunism, rent-seeking practices or political clienteles** guide the decision about the allocation of funds among priorities and territories. On the other hand, a process **excessively technical** might not lead to strategic choices for territorial development, but rather to more **conservative decisions**. In our studies, two regions with strong political stability and a long historical tradition of negotiation and cooperation, such as Emilia-Romagna (IT) and Burgenland (AT), reported that the political dimension has been functioning as a driver for the administrative component. On the contrary, other regions highlighted a more negative view of the role of politics where the regional needs were neglected in favour of opportunistic preferences and a top-down approach in planning the resources (Dolnośląskie and Warmińsko-mazurskie, PL; Essex, UK). However, the programming phase also promoted a positive political externality and a "healthy competition" between the regions' provinces in Norra Mellansverige (SE) in order to obtain more funds at the local level.

> **The role of political actors and how they interact with the administrative bodies is essential.**

Vertical coordination and multi-level governance

The PERCEIVE research came across heterogeneous experiences in terms of institutional settings and organizational design in the management of the Cohesion Policies. Despite these characteristics, in most of the cases, the **lack of adaptability** to the region's contingent needs in these countries has been indicated as the result of **vertical coordination problems** that prevented different levels of authorities from cooperating in an efficient way. The phenomenon seems to be particularly relevant in the presence of **centralised** and **hierarchised** management systems coupled with **weak** administrative offices or **low quality** of local institutions. For example, the case-study of Extremadura (ES) stressed the necessity for further interactions between the regional representatives and the federal government to engage direct conversations with the European Commission in areas in which the legal or administrative competence was regional rather than federal.

Evidence-based design

In general, all case-studies' focus groups agreed upon defining Cohesion Policy as an **evidence-based policy** (except for UK's regions of Essex), designed following a thorough and objective analysis of the territory's needs, with the aim of enhancing both policy's targeting and legitimacy. However, some criticisms arose for risk of **back-looking solutions** with excessive weight to the past (Warmińsko-Mazurskie, PL) or the **inadequacy** of scientific documents to grasp the real problems and needs of the people (Burgenland, AT). In some regions, it has been stressed that the evidence-based approach to the policy design allegedly paved the way to a top-down process which neglected the territorial component (Sud-Est, RO; Extremadura, ES; Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Dolnośląskie, PL). On the other end, a lack of evidence-based approach has been registered in the monitoring and evaluation phase, where better performance indicators would have helped to strengthen the focus on results.

B

2. The implementation phase: the challenging management of funds

Red tape

According to the results of the PERCEIVE case-studies, the high level of **regulation** and the vast set of **administrative procedures** represented the root of the **major limitations** of the Cohesion Policies. All in all, they hindered both the accessibility for potential beneficiaries (Burgenland, AT; Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Dolnośląskie, PL) and the effective action of the MAs (Essex, UK; Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Dolnośląskie, PL; Extremadura, ES; Calabria, IT). Under the pressure of a result-oriented approach and targets defined in terms of absorption rate, the risk to privilege quantity over quality of expenditure was tangible. Even in a successful example of efficient implementation of Cohesion Policy, such as the Emilia-Romagna region (IT), the presence of red tape and technicalities was perceived as the principal cause of excessive bureaucratisation and disempowerment of political local actors.

Flexibility and adaptability

The Cohesion Policy aims at depicting a medium- or long-term strategy for regional development over a seven-year timeframe. The outcomes of the PERCEIVE research called attention upon the importance to guarantee its adaptability over the entire programming period to avoid mismatches between the objectives identified at the beginning of the programming period and the regions' current needs. On this note, the **2008 financial crisis** highlighted the need for **flexibility** in the process of **re-allocation** of the budget among priorities and programmes.

> **The high level of regulation and the vast set of administrative procedures represented the root of the major limitations of the Cohesion Policies.**

> **The 2008 financial crisis highlighted the need for flexibility in the process of re-allocation of the budget among priorities and programmes.**

Even though several regions performed this task with varying degrees of success, such processes have been addressed as excessively time- and effort-consuming (Extremadura, ES; Sud-Est, RO; Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Dolnośląskie, PL). On the other hand, the experience in Emilia-Romagna — exacerbate by the major earthquake that hit the region in 2012 — was positive despite the state-of-the-art regulatory scheme and some doubts were advanced about introducing higher flexibility in the institutional architecture of the Cohesion Policy. Adaptability requires **pre-conditions** in terms of institutional capacity, decentralisation, responsiveness and involvement of stakeholders, accountability and technical capability for continuous monitoring to avoid any detrimental effect on the implementation phase.

Monitoring and evaluation activities

The economic crisis that occurred in the middle of the implementation phase also affected the **evaluation activities**, as the targets set in the programming phase soon appeared to be **hard to achieve**. This lead to an attention bias for the efficiency side of the programme over its effectiveness (Norra Mellansverige, SE), whose assessment was found to be much more difficult (Essex, UK). As a consequence, the Managing Authorities suffered from increased **administrative burdens** coupled with **unclear regulations** in an exceptional context (Extremadura, ES; Norra Mellansverige, SE; Warmińsko-Mazurskie, PL). Even though these activities were perceived as fundamental in setting the bar for policy management and particularly helpful in context with weak political accountability, their administrative costs are considered as extremely detrimental for the entire phase.

B

Administrative capacity: building the basis for an efficient implementation

> **Administrative capacity is the combination of institutional, bureaucratic and human resources capabilities necessary for the managing authorities to adopt decisions and to use Cohesion Policy resources.**

All in all, both the extant literature and the PERCEIVE research point at the **lack of administrative capacity** as the principal cause of most of the **delays** involved in the management of Cohesion Policy. The expression administrative capacity describes the ability and skills of central, regional and local authorities to prepare suitable plans, programmes and projects, and to decide on them in due time; to arrange the coordination among principal partners; to cope with the administrative and reporting requirements; to finance and supervise implementation properly, avoiding irregularities (PERCEIVE Deliverable 2.5). In other words, administrative capacity is the combination of institutional, bureaucratic and human resources capabilities necessary for the managing authorities to adopt decisions and to use Cohesion Policy resources (Milio, 2007; Surubaru, 2017).

Continuity of the administrative structures

> **Many regions suffered from an excessive rate of turn-over that hindered the process of learning-by-doing and the accumulation of knowledge.**

The presence of **stable** and **reliable** staff has been valued as a positive element that helped to build a new ruling class with a distinct mindset and approach to policy-making (Burgenland, AT; Norra Mellansverige, SE; Emilia-Romagna, IT). However, many regions suffered from an excessive rate of **turn-over** that hindered the process of **learning-by-doing** and the **accumulation of knowledge** from the administrative bodies. The reasons stretch over a various range of elements: from the salary competitiveness gap with the private sector in Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Dolnośląskie (PL) to the recruiting regulation limitations and the budgetary constraints in Calabria (IT). Over and above, the lack of political stability might also have repercussion on management continuity (Milio, 2008).

Personnel capabilities

In addition to the previous element, administrative capacity at the regional and local level has been hindered by the lack of internal personnel and expertise (Calabria, IT; Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Dolnośląskie, PL; Norra Mellansverige, SE). Despite the attempts to provide specific in-house training, external courses or post-graduate academic programs (Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Dolnośląskie, PL; Sud-EsT, RO) and promote job rotation to keep the employees up-to-date (Extremadura), the administrative staff still **struggled** to **keep the pace** with the EU implementation requirements, the changes in the regulatory framework or the empowerments and interpretation guidelines released by the European Commission (Extremadura, ES). Despite some authorities' experienced some exchange of knowledge and best practices through informal cooperation with partners and peers, they blame **insufficient** support from other levels of governance (Sud-Est, RO) and the need to seek **external** guide and consultants (Calabria, IT; Norra Mellansverige, SE).

Technical assistance

Despite resources dedicated to technical assistance has been included in the Cohesion Policy provisions, the instrument has been criticised for its lack of clarity in terms of eligible actions. In turns, this led to a low level of implementation rate in many regions. As a matter of fact, the technical assistance spending at the EU level has been significantly **lower** than the ceilings allowed by the regulations since its introduction (European Parliament, 2016).

C

Policy Implications and Recommendations

**What can PERCEIVE research teach us?
Recommendations from the academic team.**

1 Strategic approach

Promoting a strategic approach to regional development

The recommendations listed in this paragraph should be considered in combination with the following sections as they all fall under the umbrella of a coherent strategic approach to regional development.

- The Cohesion Policy design should be inspired by a **multidimensional perspective** of development in all its stages, from the choice of the objectives and strategies at the European level and the configuration of the national and regional operational programmes to the implementation of the Cohesion Policy. On a similar note, the allocation of resources for the Cohesion Policy should move **beyond the GDP per capita** criterion and be complemented with other indicators (e.g., unemployment, educational level, youth conditions, environmental issues or other structural challenges). Similarly, the evaluation of the Cohesion Policy should overcome the financial expenditure performance measures and embrace more **result-oriented criteria** in weighing the outcomes of the programmes in this multidimensional view.

- The Cohesion Policy design should also respond to a **territorial principle**. Notably, the EU should better complement the pan-European targets with the local needs and challenges in each territory. Considering that different levels of economic and social development have significant implications on the effectiveness of the Cohesion Policy, it would be desirable to better calibrate **ex-ante expectations** with the **actual capabilities** of the territory, avoiding any misrepresentation due to political bias in the programming phase (lack of competences, flagship effect or opportunistic behaviour).

- The European Commission, the Member States and regions, and the local authorities need to come together in search of the best solutions in the light of a contract of confidence among all the levels involved in the Cohesion Policy governance. **Coordination, complementarity and collaboration** between the managing authorities and the upper governance levels would promote a more "reasoned" spending, not just more spending to meet some formal threshold.

C

2 Simplification and continuity

Achieving greater efficiency through simplification and continuity in regulation

Our research identifies the need for more simplification and stability in the regulatory framework as the main critical issue related to the governance of the Cohesion Policy.
How — and when — the general regulation is arranged and approved at the EU level set the pace of the following phases of the policy cycle, causing delays in the approval of the operational programmes and obstacles to their smooth implementation at the Managing Authority level.
These recommendations are referred to the central European institutions and, specifically, the European Commission and its administrative staff.
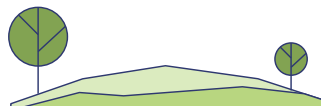
- **Provide a single comprehensive legal framework** which recollects all the standard and common requirements for the different financial instruments of the EU regional policy. The document should have a linear and rational structure to simplify the identification and comprehension of the normative content. This action could also contribute to promoting the adhesion of the Member States to the principles of additionality, complementarity, coordination, and coherence. This recommendation should not simply translate into less wordy documents since the certainty and clarity of the rules must be preserved.

- **Promote more legal certainty** through a set of guidelines on operational details defined concurrently at the main provisions, thus minimising the number of empowerments and delegated decisions approved at a later moment. The European institutions should provide more tangible and direct support to the Managing Authorities in the interpretation of provisions.

- **Reduce bureaucracy and technicalities**, provide — since the beginning of the programming period — clear rules for the transition time and roll-over procedures to smooth the implementation process and accelerate the policy cycle. Frequent changes in regulation, interpretation or guidelines make staff knowledge quickly obsolete and reduce the administrative capacity of the involved actors.

- **Include less formal requirements** for the management and monitoring of the projects, including a reduction in the administrative burden connected to implementation and progress reports. Aim at real-time monitoring through open data platforms for European, national and local purposes.

C

- **Streamline the audit procedures prescribing a single-level control system** and take into consideration the possibility of introducing **conditions proportionate** to the nature of the projects and the beneficiaries' characteristics and verifications based on the potential risk of the projects in terms of track-records and proper functioning.

- **Simplify the reimbursement process**, since it might represent a significant barrier to the potential participation of the beneficiaries and their opinion about the financial sustainability of the projects. Limited resources to co-finance the project, difficulties to access credit or obtain insurance policies and bank guarantees might further challenge the participation to Cohesion Policy initiatives.

3 # Flexibility

Enabling more flexibility to respond to local needs and dynamic challenges

Even though regions might face similar problems, the Managing Authorities could benefit from having some room for manoeuvre to deal with region-specific settings since the programming phase and defining and adapting tools and mechanisms for a later stage.

C

- **Promote the bottom-up approach** to tackle more effectively specific challenges and find the right balance with the Cohesion Policy's priorities and targets. However, an efficient implementation of this procedure requires clear political accountability, strong administrative capacity of all the actors involved, and transparent modes of coordination (Milio, 2014), because embracing the partnership principles in the programming phase might smooth the path for rent-seeking behavior of politicians or the stakeholders' audience. Where institutions are weak, implementation of bottom-up actions might be difficult, and top-down policies might be more effective for sustainable development of deprived areas (Crescenzi and Giua, 2016).

- **Avoid oversimplification of targets and objective in the operational programmes** but considering a range of possible actions to maintain maximum flexibility in selecting projects at a later stage. If the objectives and targets are not ambitious enough and detailed enough, it will be challenging to evaluate the impact of the policy (European Commission, 2014).

- **Provide ad-hoc mechanisms for easier adjustments in the strategy and allocation of funds** due to both extraordinary events or dynamic challenges in the socio-economic context during the implementation phase.

4 **Capacity building**

Fostering administrative capacity building and good governance

Administrative capacity building embodies the milestone of the policy implications of the PERCEIVE project. It is the necessary condition for any reform at the community level — i.e., simplification, flexibility and continuity — to exert consistent effects in a multilevel governance framework, but at the same time, it is also positively affected by the relieve of the external constraints from the EU.
In this sense, good governance plays a major role in creating trust in institutions and social capital, but also fostering economic development and fostering the impact of Cohesion Policy investment (European Commission, 2014).

C

- **Provide support to the Member States and the Managing Authorities to identify potential bottlenecks** in the delivery of the Cohesion Policy and subsequently arrange a medium-term plan as a proper thematic objective with a specific line of financial interventions. The European Commission may exert an important role in contributing to making local institutions more capable and accountable (Aiello and Pupo, 2012), but it should relieve them from the task.

- **Promote strategic management and organizational design in the Managing Authorities** to foster ambidexterity[3]. In particular, it would imply: i) developing procedures, practices and manuals to foster resilience and adaptability; ii) promoting administrative leadership and commitment of the personnel through clear identification of the decision roles and well-functioning performance-based reward systems; iii) simplifying the administrative architecture, since the smaller the number of actors and departments involved in the implementation system, the better the absorption performance given the same level of administrative capacity (Horvat, 2005; Wostner, 2008).

- **Invest in human resources management**, thus encouraging people development and involvement through training for legal and technical competencies and tools for administrative empowerment, reducing staff turn-over and setting the conditions for the recruitment of high-skilled personnel — at least for key positions in case of regulatory or budgetary constraints —.

- **Develop external support from the European Commission** — i.e., promoting informal interregional networks, organizing technical workshops or establishing ad-hoc task forces — **or consultant agencies** in a developmental scheme of technical assistance. When the external support measures come to an end, the Managing Authority should have gained new knowledge and set in place procedures for effective management of the policy. It is important to internalise competencies rather than outsourcing single tasks. The aim is to develop a critical learning process and to acknowledge how to adopt — and adapt — solutions picking from existing good practices implemented in other regions.

5 Open data

Sharing open data for the Cohesion Policy

During our research, collecting data on the projects managed by the local Managing Authorities was all but an easy task. Project-level information remains hard to collect and different standards coexist between regions in the same country. The availability of a cross-regional database would enhance the public awareness and legitimacy of the policy decisions as well as their transparency and accessibility. These data would also be essential for implementing some of the previous recommendations, such as: i) applying an evidence-based approach to the design of Cohesion Policy; ii) adjusting priorities and budget allocation throughout the programming period with a continuous evaluation action; iii) enforcing a strategic plan to regional development, and iv) promoting the sharing of best practices among policymakers, potential beneficiaries and the citizens.

It is not simply a matter of «more data», but it is the necessity of building **«better data»**, in the sense of information which is comparable, reliable and complete:

• **Consolidated** data at NUTS-2 level on a set of pan-European territorial indicators which account for changes in territorial boundaries over time;

• **Allocations** and expenditure by fund, year and priority theme, also providing a consistent thematic classification among programming periods;

• **Number** of projects financed and number of applications by fund, year, and priority themes;

• **Detailed** financed project information and full text, also indicating the date of publication of the public calls whenever applicable — the Italian portal OpenCoesione represents an example of best practice in data for research and a good starting point to further develop a European open access platform to be updated by the Managing Authorities.

Communication Guidelines

Communicating the European Cohesion Policy: how and to what extent can it shape citizens' perception of the EU?

A

Introduction

This section conveys a number of guidelines to support an effective communication of Cohesion Policy. The guidelines are grounded on a research process that is articulated in a number of interconnected activities: i) **focus groups** with field practitioners, ii) an **online survey** with policy communicators, iii) **workshops** with local management authorities, iv) a small **conference** with policymakers and implementers. These four activities were conducted in a sequence. In addition, PERCEIVE's team 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, the researchers conducted an automatic text analysis of discourse on Cohesion Policy both on social media and on traditional newspaper. Through this analysis, they elicited a number of thoughts that regards how discourse is associated with European identity. In presenting the guidelines, the team tried to balance synthesis on the one hand and contextual details on the other hand. In other words, the distinct aspects listed below are to be regarded as interconnected with each other: it is important to capture the connections among the different dimensions of the communication of Cohesion Policy.

B

Evidence and Analysis

What did we learn after 3 years of research activity on Cohesion Policy communication?

PERCEIVE research: evidence from focus groups, analysis of communication plans and surveys

- **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:
a. awareness of **operational programmes**: many regions indicate this as the main communication goal;
b. 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;
c. **"transparency"**: it is usually 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.

- **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.

> In some of the regions analysed, there is no explicit statement regarding the importance of highlighting the role of the EU.

> 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 might humanize figures and shorten the distance between institutions and citizens by the means of **storytelling**.

- **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:
a. countries vary in terms of their degrees of freedom in organizing and implementing the communication plans;
b. countries vary in terms of the articulation of organization lines of communication and command among different entities;
c. countries vary in terms of articulation and enactment of information channels to capture media opinions.

**Communication
Guidelines**

B

**The most
agreed-on way
to narrate the
accomplishments
of regional policy
entailed the
use of direct
testimonies of
beneficiaries.**

"

- **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.**One of the themes** 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:
a. the achievement of economic policy goals;
b. the achievement of high absorption rates;
c. the impact on beliefs of citizens about the EU.

- **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: i) some respondents perceive EU central guidelines and directives as technical **requirement** to be fulfilled as constraints; while others ii) 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.

- **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.

- **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 mentioned in our interviews; i) importance of visual and material aspects; ii) use of testimonies; iii) stimulating deeper thinking; iv) use of figures and data and v) conveying emotions.

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- **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.

Communication
Guidelines

B

PERCEIVE research:
evidence from statistical analysis

- **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.

- **While communication** budgets positively associate with citizens' perceived personal benefit deriving from financed projects, they seem to have unclear association with support for **integration**.

- **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**.

- **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.

The closer in time communication investment, the higher the levels of awareness of Cohesion Policy among citizens.

PERCEIVE research:
evidence from focus groups, analysis of communication plans and surveys

- 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**.

- 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.

The discourses occurring in newspapers reveal attitudes towards Europe that are locally entrenched.

C Policy Implications and Recommendations

Shaping future Cohesion Policy's communication strategies: guidelines from PERCEIVE project's team.

1 Context

Dealing with the general European context challenges and threats

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 Objective

The impact and benefits of setting the right communication objectives

Building **awareness** and **appreciation** is still very important. A respondent stated that this represents a "vaccine" against populism.

> **It would make sense for LMAs to have identity building as a task if not a constitutive element of their missions.**

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.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**.

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.

3 Organization

Communication activities' organisation: from EU institutions to local authorities

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**.

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.

Finally, a set of emerged issues pointed to the importance of **inclusiveness** in regard to the involvement of external

> **European Commission should lead the role of communicating Europe with centrally developed actions.**

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.

4 New channels

The role and potential of social media in EU communication

While LMAs acknowledge the importance of traditional channels and the role of educational institutions as multiplicators, they still seem to fear, or not fully understanding, the **potential of social media**. In addition, traditional centralized control prevents form 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.

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 profiles 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.

To this extent, our empirical findings (i.e. PERCEIVE 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

> **Our empirical findings highlight the importance of communicating decisions and events, as in those circumstances the EU tends to emerge as an autonomous and coherent social actor.**

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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.

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.

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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.

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.

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 Cohesion Policy's impact on people's' life, not only on long term infrastructural development.

5 **Tone, Messages and Targets**

Building better communication strategies

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.

Communication should be focused on the potential Cohesion Policy's impact on people's' life, not only on long term infrastructural development.

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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.

Further readings

From PERCEIVE Public Deliverables:

- Database on allocation and expenditures (D2.1)

- Report on the results of the convergence analysis of EU citizens' identification with the EU project from 1995 up to now (D2.5)

- Report on the policy recommendations on how to integrate Cohesion Policy with urban and rural policies (D4.4)

- Report on causal qualitative model of virtual learning scenario (D6.1)

Governance and Implementation Guidelines:

- Bauhr, M., & Charron, N. (2018). Why support International redistribution? Corruption and public support for aid in the eurozone. European Union Politics, 19(2), 233-254.

- Bauhr, M., & Charron, N. (2019). The EU as a savior and a saint? Corruption and public support for redistribution. Journal of European Public Policy, 1-19.

- Chmieliński, P., & Gospodarowicz, M. (2018). Complementarity of regional and rural policies? A study on regional programmes and Common Agricultural Policy Pillar II measures in Poland. Annals of the Polish Agricultural and Agribusiness Economists, 20(4), 22-28.

- López-Bazo, E., Moreno Serrano, R., Royuela Mora, V., & Suriņach Caralt, J. (2017). Evaluation of the Cohesion Policy operational program 2007-2013. The case of Extremadura. Investigaciones Regionales, 2017, vol. 38, p. 183-203.
- Tudor, M. M., Florian, V., & Rosu, E. S. (forthcoming). Perception on EU regional approach. in "Industrial versus small farms — competitors or Citizens' vs practitioners' partners?"

Communication Guidelines:

- 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.. Investigaciones Regionales - Journal of Regional Research.

- Cunico, G., E., Aivazidou and E. Mollona. (forthcoming). European Cohesion Policy performance and citizens' awareness: A holistic System Dynamics framework.. Investigaciones Regionales - Journal of Regional Research.