

# Better communication for cohesion policy

## SUMMARY

Cohesion policy is a major EU investment tool aimed at reducing regional disparities and achieving economic, social and territorial cohesion. It delivers a wide range of results in areas such as new infrastructure, training, job creation, support for small businesses and environmental protection.

Communication is key when it comes to making the public aware of existing funding opportunities and informing them of the results of cohesion policy investments. It can also affect public perception of the EU and raise awareness of the positive impact of EU support on people's everyday lives. Improving the visibility of cohesion policy is therefore a salient issue for the EU.

Communication measures range from requirements for fund managers and beneficiaries on the basis of EU legislation to more informal initiatives such as information campaigns, events and web portals aimed at publicising the policy's achievements. In the spirit of multi-level governance, communication activities bring together a wide variety of actors including EU institutions, Member States, regional and local authorities and members of civil society.

The ongoing negotiations on the new multiannual financial framework for 2021 to 2027, including new regulations on cohesion policy, and the upcoming conclusion of the 2014-2020 programming period provide a good opportunity for reflection on the issue of cohesion policy communication.



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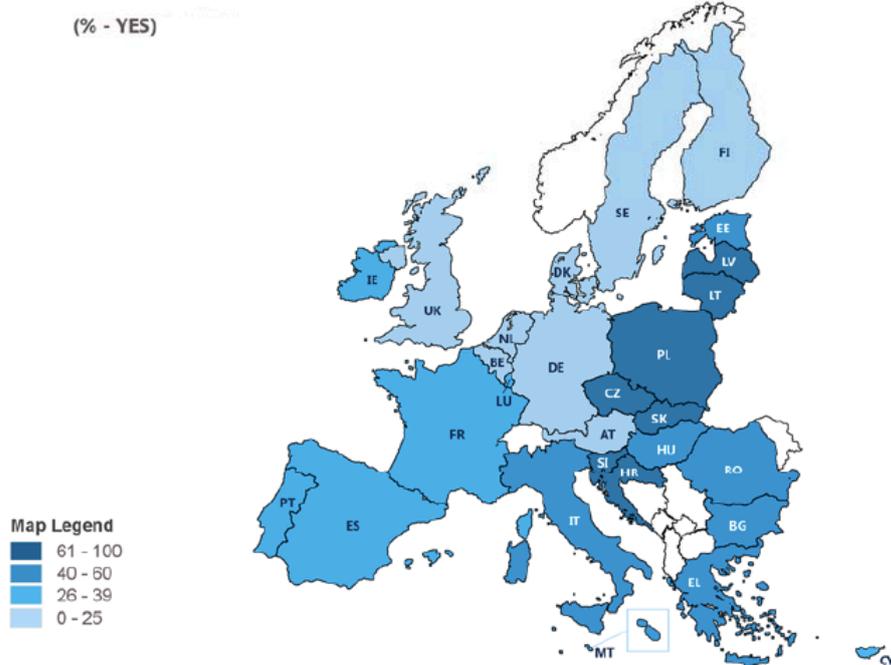
## Background

Cohesion policy funding totals €351.8 billion for the 2014-2020 period and is equivalent to about one third of the EU budget. This scale of funding makes it essential to make potential beneficiaries aware of existing opportunities and ensure transparency by communicating the policy's results effectively. Specific [achievements](#), financed under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Cohesion Fund in the 2007-2013 period, include for instance providing financial support for 141 145 start-ups and over 350 000 small and medium-sized enterprises, supporting 125 687 research projects, helping to build almost 6 700 km of roads and upgrade 7 500 km of railway, and modernising water supply systems benefiting 15 million Europeans.

The [regulatory context](#) for cohesion policy communication has evolved significantly over recent programming periods. From the initially minimal provisions for information measures the policy has developed to include detailed obligations for implementing bodies and beneficiaries. A recent trend in legislation also includes a greater focus on communication for the general public and engagement with various types of media and communication multipliers.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the recent post-crisis years have seen EU institutions placing increased emphasis on reconnecting with the public. Enhanced cohesion policy visibility can help raise awareness of the tangible benefits of EU support in people's daily lives and improve the EU's public image. The 2017 [Eurobarometer](#) survey on 'Citizens' awareness and perceptions of EU regional policy' shows that the percentage of citizens aware of EU-funded projects in their region increased from 34 % in 2015 to 35 % in 2017. Among those citizens aware of regional policy, 78 % had a positive opinion of the impact of investment at regional and local level (compared with 75 % in 2015). Moreover, a Standard Eurobarometer [survey](#) from the same period reveals that the percentage of citizens with a positive image of the EU increased from 39% in 2015 to 40% in 2017. While this shows a positive evolution in the impact indicators set for communication actions, there is still scope to improve the effectiveness of cohesion policy communication and learn from evaluation. Awareness of EU-funded projects varies across the EU (see Figure 1). This may depend on [factors](#) such as the intensity of EU support (higher visibility in regions with large allocations), ease of publicity depending on the purpose of the investment (e.g. infrastructure vs research), as well as intensity and reach of communication activities. Communication of cohesion policy can be improved through better legal provisions, providing clear guidance, implementing effective approaches and enhancing collaboration between the actors involved in communication at local, regional, national and EU level.

Figure 1 – Awareness of EU-funded projects



Source: [Eurobarometer](#), 2017.

# Legislative framework for communicating cohesion policy

## 2014-2020 legislation

The information and communication rules for cohesion policy are defined in [Common Provisions Regulation No 1303/2013](#) under Articles 115 to 117 and Annex XII. The provisions contain formal requirements regarding the communication of information on projects by managing authorities<sup>2</sup> and beneficiaries, as well as requirements regarding the communication of cohesion policy achievements to the general public. The Member States and **managing authorities** are required to draw up communication strategies for each operational programme<sup>3</sup> or several programmes. The strategy has to be approved by the monitoring committee, which also must be informed once a year on progress in the implementation of the communication strategy and on the planned communication activities to be carried out the following year. The Member States must designate an information and communication officer responsible for coordinating communication activities in relation to one or more funds, while the managing authorities must designate one person responsible for information and communication for each operational programme or several programmes. Member States and managing authorities must also establish a single website or portal for all cohesion policy operational programmes and maintain a publicly accessible list of operations (i.e. projects and beneficiaries). They are also required to inform potential beneficiaries about funding opportunities and publicise the achievements of cohesion policy among EU citizens. They must also make existing beneficiaries aware of their responsibilities and monitor compliance. **Beneficiaries** are required to put up billboards or plaques for projects receiving over €500 000 in public support (for the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund) and A3 posters for smaller projects, inform project participants of EU funding, display the EU flag and include references to the relevant EU funds, as well as acknowledge EU support on their websites. Further specifications regarding technical characteristics of information and communication measures such as creating the EU emblem and data storage are laid down in Commission [Implementing Regulation](#) No 821/2014.

While the provisions of the Common Provisions Regulation specify details to be included in the list of operations, communication strategy, application calls, eligibility, selection criteria, procedures etc., they do not include a detailed description of the concrete communication actions or measures that should be undertaken. There is only a general reference to Member States or managing authorities having to organise a programme launch event and run one major annual information activity as well as maintain a website giving examples of projects. [Annex XII](#) specifies elements to be included in the communication strategy: description of information and communication measures, materials to be used, support provided to beneficiaries in their communication activities, the indicative budget of the strategy, indication of administrative bodies and staff resources responsible for implementation, assessment of information and communication measures and annual updates of activities to be carried out in the following year. Article 50 of the Common Provisions Regulation meanwhile requires managing authorities to produce 'citizens' summaries' of annual implementation reports outlining progress on projects.

## New proposals for the 2021-2027 period

In the new legislative [proposal](#) for a regulation laying down common provisions for several EU funds<sup>4</sup> (COM(2018) 375), the responsibilities of both programme authorities and beneficiaries regarding visibility and communication have been reinforced. The new provisions are laid down in articles 41-45 (chapter on visibility, transparency and communication) and in Annex VIII on communication and visibility. The specific communication requirements are now included in the body of the regulation rather than the annex (as was the case in the previous period). The currently proposed Annex VIII only includes technical specifications on the graphic and colour standards of the EU emblem (previously covered by an implementing act) and provisions on intellectual property rights as regards the reproduction of communication and visibility materials.

The new provisions in the proposed regulation uphold many of the previous provisions but add several new elements. They oblige the **Member States** to ensure the visibility of operations supported by EU funds, with a particular focus on operations of strategic importance, and to communicate to EU citizens and role and achievements of the funds through a single website. This 'single branding' is aimed at communicating EU action as a whole, rather than the action of individual funds. Each Member State must also identify a communication coordinator for visibility, transparency and communication activities in relation to support from the funds.

The **managing authorities** are still required to prepare 'a strategy for each programme's contribution to the policy objectives and the communication of its results' and to ensure that each programme outlines 'the envisaged approach to communication and visibility for the programme through defining its objectives, target audiences, communication channels, social media outreach, planned budget and relevant indicators for monitoring and evaluation' (article 17 on the content of the programmes).<sup>5</sup> However, the chapter on visibility, transparency and communication (i.e. articles 41 to 45) no longer includes an 'elements of the communication strategy' provision. The managing authorities are still required to maintain a list of operations and a website with information on programmes (to be set up within six months of the programme approval), covering the programme's objectives, activities, available funding opportunities (calls for proposals) and achievements. The provisions regarding what should be on the website are more detailed than in the current regulation. Moreover, the requirements on what should be included on the list of operations (i.e. projects and beneficiaries) have been expanded (for instance including names of natural persons, the purpose of the operation and its achievements). The managing authorities must also appoint a programme communication officer but there is no longer a reference to a programme launch event or a major annual communication activity.

The obligations of **beneficiaries** now include acknowledging EU support on social media sites (in addition to doing so on their websites), plaques and billboards for projects whose total cost exceeds €500 000 (ERDF and Cohesion Fund) and projects exceeding €100 000 (for ESF+). There is a new requirement to organise a communications event for operations of strategic importance and those whose total cost exceeds €10 000 000. Non-compliance with beneficiary obligations in terms of communication will now trigger a financial correction, cancelling up to 5 % of project support.

## Views of the European Parliament

Negotiations on the new proposal are currently ongoing. The European Parliament adopted its [amendments](#) to the proposal in plenary on 13 February 2019. Its proposed modifications to the chapter on visibility, transparency and communication are very minor. Parliament proposed to add a specification of the type of partners to be involved in communication activities by the communication coordinator, to include 'regional, local and other public authorities, and economic and social partners' (article 43 on visibility). In article 44 on the responsibilities of the managing authorities it proposed the addition of an 'indicative timetable for calls for proposals' to the website maintained by the managing authority and the names of contractors in the list of operations. In article 45 regarding the responsibilities of beneficiaries, it proposed that information on EU support be displayed on beneficiaries' websites and social media sites simultaneously (rather than only one of them). It also made amendments regarding the visibility of plaques, billboards and posters to improve their exposure to the public.<sup>6</sup> Further modifications to the proposal are expected in the course of negotiations with the Council of the European Union.

## Views of the European Committee of the Regions

The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) adopted its [opinion](#) on the proposed common provisions regulation on 5 December 2018. Its amendments to article 43 on visibility insist that 'local and regional authorities involved in the implementation of the programmes' be specified among the partners to be included in communication activities carried out by the communication coordinator. It also recommended the possibility that the communication officer appointed by the

managing authorities be responsible for several programmes (rather than just one) to support integration and synergy of funds. The CoR also proposed that representatives of the European Committee of the Regions be included in the network of communication coordinators and programme communication officers run by the European Commission. With regard to article 44 on the responsibilities of the managing authorities, the CoR advocates reinstating specific provisions on the communication strategy for one or several programmes, with elements specified in the annex to the regulation. Moreover, it proposes a new article outlining the approval procedure by the monitoring committees. These provisions would serve to improve the implementation of the strategy, ensure minimum uniformity and facilitate supervision.

## Communication tools available

As explained above, the current legal framework contains detailed requirements for the Member States and/or managing authorities to develop a communication strategy, appoint communication officers, set up a website and organise an annual event and programme launch. Beneficiaries are required to display the EU flag and information about EU support on their websites and in physical locations, if applicable. In addition to these tools enshrined in the legislation, there are several other communication tools.

The [INFORM network](#) of communication officers (set up on the basis of Article 117 of the CPR) gathers officers responsible for communicating ERDF and Cohesion Fund investments. It is coordinated by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, and meets twice a year to exchange information on the results of communication strategies, share good practices, coordinate communication activities between the Member States and the Commission and propose recommendations to enhance the outreach and impact of communication activities. The equivalent for the European Social Fund is the [INIIO network](#).

The yearly [European Week of Regions and Cities](#) has been organised in Brussels since 2003. Co-hosted by the European Committee of the Regions and the European Commission, this annual four-day event hosts over 100 workshops, debates and exhibitions. It also provides opportunities for the 6 000 participants (local, regional, national and European decision-makers and experts) attending this event in October each year to network and pool ideas. In addition to the main event in Brussels, local events run from September to November all over Europe. Moreover, the EU institutions regularly organise shorter events such as conferences and seminars, for example the ['Briefing on the future of Cohesion Policy beyond 2020'](#) organised by the European Committee of the Regions in May 2018, the [7th Cohesion Forum](#) organised by the European Commission in June 2017 and the public [hearing](#) on 'Evaluating the contribution of the ESI Funds' organised by the European Parliament in June 2016.

The [RegioStars Awards](#) is a competition organised by the European Commission since 2008. Winners are selected from EU-funded projects that demonstrate excellence and new approaches in regional development in five thematic categories (smart, sustainable or inclusive growth, urban development and a topic of the year).

The [COHESION30](#) campaign was a high-profile campaign organised in 2018 to celebrate 30 years of cohesion policy. It included events, exhibitions and debates on the evolution of cohesion policy as

### Box 1 – Examples of communication initiatives

**Portugal** – A national campaign '*Sabia que...?*' (Did you know?) informs the public about the contribution of EU funds in an innovative way – by presenting short facts and statistics on packets of sugar.

**Belgium** – Belgian communication actions include displaying photos and posters of EU co-funded projects in metro stations, featuring areas such as support for vulnerable social groups, research and infrastructure.

**Slovenia** – Slovenian authorities organise a very successful annual video contest called 'EU project, my story'. Short 90-second clips showcasing projects, people or stories linked to EU funding can win very attractive prizes and publicity on social media.

well as its current and future role. [Europe in My Region](#) is an ongoing annual campaign organised since 2016. It gathers local partners wishing to publicise projects supported by the EU by organising events featuring stories and photos, setting up quizzes and contests and promoting them on social media. In addition, a number of [regional campaigns](#) are conducted every year in over 40 regions in partnership with the European Commission, these include the '[EU delivers in the Regions](#)' campaign. Local and regional efforts are often supported by the European Commission representation offices in the Member States (including Europe Direct Information Centres), the European Parliament's liaison offices and the relevant contact points in the European Committee of the Regions.

In addition to events and information campaigns, the EU institutions also promote cohesion policy via information provided on their websites. The European Commission's website [InfoRegio](#) contains practical information on numerous aspects of cohesion policy and a map showing major EU-funded projects. It also features a variety of [publications](#) such as reports and brochures, including the quarterly [Panorama Magazine](#). The [Open Data](#) portal on cohesion contains up-to-date statistics divided by theme, country and type of funds, as well as data on achievements including project examples. The European Parliament also provides websites with [factsheets](#) on cohesion policy and research papers on its [Think Tank](#) website. In November 2018 it launched a portal called '[What Europe Does for Me](#)', featuring hundreds of EU-supported projects in each Member State as well as information on EU actions for various social groups and policy areas. The EU-funded projects selected are accompanied by links to national and regional sources presenting a full range of projects in national languages. The European Committee of the Regions also features a wide variety of studies, brochures and information materials on its [website](#). In addition, all institutions publicise information on cohesion policy on their respective social media channels.

## Joint communication actions

On 25 April 2017 the Council of the European Union adopted its [conclusions](#) on 'Making cohesion policy more effective, relevant and visible to our citizens'. It emphasised the potential of communicating cohesion policy to raise citizens' awareness of the positive impact of the EU on their everyday lives, as the projects bring tangible results and are visible on the ground. The Council invited the Commission and the Member States to enhance cooperation on their cohesion policy communication strategies.

Following this invitation, on 25 May 2017 the Commissioners Corina Crețu and Marianne Thyssen presented plans for **seven joint communication actions** for cohesion policy in a [document](#) entitled 'Bringing opportunities to Europeans: communicating together the results of EU cohesion policy'. They acknowledged that communicating cohesion policy was the collective responsibility of the Commission, Member States, local and regional authorities and civil society. The document proposed a range of very specific communication actions, some new and some building on already existing tools (see Box 1).

### Box 2 – Seven joint communication actions

1. Cohesion policy coalition
2. Video competition
3. 'Did you know?' campaign (three emblematic projects per country and region)
4. Photo exhibitions
5. RegioStars Awards at national level (rewarding successful cohesion policy projects)
6. '60 ways the EU helped YOU' campaign
7. Debates about cohesion policy

On 12 April 2018, a [progress report](#) on implementation of the actions was presented to Council. The most successful actions turned out to be the #CohesionAlliance (action 1), followed by the regional or local debates on cohesion policy (action 7) and the 'Did you know?' campaign (action 3). Other actions have been slower to take off due to the major effort or investments required either for participants (the video competition – action 2) or for the organisers (national version of the RegioStars awards – action 5). However, progress has been made on all of the actions, with concrete examples referenced in the report.

The [#CohesionAlliance](#), coordinated by the European Committee of the Regions, [numbers](#) over 10 600 individual signatories, including 121 regions, 135 cities and counties, 46 national associations of local and regional authorities, and 35 European associations. Many of the supporters are umbrella organisations, which ensures a substantial [representation](#) of the population. The alliance runs a website, has an active social media presence (e.g. hashtag #CohesionAlliance), organises events, publishes documents and is running a [petition](#) for a strong EU cohesion policy beyond 2020. The second most popular action relating to [debates](#) on cohesion policy will be reinforced by regional 'citizens' dialogues' to secure greater visibility and input for the European Commission representations. In addition to monitoring progress on the individual actions, the progress report outlines events planned for the future, such as the [Road Trip Project](#) to engage with young audiences, a Massive Online Open Course ([MOOC](#)) with a chapter on cohesion policy, a European Commission [call](#) for proposals targeted at national, regional and local media to improve information and journalistic reporting about cohesion policy and several [information campaigns](#).

## Recommendations from academic studies and think-tanks

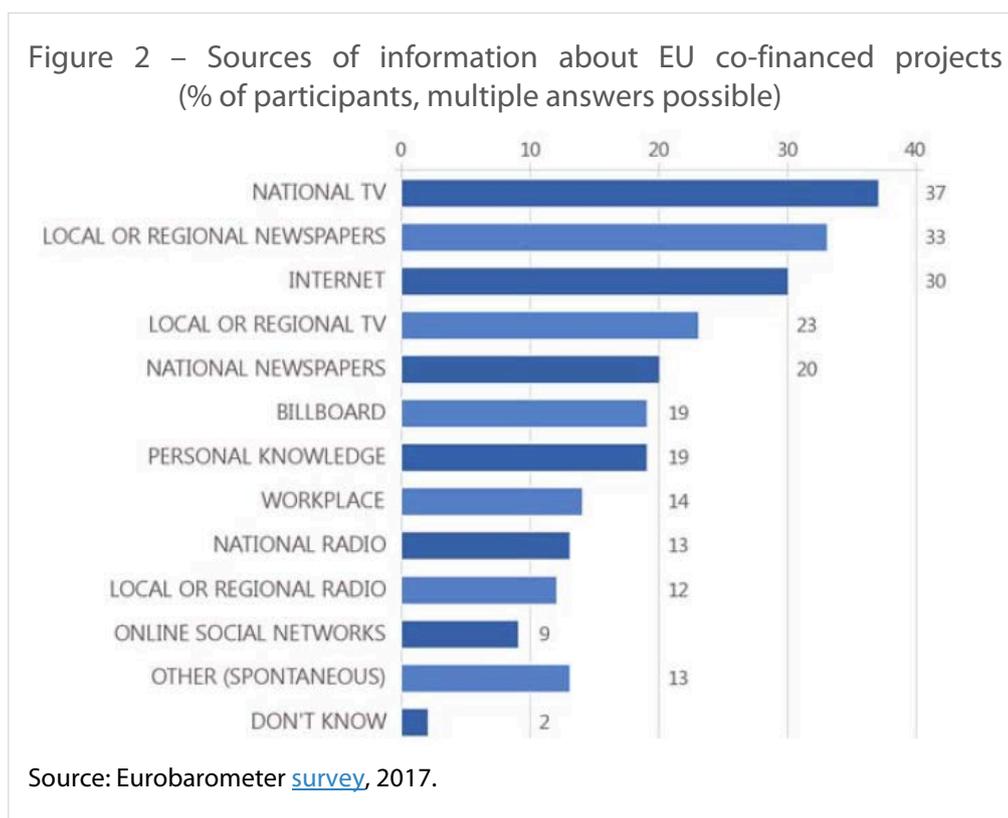
Aggregate information on actions undertaken at national and regional level is not easily available, as the annual summary report produced by the European Commission on the basis of the annual implementation reports from the Member States does not contain data on communication. The annual implementation reports do include a chapter describing information and communication activities but there is no aggregate data available. Therefore, it is invaluable to turn to empirical studies on this topic.

The [Cohesify](#) project, funded under the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and carried out in the years 2016 to 2018, provides a [comparative analysis](#) of communication strategies in 17 regions from 12 Member States,<sup>7</sup> with regard to their structure, territorial coverage and funds covered. It also explores their objectives, measures, target groups and performance indicators.

An overview of internal and external evaluations carried out in these regions with regard to the 2007-2013 period and analysed in the [study](#) shows positive results in the number of publications, events and development of websites. The main shortcomings include insufficient coordination of communication activities, lack of involvement of beneficiaries in communication and absence of proactive engagement with journalists and opinion formers. The results also reveal a need for wider use of digital media, less technical language, better targeting of actions and efforts to monitor the number of people affected by communication actions (e.g. website visits after an event). Moreover, stakeholders did not consider communication to be a core priority compared with other tasks such as performance and compliance.

[Findings](#) from the comparison of communication strategies show that the budgets for communication policy are difficult to aggregate and compare, as the strategies are defined at different levels with different funds. Moreover, cost categories and methods are not always clearly defined. Similarly, there is great variability in the definition of performance indicators. In terms of specific communication tools, the survey of stakeholders reveals plaques or billboards displaying the EU flag as the most commonly used (70.53 %), followed by the programme website (69.02 %) and brochures and newsletters (63.7 %). The least used communication tools were advertising campaigns on television or radio (12.85 %). In terms of the effectiveness of the specific

communication measures, the surveys highlight public events as the best tools to make citizens aware of cohesion policy achievements, followed by television, press and the programme website. These findings are consistent with the results of the 2017 Eurobarometer [survey](#) indicating that the TV, newspapers, the internet and billboards are the most common sources of knowledge about EU-funded projects (see Figure 2). In terms of the traditional media, however, many of the stakeholders surveyed in the [study](#) argued that the media either pay little attention to EU news or report negative stories such as scandals and episodes of corruption to attract more public attention. Stakeholders interviewed in the course of the [study](#) also pointed to the need to move away from technical language, foster good proactive media relations and use social media more extensively. Moreover, resource-intensive channels could be optimised by tailoring messages to target groups.



The [study](#) also makes a series of policy recommendations with regard to communication. It recommends EU-level definition of the content of communication strategies in the form of a guidance document including a detailed methodology and key performance indicators. It also suggests establishing a budget earmarked for communication in the operational programmes with a common methodology for calculating costs, definition of objectives and indicators, promotion of national and regional communication networks, and evaluation of the impact of communication strategies and specific communication measures and tools. Other recommendations include promoting greater involvement of beneficiaries, the media and elected officials in communication initiatives, interactive engagement on social media and the creation of a single portal featuring all EU-funded projects.

The [PERCEIVE](#) project, also funded under Horizon 2020, explores EU citizens' perceptions of cohesion policy and their identification with the EU. Although the project is still ongoing, some of the research reports are already available. The 2017 qualitative [report](#) on the impact and effectiveness of communication strategies provides findings from nine case studies. These include the need for a mix of channels and audiences, flexibility to adapt communication actions to different target groups and local needs, a move away from technical jargon and acronyms, and efforts to view communication as more than just a European Commission obligation. Another 2017 [report](#) on 'the

specific role of new media in EU-financed projects' communication strategies' highlights the unrealised potential of social media use. It encourages a change in the communication approach from a static one focusing on information to a more interactive one focused on community-building and interaction (for instance to overcome the situation where the number of Facebook posts largely exceeds the comments or where the posts generate a low number of likes). In terms of style of communication, the report recommends moving away from a neutral tone towards the more emotional logic and language of social media. In relation to Twitter, recommendations also focus on departing from top-down communication and engaging more in social debate (for instance by asking and answering questions). Further recommendations were made with regard to targeting messages to different audiences. For instance, young people are the natural target groups of social media whereas older groups are generally targeted more effectively through traditional media. This however, must be done while taking into account the changing demographics of social media and the role of professional journalists and influencers. Additional recommendations referred to storytelling and using multimedia features such as photos and video files.

A 2016 thematic [paper](#) published by the European Policies Research Centre at the University of Strathclyde confirms the increased salience of communicating cohesion policy and renewed EU focus on communicating results. It reveals similar findings to those mentioned above, such as the need to move away from complex and technical language to give citizens a better understanding of projects, harnessing the potential of new media and linking the positive achievements of cohesion policy to wider macro debates about current political challenges as well as the future and sustainability of the EU.

## Outlook

While the communication of cohesion policy has recently been intensified, there is still room for improvement. Bringing together information on action taken at national and regional level would facilitate the exchange of good practices at EU level. Moreover, a clearer definition of cost categories and methods would make it easier to aggregate and compare the budgets for communication policy, as the current communication strategies are often defined at different levels with different funds. More wide-spread evaluation of communication efforts in terms of their effectiveness and outreach could also serve as guidance for targeting future action.

Policy recommendations from academic studies include enhancing the guidance on communication efforts, establishing a budget earmarked for communication with a common methodology for calculating costs, and setting up a single portal to feature all EU-funded projects. In terms of specific communication actions, they recommend moving away from technical language, greater engagement with communication multipliers and increased use of social media. Promotion of national and regional communication networks, greater involvement of beneficiaries and the collaboration of a wide variety of actors on the communication actions are also seen as effective ways to increase outreach to the EU population's various audiences.

The ongoing negotiations on the new 2021-2027 common provisions regulation provide an opportunity for debate on the future direction of cohesion policy communication, with the potential to affect public perceptions of the EU and raise awareness of the role of EU policies in the daily lives of EU citizens.

## MAIN REFERENCES

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Mendez C. et al., [The implementation of ESIF communication strategies in 2014-20: Are they achieving expectations?](#), IQ-Net Thematic Paper 39(3), European Policies Research Centre, November 2016.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Communication multipliers include journalists, influencers, networks, regional and professional associations, local governments, European Commission representations, Europe Direct Information Centres, etc.
- <sup>2</sup> According to the European Commission glossary, a managing authority is a body responsible for the management and implementation of an operational programme. It can be a national ministry, a regional authority, a local council, or another public or private body nominated and approved by a Member State.
- <sup>3</sup> According to the European Commission glossary, operational programmes are detailed plans in which the Member States set out how money from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) will be spent during the programming period. They can be drawn up for a specific region or a country-wide thematic goal (e.g. digitalisation or environment).
- <sup>4</sup> Common Provisions Regulation No 1303/2013 currently in force covers the five European structural and investment funds: the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. The new regulation proposed in 2018 excludes the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development but includes the Asylum and Migration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Border Management and Visa Instrument.
- <sup>5</sup> In the new proposal for the 2021-2027 framework the name 'operational programmes' is changed to simply 'programmes'.
- <sup>6</sup> It is also important to note that a previous 2017 EP own-initiative resolution on increasing engagement of partners and visibility in the performance of European Structural and Investment Funds (2016/2304(INI)) invited the Commission to 'consider the added value of providing a specific financial envelope for communication within the technical assistance, as well as of increasing, where appropriate, the number of binding publicity and information requirements for cohesion policy projects.'
- <sup>7</sup> The report is based on surveys and interviews with cohesion policy stakeholders, citizens, European Commission officials and Members of the European Parliament. In addition to examining the communication strategies at national and regional levels, it also explores the Commission's communication plans in DG REGIO, DG EMPL and DG COMM.

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