



EuroPCom session report

Out of the dark: Cohesion policy to connect the EU and its citizens

Thursday, 7 November, 14h30-16h00

Speakers: **Agnès Monfret**, Head of the communication unit, DG REGIO, European Commission; **Adrian Teban**, Mayor of Cugir in Romania and CoR member; **Dr Luca Pareschi**, Post-doctoral research fellow of the PERCEIVE Project in Italy

Moderator: **Pierluigi Boda**, #CohesionAlliance campaign manager, European Committee of the Regions

The session focused on the link between cohesion policy and citizens' perception of the EU, pointing out some of the key elements of existing communication campaigns, as well as addressing possible improvements.

After introducing the speakers, **Mr Boda** presented a few Slido questions around cohesion policy. Results showed that cohesion policy is one of the most important policies of the European Union, and yet, it is unknown to a majority of EU citizens. A Eurobarometer survey from 2019 shows that four in ten people had heard of projects co-financed by the EU in their region and 30% knew about the European Regional Development Fund. When people are aware of such projects and funds, 81% have a positive perception of the EU. These figures went up from when the last survey was carried out in 2017.

Agnès Monfret highlighted a few elements that would contribute to making EU citizens more aware of what the EU does for them. For example, the decentralisation of campaigns proves to be a good solution, as it not only requires a lower budget but also has a higher impact at local level. Another positive factor during the campaigns was the focus on young people. Young people are keen on European projects taking place in their communities, which presents a key opportunity to mobilise citizens locally. An example of a communication campaign was the campaign carried out as part of the InvestEU programme, which recorded good pre-test and post-test results. She also mentioned a few challenges when building communication campaigns. These included the fact that campaigns require strong backing from local and regional authorities, especially in terms of human resources. There is also a need for co-creation, not only with regard to the communication campaigns but also the policies.

Adrian Teban emphasised the link between cohesion policy and citizens' awareness of the EU. He was rapporteur on an opinion by the European Committee of the Regions on Better Communication for Cohesion Policy. He pointed out that even though Europe has become the most cohesive area in the world, awareness about cohesion policy differs, depending on the amount of funding received. Mr Teban mentioned that although communication is important, trusted messengers are crucial. Local leaders have the most trust from the citizens, and are therefore an essential vector of information regarding cohesion

policy and projects co-financed by the EU. Increasing the visibility of ESI funds would not only improve the perception of the EU but would also be a solution for tackling Euroscepticism. Communication campaigns are therefore crucial, as well as ensuring a constant dialogue with citizens.

Dr Luca Pareschi presented the PERCEIVE project, a project supported by the Horizon 2020 programme, aimed at measuring the "sense of European identity" and its link with cohesion policy. Regarding communication more generally, **Mr Pareschi** pointed out some of the challenges. There is a need to build awareness and appreciation of cohesion policy, which is often overshadowed by EU "hot topics", most recently, migration and Brexit. Issues such as political opportunism, the unclear mission of local management authorities and the complexity of EU programmes are also hindering the visibility of cohesion policy projects, which could be a vaccine against populism. With regard to the organisation of communication, more coordination between central and local units is necessary, to be more inclusive of all stakeholders and of funds' beneficiaries. Mr Pareschi also stressed the importance of the frequency and magnitude of communication, with the support of varied and new communication channels, to prevent a "memory-decay effect".

The moderator then welcomed questions from the floor. In response to a question on how DG REGIO intends to fund upcoming communication campaigns, **Ms Monfret** replied that there was a significant budget allocated to regional media and academia, and also a pilot measure to include schools and universities.

The issue of the complexity of procedures for cohesion policy projects was then raised. The panellists recognised that there was a need for simplification in order to make funds more accessible to local authorities but reminded them that the balance between simpler procedures and a stable framework is difficult to obtain.

A question then focused on the format of communication campaigns and the possibility of going beyond events. In response, it was mentioned that there are measures to promote citizens' engagement activities, which could take different shapes.

Another question concerned the successful elements of a communication campaign aimed at involving young people. The example of a "no-nonsense campaign" was mentioned, promoted by a selection of young Europeans. Other examples included communication that is free from acronyms and only using every-day language. This had mobilised an important crowd on social media channels, especially Instagram and YouTube.

A question was asked concerning the missing ingredients in communications about cohesion policy. **Ms Monfret** explained two main elements: the first one being that at national level, politicians tend to praise successes as their own but for failures, the EU is to blame. Secondly, citizens need to be involved at all stages via consultation, citizens' dialogue and monitoring committees. **Mr Pareschi** and **Mr Teban** stressed the need to simplify the message, logos and campaigns, as well as to involve local entities in a more systematic way. The aim of raising awareness of the EU among citizens can be achieved if policy and communication go hand in hand.

Pierluigi Boda concluded the workshop by summarizing the main points addressed during the session. The first of these was that communication could be increased to connect the EU and its citizens and cohesion policy is a good opportunity to do so. There are some issues to be addressed, such as simplifying procedures and vocabulary, localizing messages and diversifying channels, but there are also good existing practices to build on. The session concluded with the future prospects for cohesion policy within the next multiannual financial framework, which without forecasting drastic changes will allow for a learning curve.

References made during the presentation:

- The European Parliament Research Services' (EPRS) briefing on [Better Communication on Cohesion Policy](#)
- The COTER Commission's Opinion on [Better Communication on Cohesion Policy](#) (European Committee of the Regions)
- The [PERCEIVE Project](#)
- Information about the [InvestEU Programme](#)
- The [ESI Open data platform](#)