



COHESIFY

The Impact of EU Cohesion Policy
on European Identification



What do citizens think of Cohesion Policy and does it matter for European identity? A comparative focus group analysis

Andreja Pegan*, Carlos Mendez** and Vasiliki Triga***

* Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

** University of Strathclyde, United Kingdom

*** Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus

Cohesify Research Paper 13

[Work Package 5 - Task 5.4]



The COHESIFY project (February 2016-April 2018) has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 693127

Summary

This research paper investigates citizens' perceptions and attitudes to EU Cohesion policy, its impact and the relationship with European identity. Discussions with 240 participants in 47 focus groups organised in 16 regions showed that the citizens of the EU have an implicit and cursory knowledge of Cohesion policy. Citizens recognise the importance of Cohesion policy for addressing regional disparities and improving the quality of life, but feel they are inadequately informed. Citizens want to have more say on how funds are allocated or governed in their area and expect the responsible authorities to improve their communication on Cohesion policy. Although many positive views were expressed about the impact of Cohesion policy on the region or city's development, only a small number of participants considered that Cohesion policy has had a direct impact on their feeling of European identity. Furthermore, Cohesion policy can also have negative effects on European attitudes and identity if it is not perceived to be addressing local needs.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the contributions of the COHESIFY consortium teams that undertook the focus groups in the case study regions: Central European University, Cyprus University of Technology, Delft University of Technology, Polytechnic University of Milan, Trinity College Dublin, University of Mannheim, University of Strathclyde/EPRC, University of Warsaw/EUREG, Regio Plus Consulting.

TABLE OF CONTENT

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Methodology	5
2.1 Recruitment and composition	5
2.2 Structure of discussions.....	5
2.3 Method of analysis.....	5
3. Cohesion policy awareness and knowledge	6
3.1 Cohesion policy, funds and projects	6
3.2 Financial allocation mechanisms	10
3.3 Sources of awareness.....	11
4. Cohesion policy impact.....	14
2.1 Positive impact.....	14
2.2 Negative challenges	16
5. Cohesion policy and European identity	25
6. A comparison of citizen narratives and media frames	29
7. Conclusion	32

1. Introduction

This research paper investigates citizens' perceptions and attitudes to EU Cohesion policy, its impact and the relationship with European identity. This is a particularly salient topic given the increased political priority placed by EU institutions on increasing the visibility of Cohesion policy. The Council of the EU adopted conclusions in April 2017 on "making Cohesion policy more effective, relevant and visible to our citizens" and calling for more efforts to increase the positive image of Cohesion Policy and show that it represents a tangible manifestation of the EU in the daily lives of citizens.¹ The European Parliament tabled a report on building blocks for a post-2020 EU Cohesion Policy at the end of May 2017 calling for increased visibility of Cohesion Policy "to fight against Euroscepticism" and "contribute to regaining citizens' confidence and trust."² Responding to these requests, the European Commission launched an action plan in May 2017 setting out concrete actions to increase the visibility of Cohesion Policy and improve the communication of the benefits to citizens. More generally, the need for greater transparency and visibility of EU funding achievements is being emphasised in EU debates on the post-2020 Multi-annual Financial Framework.

Set against this background, the central research questions addressed in the research paper are what do citizens think of Cohesion policy? And does this matter for European identity? To address these questions, a focus group methodology was employed. Specifically, 47 focus groups were undertaken with 240 citizens in 16 regions of the EU on the topic of Cohesion policy and European identity. The focus group method allows more in-depth investigation of what people think than other methods such as surveys. While the result of focus groups may be difficult to generalise beyond specific cases, they provide real insight into the breadth of opinions of people by providing for interactive discussion about perceptions, interpretations and the assumptions underpinning complex concepts such as EU Cohesion policy and European identity.

The structure of this research paper is as follows. The next section sets out the focus group methodology and protocol used. The following section presents the research findings distinguishing awareness and knowledge of Cohesion policy, views on the impact of Cohesion policy and on the contribution to European identity. The penultimate section compares the citizen narratives with media frames in the case study countries. The conclusion summarises the findings and presents the policy implications and recommendations.

¹ Council conclusions on "Making Cohesion Policy more effective, relevant and visible to our citizens", 8463/17, adopted on 25.5.17.

² European Parliament Report on Building Blocks for a Post-2020 EU Cohesion Policy, (2016/2326(INI)), 24.5.2017.

2. Methodology

2.1 Recruitment and composition

The COHESIFY consortium convened a total number 47 focus groups. In the majority of case study regions, 3 focus groups were organised.³ Focus groups consisted of 3 to 10 participants. The participants were European citizens or permanent residents. A total of 240 individuals were recruited, 110 of which were women. A list of focus groups with their ID number is included in Annex 1. The main two criteria to select participants were age and gender. When possible, groups were gender balanced and homogenous per age. The recruitment of participants consisted of a mixed approach. An overview of the approach used per case study is presented in Annex 2. Financial incentives for participation were provided to participants in focus groups organised in 9 case study regions in Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, the Netherlands and United Kingdom. All the focus groups were recorded, transcribed and translated. The transcripts were anonymised.

2.2 Structure of discussions

The focus groups followed uniformed protocol of questions to ensure comparability. Three themes were addressed: Cohesion policy awareness and benefits, factors shaping attitudes to the EU and European identity. A list of questions is included in Annex 3. The recommended time for the discussion was 1h 15 minutes. However, depending on the number of participants the discussions varied between 45 minutes to 2h 30 minutes. Prior to the start of the discussion, participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire and to sign a consent form. The questionnaire collected information on gender, age, level of education and work situation. In some of the focus groups, the discussion was informed by a video, which showed examples of EU-funded projects.

2.3 Method of analysis

Participants' comments and discussions were summarised in themes or narratives based on the frequency of comments and their extensiveness per case study region. This was done through the process of coding with the computer software NVivo. Two coders discussed and coded 9 transcripts together to develop codes and themes. In the report, the importance of a theme refers to the frequency it has been mentioned by participants and the broadness of the theme across focus groups and case study regions.

³ In two case study regions (Nyugat-Dunantul in Hungary and the West region in Romania), we organised 2 focus groups. The total number of participants in these two case study regions was similar to the number of participants in case study regions, where three focus groups were organised. Moreover, in both cases, the discussion was longer than the average discussion recorded in the case study regions where 3 focus groups were organised. In Central Macedonia, we were not able to conduct more than 2 focus groups due to participants not showing up and a public strike.

3. Cohesion policy awareness and knowledge

3.1 Cohesion policy, funds and projects

To explore awareness of EU Cohesion Policy, we asked participants whether they had heard of the term “Cohesion policy”. Participants provided three type of responses:

- Participants who had never heard of the term and could not explain it, for example:

Participant 5 (NL 4): *“I’ve never heard those words together.”*

- Participants who had heard of the term, but did not know what it meant or how it operates, for example:

Participant 1 (IT 3): *“I have heard this term before, but honestly I do not know what Cohesion policy is and how it works.”*

- Participants who had heard of the term and elaborated on purposes or governance.

There were more participants claiming to have heard of the term “Cohesion policy” than those claiming to have never heard of the term before. However, only a minority of participants provided an explanation of the term or were able to discuss the meaning of the term. The relative low intensity of discussions of the term indicates that most of the participants did not have an in-depth knowledge of Cohesion policy.

Among those who spoke about the meaning of Cohesion policy, some associated it with “EU money”, “EU funds” and “Structural funds”. In a small number of instances, Cohesion policy was confused with the Cohesion Fund. This confusion was apparent, when participants were asked about Cohesion “policy”, yet, they spoke about the Cohesion “Fund”. This was the case in the discussion groups in the Southern and Eastern region of Ireland, Lombardy, Pomorskie and Central Macedonia.

3.1.1 Cohesion policy goals and purpose

Based on the participants’ responses, we discerned two narratives on the goals and purpose of Cohesion policy (Table 1):

Table 1: Cohesion policy goals and purpose

Development and convergence	“Common action”
Andalusia, Baden-Württemberg, Central Macedonia, Cyprus, Lombardy, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, Southern and Eastern (Ireland), Scotland, West (Romania), West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia	Central Macedonia, Flevoland, Podkarpackie, West (Romania), West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia

Development and convergence

The dominant narrative is the understanding of Cohesion policy as a policy for the development and convergence of Member states and regions in line with the EU Treaty objective of cohesion (Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union). Participants emphasised the economic development dimension of Cohesion policy over the social one. In addition, most of the participants spoke about the objective of convergence between poorer and richer regions or Member States. These are some examples of excerpts from which the narrative of development was discerned from:

Participant 3 (CY 1): *"Cohesion policy, if I am not mistaken, is wanting to remove differences between different regions, to make all the regions grow together."*

Participant 2 (IT 1): *"I know that the EU gives money to the poorest countries of the Union to achieve a more homogeneous level of wealth within Europe."*

Participant 2 (SI 1): *"Equal development of regions. Probably reducing differences and inequalities."*

Participant 1 (RO 2): *"To bring underdeveloped countries to the same level as countries that are more developed."*

Participant 5 (PL 2): *"Cohesion is about equalising the quality or density of certain infrastructure."*

Participant 1 (HU 1): *"That inside the EU, Member States stand on the same level, the same standard of living."*

Participant 5 (UK 3): *"I have heard of the term. It is to do with the various sectors and needs and finding a way to draw those together and benefitting economically and socially the EU rather than the individual countries that make it up."*

"Common action"

A second and less prevalent narrative relates to a conceptualisation of Cohesion policy that emphasises cooperation and a means to bring Member States and citizens together but that is dissociated from economic development. These are some examples of excerpts from which the narrative was discerned:

Participant 3 (EL1): *"I for one believe that cohesion has to do with the idea of how "connected" the Europeans are to one another. How capable they are in reaching some decision jointly and simultaneously. That is, I believe it has more to do with this type of bonding, regardless in which field we are referring to. Whether this is the economy or something else."*

Participant 1 (PL 4): *"It seems to me that its goal is to have all these 28 democratic states cooperate with each other, to collaborate for a shared goal, for example in the economy, politics, or other activities, including military. It's all about acting together, right? About harmonious, joint actions."*

Participant 4 (SI 2): *"If I conclude from the name itself – the main objective should be to make Europe more unite by financing some projects."*

The narrative suggests that Cohesion policy can play a role in building a European identity. However, its infrequent appearance in focus group discussions suggests that citizens mainly understand the purpose of Cohesion policy in economic development terms. This is further corroborated by the very few instances where focus group participants would invoke both types of narratives at the same time, such as in the following example:

Participant 1 (RO 2): *"Deeper integration, a unity, singularity, among member states, and to bring underdeveloped countries to the same level as countries that are more developed."*

3.1.2 Fund awareness

Participant 1 (PL 2): *"I never know which project is covered by which fund... I know there are several. There's the Cohesion Fund, the Regional Development Fund, maybe even a Polish one. I never know which fund is it. For me, it all blends into one. What I know is that the European Union co-financed the repair of the railway track here."*

While all the Cohesion policy funds were mentioned in the focus groups, there was little spontaneous discussion and participants did not generally qualify their awareness of Funds with further discussion. The ESF was mainly mentioned by participants who had either benefited from an activity funded by the ESF or by participants who had worked on the implementation of the ESF. The ESF appears to be the most recognized Cohesion policy fund, given the relatively higher number of groups in which it was explicitly mentioned compared to other funds. Participants in 13 focus groups in 8 regions mentioned the ESF. The Cohesion Fund was mentioned in 11 groups in 6 regions, while the ERDF was mentioned in 9 groups in 8 regions. The Cohesion Fund was known in recipient countries as well as non-beneficiary countries.

Table 2: Fund awareness by region

ESF	ERDF	Cohesion fund
Andalusia, Baden-Württemberg, Flevoland, Lombardy, North East England, Pomorskie, Scotland, West (Slovenia)	Andalusia, Baden-Württemberg, Southern and Eastern (Ireland), Lombardy, Pomorskie, West (Romania), North East England	Central Macedonia, Lombardy, Pomorskie, Southern and Eastern (Ireland), Scotland, West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia

3.1.3 Project awareness

There appears to be relatively high awareness of EU-funded projects and thematic areas of intervention. Only a minority of participants explicitly declared to have no knowledge of EU-funded projects and only in one group (DE 1) did participants not know of any EU-funded project. Most of the participants could name a thematic area of EU-funding (e.g. road infrastructure, education infrastructure, public transport, investments in human resources and urban regeneration). Fewer participants could identify a specific project. The most knowledgeable about specific projects were the Polish, Hungarian, Cypriote, and Dutch participants. While the Dutch participants could list projects, they were also the ones to frequently express doubt as to whether the project had actually been funded by the EU. A certain level of confusion about projects and their source of funding existed also among participants in Spain, the UK, Ireland, Slovenia and Cyprus. In addition, there was a belief among some participants that the source of funding is not as important to the citizens as the fact that development takes place, for example:

Participant 3, (DE 3): *"I don't even notice because things that should be financed are financed by the public domain no matter where the money comes from, from the national state, the federal state or the [European] community. What has to be done is done, and for us as citizens, it is not of interest where the money comes from and how it is shared among the different actors."*

Participant 2, (CY 1): *"But why should the average citizen even care about how much money came from this or that fund? I will appreciate the mere fact of funding. [...] And I wouldn't want to know to find out more. Why should I bother?"*

Participant 5 (SI 2): *"People are not interested in where the money comes from. The question is only if there is money or not."*

Finally, a number of participants in Baden-Württemberg, Flevoland, Limburg, North East England, Scotland and the West region of Romania were aware of EU-funded projects implemented in other Member States (or regions) than their own. This suggests that when communicating projects, the authorities need to be mindful of domestic and foreign audiences.

Project awareness by theme

We identified eight thematic areas of project awareness (Table 3), which show the breadth of projects that participants were able to identify.

Table 3: Project themes by region

Theme	Case study regions	
Road infrastructure	Andalusia Castile and Leon Cyprus Baden- Württemberg Central Macedonia Flevoland Limburg	North East England Pomorskie Podkarpackie Southern and Eastern (Ireland) Scotland West (Romania) West (Slovenia) Western Transdanubia
Human resources development and social inclusion of disadvantaged groups	Andalusia Castile and Leon Cyprus Baden- Württemberg Central Macedonia Limburg Lombardy	North East England Pomorskie Podkarpackie Southern and Eastern (Ireland) Scotland West (Slovenia) Western Transdanubia
Sustainable development	Cyprus Castile and Leon Central Macedonia Flevoland Lombardy Pomorskie	Podkarpackie Scotland Southern and Eastern (Ireland) West (Romania) West (Slovenia) Western Transdanubia
Public transport and other forms of sustainable transport	Andalusia Castile and Leon Cyprus Central Macedonia Limburg	North East England Pomorskie Podkarpackie Southern and Eastern (Ireland) West (Slovenia)
Culture	Andalusia Cyprus Baden- Württemberg Lombardy	Limburg Scotland Southern and Eastern (Ireland) West (Slovenia)
Urban regeneration	Andalusia Castile and Leon Limburg Flevoland	North East England Pomorskie West (Romania) Western Transdanubia
Business support: small and large businesses	Castile and Leon Flevoland North East England Pomorskie	Podkarpackie Lombardy Scotland Western Transdanubia
Research and innovation	Castile and Leon Lombardy	Pomorskie

In almost all the case studies but one (Lombardy), participants provided the example of road infrastructure as a type of project funded by the EU. This category includes motorways, roads, bridges, roundabouts, and tunnels. In addition, we found high awareness of projects (14 out of 17 case studies) supporting human capital and social inclusion. In this category, we classified projects in the areas of education, training, vocational training and lifelong learning.

The third most referenced projects in the case study regions were in the areas of sustainable development, environmental protection, fighting climate change, resource efficiency and low-carbon economy. These types of projects were mentioned in 12 case study regions. In 10 case study regions, participants mentioned projects developing the public transport or other types of sustainable transportation, such as bicycle lanes. Projects supporting culture, such as renovations of museums, support for music events and preservation of cultural heritage, were mentioned in 8 case study regions. Similarly, projects supporting businesses and urban regeneration were mentioned in 8 case study regions.

The projects that were mentioned the least (in only 3 case study regions) were those pertaining to research and innovation. This is surprising because research and innovation receives the highest allocation from the ERDF among all eleven thematic objectives in 2014-20, although it is mainly channelled to businesses or research infrastructure that is less visible to ordinary citizens.

The frequency of project themes discussed across the regions can be seen in Table 3. This shows that participants in Pomorskie and Castile and Leon identified projects in seven different areas of funding. In the majority of case studies, participants identified five areas of funding (Podkarpackie, Andalusia, Cyprus, Scotland, Southern and Easter (Ireland), West (Slovenia) and Western Transdanubia). In five case study regions (Central Macedonia, Limburg, Lombardy, North East England) participants spoke about projects in four different areas of funding. Participants in Baden-Württemberg and the West region of Romania mentioned projects in three thematic areas.

3.2 Financial allocation mechanisms

When asked about the mechanisms that underlie the allocation of EU funds, very few participants explicitly declared to be unaware of how the funds are allocated. The two dominant narratives on the allocation of funds that emerged related to the efficiency and equity principles.

Efficiency vs Equity

In the *efficiency* narrative, funding is understood to be allocated through a selection process based on criteria such as predetermined priorities of funding, compliance with rules, past performance in managing funding, the envisaged impact or profitability of projects. In this narrative, the relative needs or wealth of region is not taken into account when allocating funds. By contrast, the *equity* narrative emphasises socio-economic needs based on the relative wealth (measured with economic indicators such as GDP), population size, and other needs of regions or Member States. The efficiency narrative was present in 21 focus groups carried out in Cyprus, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands (Flevoland and Limburg), Poland (Pomorskie and Podkarpackie), Romania and the UK (Scotland and North East England). The equity narrative was more dominant, since it was mentioned in 30 focus groups carried out in all the regions under study except in Slovenia (West) and Greece (Central Macedonia), where the allocation of funds was not discussed in detail.

In addition to the efficiency and equity narratives, participants described the allocation of funding as a political process involving redistributive bargaining between domestic and supranational actors. However, this view was present only in a minority of focus groups. Several participants talked about the co-financing principle of funding, which indicates that participants are well aware that the EU makes a contribution to programmes and projects alongside domestic institutions and beneficiaries.

Redistributive politics

The allocation of EU funding was perceived to be determined by a redistributive political process in a smaller number of focus groups (in Central Macedonia, Flevoland, Lombardy, Pomorskie, Podkarpackie and Western Transdanubia). The domestic level of political involvement was mentioned in Central Macedonia, Pomorskie and Western Transdanubia, where participants emphasised actors such as mayors and governors influencing funding allocation decisions. Here, it was implied that political clientelism is a negative factor influencing the distribution of funds. Lastly, participants talked about intergovernmental bargaining at the EU level, where the allocation of funds can be influenced by the political strength of individual countries and the European Commission, in three cases (Lombardy, Flevoland and Podkarpackie),

Co-financing

The co-financing aspect of funding was mentioned in 17 out of 47 focus groups in Andalusia, Castile and Leon, Cyprus, Flevoland, Pomorskie, Podkarpackie Southern and Eastern region (Ireland), Scotland, West region of Romania and Western Transdanubia. It appears that the technical term “co-financing”, which is often present in EU publicity material, has been internalised since several participants would mention it when describing projects they had heard of. This the case for the conversations held in the two Polish regions. There was no discussion on the level of or reasons for co-financing, which indicates limited knowledge on the rationale. Only one participant questioned what co-financing meant in the following way:

Participant 3 (E1 1): *“And even if you see something that says like ‘part funded’, you go ‘Ok, what part is it? One per cent, two per cent or is it 60 or 80 per cent? Or is it just money that is given? Or is it loan and it is paid back eventually?’”*

3.3 Sources of awareness

The dominant sources of awareness of projects can be classified into 7 groups (Table 4). In each case study, participants mentioned different source types indicating that knowledge of projects is acquired through a range of means. The most referenced sources of knowledge were physical signs, the media, and experience with EU funds at work. Other well-known EU funding publicity or citizen engagement measures promoted by EU institutions and rules (such as public events, consultations etc.) were less commonly mentioned if at all.

Table 4: Sources of project awareness by importance and regions

Source of awareness	Dominant source in the following regions
Signs	Andalusia, Castile and Leon, Central Macedonia, Cyprus, Flevoland, Limburg, North East England, Pomorskie, Scotland, Southern and Eastern (Ireland), Western Transdanubia, West (Slovenia)
Media	Limburg and West (Slovenia)
Work	Central Macedonia and Cyprus
“My area”	Lombardy and Podkarpackie
Education	Baden-Württemberg
Beneficiaries	Not a dominant source of awareness
“I know a beneficiary”	Not a dominant source of awareness

Signs

The most commonly quoted source of awareness were physical signs, such as plaques, boards posters, and the EU flag. These were mentioned in all the cases studies except in the focus groups conducted in Lombardy, Baden-Württemberg and the West region of Romania. Signs were the dominant source of project awareness in 11 regions (Table 4), which indicates the importance and

effectiveness of this publicity medium. However, most of the mentions of signs referred to infrastructure projects, such as roads and buildings. Only one participant spoke about seeing posters on the wall in a building, where an organisation was carrying out trainings for people. This might indicate that, as a means of communication, signs are important to create awareness of infrastructure projects, but they might be less effective for the promotion of other types of projects. It also suggests that awareness will be lower in more developed regions as consequence of the increased focus on softer forms of intervention and away from hard infrastructure projects. Another observation that arises from the focus groups discussion is the aesthetics of signage. According to some participants, signs are important, yet, they spoil the landscape:

Participant 3 (HU 1): *"There is a big billboard at the nursery of my daughter. The billboard is ugly, but the nursery is very nice."*

Participant 2 (PL 2): *"I agree with what one of you said about putting up such boards. They tell us how much money comes here. They spoil the view but I understand why they're needed."*

Media

Media was the second most quoted source of awareness of projects which was mentioned in all but four case study regions (Central Macedonia, Southern and Eastern (Ireland), Pomorskie, Podkarpackie and North East England). Alongside signs, the media was frequently mentioned in particular in Limburg and the West region of Slovenia. Three types of media were identified: the press, television and radio. Social media was only mentioned by one participant from Scotland (UK) as a source of project awareness. In most cases, participants did not pronounce an opinion on whether the news and stories reported by the media were positive or negative. However, all the references to the media in the Italian focus groups were about news on absorption problems of the funds due to bureaucracy challenges.

Work

Becoming aware of projects through working experience was the third most quoted source of knowledge in the focus groups. It was mentioned in Baden-Württemberg, Castile and Leon, Central Macedonia, Cyprus, Lombardy, North East England, Podkarpackie, Scotland, Southern and Eastern (Ireland) and West (Slovenia). Alongside signs, working experience was the dominant source of awareness in Central Macedonia and Cyprus. Participants with a Cohesion policy related experience worked in the areas of education, energy, water management, and entities receiving funding for organising vocational training and life-long learning.

"My area"

Some participants linked their source of project awareness to the fact that projects were carried out in their immediate vicinity or area of living without referencing any medium. In this category we also identified two examples where participants awareness was determined through their activities in local politics. The category "my area" turned out to be an important source of awareness in Lombardy and Podkarpackie, and was present in some of the focus groups carried out in Andalusia, Castile and Leon, Limburg, Southern and Eastern (Ireland) and Baden-Württemberg. The presence of the "my area" category in the narratives of participants might indicate that citizens do not always pay attention to how projects are promoted through publicity measures.

Education

A small share of participants had heard of EU-funded projects in their studies. Unsurprisingly, most of these mentions occurred in focus groups where the participants were below the age of 35 (CY 1, DE 1, IT 1, ES 2, NL 2 and NL 4). Even in other focus groups, which were heterogeneous per age, the participants that referred to their studies as a source of awareness were those aged below 33 (PL 6 and UK3). This might indicate that studies are an important source of awareness among the young. It also reflects the opinion of some participants that knowledge on the EU should be part of the educational curricula for children to increase citizen awareness and understanding of the EU.

Beneficiaries

Direct beneficiaries of EU funding were present in the focus groups conducted in Andalusia, West region of Slovenia, Pomorskie, Podkarpackie, Limburg, Flevoland and Cyprus, where 16 participants who had at a certain point of their life applied for EU funding and/or benefitted directly from it. The majority of these beneficiaries had either participated in EU-funded trainings or studies. Two participants mentioned being beneficiaries while working in agriculture and in home energy retrofitting.

"I know a beneficiary"

Another source of awareness was the acquaintance of a beneficiary, although this was mentioned infrequently. This source was identified in the focus groups conducted in Andalusia, Western Transdanubia, Flevoland, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie and Scotland. The beneficiaries that were mentioned were, for example, participants' children who had benefitted from EU-funded education activities, unemployed persons who took part in training courses and owners of businesses that had received support for developing their companies.

4. Cohesion policy impact

In order to explore what citizens think about the impact of Cohesion policy, we asked the participants to assess the contribution of EU funds and projects to the development of their region or city. Interestingly, the participants spent more time discussing negative aspects associated with policy implementation challenges than positive benefits or achievements. As a result, we have identified more negative (11) than positive (9) associations to the impacts of Cohesion policy. When participants were asked about the negative impacts, they talked about the problems that impeded the policy from having positive impacts.

A number of participants could identify positive and negative impacts at the same time. This shows that citizens have mixed feelings towards the benefits of Cohesion policy. These are some examples, where participants formulated positive and negative statements on the impact of Cohesion policy:

Participant 1 (CY 2): "I believe that the EU contributes to development, but whether this development benefits all layers of society I am not sure. Development is actually taking place, but with both positive and negative effects."

Participant 6 (PL 6): "As for infrastructure, in my opinion, there's huge improvement if we look back 10 years, but I think we're still backwards compared to the West. I was recently driving in Germany, and must say that the roads there and the roads here are worlds apart."

2.1 Positive impact

Participants talked about nine positive impacts of Cohesion policy (Table 5). The additionality of EU funds, broadly defined as benefits that would not have arisen without the EU funding contribution, was the most referenced positive impact. In line with participants' awareness of projects, many of the positive impacts were associated with improved infrastructure.

Table 5: Positive impacts by importance and region

Positive impacts	Case study regions
Additionality	Andalusia, Baden-Württemberg, Central Macedonia, Castile and Leon, Cyprus, Lombardy, North East England, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, Scotland, West (Romania), West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia
Improved infrastructure	Andalusia, Castile and Leon, Central Macedonia, Flevoland, Lombardy, Limburg, North East England, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, Southern and Eastern (Ireland), Scotland, West (Romania)
Reducing inequality	Andalusia, Baden-Württemberg, Central Macedonia, Cyprus, Lombardy, Limburg, North East England, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, Scotland, Southern and Eastern (Ireland), Romania (West)
Economic development and business support	Cyprus, Castile and Leon, Flevoland, North East England, Pomorskie, Podkarpackie, Scotland, Southern and Eastern (Ireland), West (Romania), Western Transdanubia
Human resources development and education	Andalusia, Baden-Württemberg, Lombardy, North East England, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie
Quality of life	Andalusia, Castile and Leon, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, Scotland, Southern and Eastern (Ireland), West (Romania)
Sustainable development	Andalusia, Baden-Württemberg, Lombardia, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie
Urban regeneration	Flevoland, Podkarpackie, Western Transdanubia
Partnership	Pomorskie and Scotland

EU added value

The added value of EU funding was mentioned in 19 groups in 13 regions. The different dimensions of added value highlighted included net benefits for economic development or in specific areas of intervention and projects, additional funding relative to domestic sources, and administrative benefits relating to the management of funding.

Development that would have not occurred without EU funding was referred to in Cyprus, Central Macedonia, Castile and Leon, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, West (Slovenia) and West (Romania). Additionality references relating to specific areas of intervention focused on infrastructure projects (Castile and Leon, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie). In Lombardy, participants perceived EU funding added value in the investments in renewable energy resources and broadband connectivity, where national funding might otherwise not have been invested.

Financial additionality was referred to more generally in Baden-Württemberg, where participants talked about EU funds supplementing what is already funded by the state. In North East England, the additionality of EU funding was discussed from the perspective of underinvestment by domestic (national and local) government in the region. A similar view was expressed in Scotland, where participants expect to see a drop in regional development funding after Brexit.

Management added value was highlighted in Andalusia, Castile and Leon, Central Macedonia, Lombardy, Southern and Eastern region (Ireland), West (Romania) and Western Transdanubia participants mentioned the, which ensures the efficient use of funds though its strict rules and controls.

Improved infrastructure

Improved infrastructure was mentioned in 18 focus groups in 12 regions. Some of these references were general statements of improved infrastructure, while most of the participant would specify the improvement in road and public transport infrastructure. Very few participants referred to improved accessibility or travel time reductions (e.g. quality of life improvements) arising from transport infrastructure investments.

Reducing inequality

In line with the Treaty objective of cohesion (Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union), the reduction of inequalities was mentioned in 18 groups and 12 regions. The underlying theme of this positive impact is the acknowledgment that EU funding has helped to reduce territorial or social inequalities in the member states and/or across the EU. In most of the regions, participants talked about the reduction of territorial inequalities. In Cyprus, Central Macedonia and Southern and Eastern (Ireland), the discussion was about the reduction of social inequalities with the respective member states. In the Southern and Eastern region (Ireland), participant mentioned that EU funds helped to reduce the gap in the standard of living in the urban and rural communities. In Limburg and Southern and Eastern, participants spoke about the reduction of inequalities between member states in Central and Eastern Europe with the rest.

Economic development

Economic development and business support was mentioned in 13 focus groups in 10 regions. In this category of positive impact, participants emphasised that EU funds support economic growth, which included the support for businesses and the creation of employment opportunities.

Human resources development and education

Human resources development was mentioned in 12 focus groups in 6 regions. Most of the references were about the improved opportunities for the unemployed. In addition, participants in Podkarpackie and Pomorskie spoke about the improvements in the education system. In Lombardy, participants spoke about training for the unemployed, education and lifelong learning.

Quality of life

The improvement in the quality of life was mentioned in 11 focus groups in 7 regions. These were general statements mentioning an improvement in the quality of life including the standard of living. The exceptions were in Pomorskie and Podkarpackie, where participants qualified their statements by mentioning the improvement in road infrastructure and sports facilities.

Other thematic achievements

A number of other positive impacts were linked to thematic achievements in two broad areas. The first was sustainable development, tackling climate change and supporting the low-carbon economy (five focus groups in five different regions - Andalusia, Baden-Württemberg, Lombardy, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie). The second was urban regeneration achievements in terms of improving the appearance of the city, as discussed in three focus groups in three regions (Flevoland, Podkarpackie and Western Transdanubia).

Partnership and targeting of groups

The engagement of societal actors or impact on specific groups was only discussed in two focus groups. In Scotland, a participant talked about the increased involvement of local communities in regional development, while in Pomorskie a participant talked about an increased attention towards the impact of projects on different societal groups. The limited discussion of partnership is somewhat surprising given the emphasis on multilevel governance as a key asset of the policy by EU and national institutions as well as in the academic and evaluation literature. It also highlights the lack of in-depth knowledge among citizens about Cohesion policy decision-making principles and, arguably, the disconnection between policy elites and rhetoric and citizens' perceptions. Indeed, as discussed further below, partnership was mainly discussed in negative terms relating to a lack of citizen engagement and interest in Cohesion policy.

2.2 Negative challenges

Participants identified eleven challenges linked to Cohesion policy performance (Table 6). The lack of communication and the mismanagement of projects were the most dominant topics discussed.

Communication

The need for better communication was discussed in 39 focus groups in all the case study regions. Except in five case study regions (Italy, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, Southern and Eastern region of Ireland and Scotland), communication was discussed in all the focus groups carried out per region. It was by far the most extensive topic discussed, where participants were able to exchange views rather than just provide an opinion, for example:

Participant 2 (PL 2): *"If we talk about the media, they impart little such knowledge. If you're interested, you can browse the internet, but you need to be interested. Knowledge doesn't come to you without your effort, right? And think that the radio, TV, other..."*

Participant 5 (PL 2): *"...media. Yes, they give too little coverage."*

Participant 2 (PL 2): *"Too little information. Absolutely."*

Participant 1 (PL 2): *"In fact, it's these boards that..."*

Participant 2 (PL 2): *"They spoil the view, but they're well visible."*

Participant 1 (PL 2): *"...and people begin to seek more information."*

The importance participants placed on communication might be indicative of their low awareness and knowledge of Cohesion policy and EU-funded projects, but it also raises questions on the efficiency and audience reach of Cohesion policy communication. When speaking about themselves or the knowledge of the people close to them, participants acknowledged they did not have an

informed opinion on Cohesion policy. Some participants felt that not enough was being done to promote awareness of Cohesion policy among citizens. While some participants questioned the need for citizens to be informed on Cohesion policy (see the excerpts on p. 8), other thought that improving awareness on Cohesion policy was an important task of government authorities.

The importance of improving awareness of the positive benefits of EU membership and common policies (such as Cohesion policy) was highlighted as means to redress the perceived dominance of negative information and news surrounding Cohesion policy. Participants welcomed the idea of better and increased communication on Cohesion policy:

Participant 3 (NL 4): "I think people do not understand how the European Union works, but I think it's necessary that you know how it work. More importantly, that there's promotion of what they [EU] actually do in the region. They do a lot, but nobody really knows that something is being done for them, and I think that helps the confidence of citizens in the EU."

Participant 2 (DE 3): "People are not interested in politics or they have a negative picture of the EU. [...] But if they are confronted with projects that would have been impossible without the EU, this could have of course a positive effect. [...] Many people, unfortunately, have a bad picture of the EU because they have only learnt about the disadvantages and don't know about the profits from the EU, such as the increase of the welfare across the whole EU which leads to more welfare for all."

Participant 2 (EI 1): The EU doesn't shout from the rooftops about what it has done and what it gives people. So, lots of people are sitting there and going "What has the EU ever done for me?" not realising that the EU had done a hell of a lot for them. I don't think these projects if they were publicised would help people understand how the money got there. But at least they would be able to say "Oh, well, the EU built that Luas or that tram paid, or built that bridge, paid for that festival and did this and did that". And then people would actually going to see, they would know that they were looking at tangible results of the EU policy. Whereas I think that at the minutes they are seeing tangible results of the EU policy, but they are not realising it is coming from the EU.

Participants discussed three different problems in communication: 1) the lack of information for potential applicants, 2) insufficient reporting from the media, and 3) the lack of publicity, such as campaigns, signs and posters.

The lack of publicity was by far the most referenced theme in the discussions, as it appeared in all the case study regions. Except for the West region in Romania, where participants were more concerned about media reporting and the lack of information for potential beneficiaries, publicity was identified as the *main* problem in the communication of Cohesion policy in all the other regions. The lack of publicity was problematized as insufficient efforts from authorities and recipients to promote the projects or acknowledge the funding as well as a difficulty to access information, for example:

Participant 1 (CY 3): "Personally, I would like to have more information on the workings of the EU. Perhaps it is partly my fault because I have not sought out this information. As a citizen I would like to see more information readily available."

Participant 2 (CY 3): "You can go on the webpage of the EU and you can ask to receive in your email inbox a whole series of news bulletins. But one has to look for this service, something that requires time, away from daily drudgery."

Participant 3 (RO 2): "And the organizations that are in charge with disseminating information, they should do it [promotion] more aggressively, in the good sense of the word. To participate to festivals, for example to the events in the city centre where many people participate, or to business events. They should come with leaflets, and they should be available to answer

questions. They should be more visible. They are waiting for people to come to them, but they're not doing much."

The need to provide more information on funding opportunities was mentioned in Andalusia, Baden-Württemberg, Central Macedonia, Cyprus, Flevoland, Pomorskie, Podkarpackie, West region (Slovenia) and West region (Romania), for example:

Participant 2 (CY 2): "I do not even know where to go to find out what sort of programs and funds are potentially available. I know that the EU is quite open about these things, but it is still a lot work to actually get hold of the information required. There is nowhere you can go to get a clear idea of what corresponds to your specific interests: where I can say that I am a musician and be told that this relates to musicians; that I am a bricklayer and be told that this has to do with bricklayers."

When the media was mentioned as a problem of communication, participants mostly spoke about the lack of interest from the media to report on regional development (Andalusia, Baden-Württemberg, Castile and Leon). Consequently, some participants felt there was a need for creating a European media space, where European news and stories could be divulged (Flevoland, Lombardy, Southern and Eastern region in Ireland, West region (Slovenia), and Western Transdanubia), for example:

Participants 4 (SI 2): "If there is no media that generates public opinion in order to spread this information, then this [European] cooperation is more difficult."

Participant 2 (NL 2): "A European broadcast-station that you also make European projects visible, like what video is being made here or what concerts are being done there, that's starting a bit, but that has really been very minimal. It was mainly about the economy."

Participants 7 (HU 1): "People get their information from the media and if no European media channel exists that speaks the language of a country, then..."

Participant 1 (HU 1): "A European news programme should be made mandatory in national channels."

In some regions, participants spoke about media biases, such as a media emphasis on negative stories (West region in Slovenia), media's political biases (Podkarpackie and Western Transdanubia), and a media anti-EU bias (North East England), for example:

Participant 3 (SI 3): "It's a kind of media sabotage. Media report much more about failed projects – blaming of course government – than about successful projects. And then, when you hear European funds you get nervous breakdown, because you are sure that something will go wrong again."

Participant 1 (HU 1): "Most media are held in the same hand. Whatever you read or listen or watch, there is one news only. They report about the same project launch, laying the foundation stone three times, but they don't report about the metro 4 is being examined."

Participant 6 (PL 2): "All our media cover EU funds, maybe too little, though, sometimes it is politically biased, depends on what you listen to, but they do report it."

Participant 1 (UK 5): "I think another thing is you are right there when you say we have a xenophobic media, I think what we have is a very negative media all around. If they're not attacking Europe, they're attacking the government, they're attacking the councils. There has to be somebody we can identify to say you are to blame. [...] More often than not the people that are blamed are the people we are not closest too and that ends up being Europe again."

Finally, in the West region of Romania, participants thought there was an over-emphasis on information provision through traditional media, such as printed newspapers, whereas citizens today get most of their information from digital media and social networks. Moreover, as noted earlier, social media was only mentioned by one participant from Scotland (UK) as a source of EU project awareness.

Mismanagement

The second most discussed challenge for the positive impact of Cohesion policy was mismanagement of projects and programmes. This topic was discussed in 33 focus groups across all regions except for Baden-Württemberg. Participants spoke about the mismanagement of programmes and projects by the national and/or local government in relation to strategic and operational quality and implementation. This included inefficient and nonstrategic use of funds, the implementation of unsustainable projects, rent-seeking behaviour, inadequate financial (cost overruns) and time planning (project delays) for the realisation of projects, and noncompliance with rules, which result in sanctions. These are some examples of the specific issues covered in the theme:

Project sustainability:

Participant 2 (UK 1): *"I know of a project I worked in with ESF money... (speech inaudible) converted into small business units. It's now boarded off and the council had to sell it... ESF money ran out. It wasn't viable."*

Participant 6 (PL 4): *"The thing with the swimming pool is that since we have it, it only generates costs for us because of the heating, cleaning, chemicals, sanitary inspections, and, I'm sorry to say, bacterial incidents, when then the swimming pool has to be shut down, 30 tons of water has to be poured down the canal and new water has to be provided, and it all costs."*

Project selection:

Participant 1 (PL 6): *"I think that some of these investments are badly chosen – money could have been spent on other things that would more encourage people to be active, to act, and not on such stationary things such as those outdoor fitness places. Of course, it's nice to have such amenities, but there is no assistance, no giving a fishing rod, so to speak, to people who would like to do something. Often, vocational training programmes are typically addressed to people who want to go abroad. They are not designed for the needs of the labour market in [the region of] Podkarpackie, or Poland, but for the labour market abroad. So, here, I think they could stand back and reflect a little, and give people a rod, not a fish, right?"*

Quality of management:

Participant 1 (EL 2): *"Don't they mention lots of times, that not all the funds could be absorbed..."*

Participant 2 (EL 2): *"Let's put it this way, it is not the European Union's fault, the question is where the money goes."*

Participant 2 (EL 2): *"There should be some support...To monitor if the works can be implemented."*

Moderator: *"So, you believe the issue at stake is the mismanagement of the Cohesion policy funds?"*

Participant 2 (EL 2): *"From the Greek side!"*

Participant 1 (EL 2): *"I believe that it is us here [in Greece] that are doing something wrong."*

Participant 3 (CY 4): *"Yes. The contribution [of Cohesion policy] is very positive, but it is not handled properly by the Cypriots."*

Project delays:

Participant 3 (EL 1): *"Take a random project for example. For example, a road network. I imagine that in any other European country, things would be different. From the way the project would proceed, from the time of delivery, from the money allocated, something similar abroad – I imagine – would be, from the perspective of costs or the delivery date – that would be defined or predetermined. This does not happen in Greece. The cost would be much bigger than initially planned, and the delivery date much later than the one foreseen. That is why I claim that we function differently."*

Accountability

As a well-represented type of mismanagement or governance challenge across the focus groups, we classified accountability as a separate theme. The theme consists of mismanagement where there is inexistent and/or insufficient monitoring of funds. It includes political credit claiming behaviour over the benefits generated by EU funds and scapegoating behaviour of the EU for failed projects or other problems. It includes references to practices that are not transparent. The theme was discussed in 24 focus groups in all case study regions except Flevoland and Baden-Württemberg. It was extensively discussed in the West region of Romania as shown in this example:

Participant 3 (RO 1): *"I believe all of them [national government, regional and local authorities and the European Union] contribute [to the implementation of Cohesion policy]."*

Participant 2 (RO 1): *"No, I think the government doesn't contribute."*

Participant 3 (RO 1) *"The government contributes the least among these. But the Union deserves the most [credit]."*

Participant 2 (RO 1): *"The government doesn't do things in the timeline, and they don't respect their agreements."*

Participant 5 (RO 1): *"That's also why they lose a lot."*

Participant 2 (RO 1): *"You can't congratulate neither the local nor regional authorities, because there are many projects that become useless. They are the ones on the ground responsible for monitoring the implementation of the project, but they don't do it often enough. There is, however, from my point of view, a problem at the European Union level [...]. The problem is the EU cannot connect through direct channels with the average citizen in the member states. A simple citizen can't really contact the European authorities."*

Utility of projects and programmes

The utility theme includes participants' perception that basic needs are not being addressed by the projects and programmes and that the funds are spent on 'vanity projects' that do not contribute to solving real needs in society. The theme was discussed in 23 focus groups in all case study regions except Andalusia, Lombardy and the West region of Romania. Extensive discussion of the theme occurred in Western Transdanubia, where participants in both groups mentioned the construction of lookout towers – a project they considered to be without value. This is the example of a discussion in Western Transdanubia:

Participant 7 (HU 1): *"I heard a case, 10 lookout towers have been built in a boring village that has no attractions at all."*

Participant 1 (HU 1): *"A cycle road has been built and they built the bridge 200 meters away from it."*

Participant 5 (HU 1): *"In the country, I see many meaningless lookout towers."*

Participant 7 (HU 1): *"The education, the health system does not get any support. I just read a report about disabled people who worked for 700 HUF per hour and this was reduced to 200 HUF, and they even have been obliged to pay for the food they got. This is a catastrophe. Education is bankrupt. They are not interested in raising clever people who think, because they just pose problems for them."*

Fraud and corruption

Fraud and corruption refers to the misappropriation of funds for personal gains, such as personal wealth creation, nepotism, political involvement and examples of pork-barrel. It was discussed in 22 focus groups across all case study regions except in Baden-Württemberg and Flevoland. Extensive discussion on the theme took place in the West regions or Romania and Slovenia, and Western Transdanubia. The following is an example from Western Transdanubia, where participants suggested that politics is involved in the allocation of funding:

Participant 1 (HU 1): *"In some cases, the beneficiary [of the project] didn't even apply."*

Participant 7 (HU 1): *"Politics."*

Participant 1 (HU 1): *"Good luck for certain."*

Participant 6 (HU 1): *"By chance they won [a project]."*

Participant 1 (HU 1): *"The wind brought the letter into the mailbox."*

Participants spoke of 'pork barrel politics' in this way for example:

Participant 3 (EL 4): *"And a lot of government ministers were, as far as I could see, were able to use those funds to under their own area [...]. I come from county Meath and down around Trim, a former government minister, just fantastic roads leading into quite small towns and there were bid by Cohesion funds and they could have been used. So, maybe the EU didn't control the spending and see that they would be spent a little bit better rather than get more votes for the particular government minister."*

Participants would point out corruption in their own countries as well as in other member states. This was for example the case in North East England. In Flevoland on the other hand, participants thought corruption happened in other countries. These are two examples

Participant 4 (UK 6): *"I was on holiday in Sicily and we passed this road in the middle of a field not attached to anything 20+ feet up and the chap said well yes that is the local mafia and they managed to persuade the local authority to pay for this road and it probably was EU funded, but the EU didn't see that coming. It is just that people are playing the system."*

Participant 5 (NL 3): *"The poor European countries, where corruption is everywhere... How can you justify that there is also a good supervisor or whatever, so that our money is spent well and does not disappear from "oh, then we'll do that "or" that's my bridge "?"*

The theme was not always discussed in negative terms. EU-funds are in some cases seen as better-managed funds, where there is more oversight compared with other programs, for example:

Participant 5 (ES 1): *"There is probably less corruption in these projects than those funded by Spain."*

Bureaucracy

The bureaucracy theme refers to the existence of excessive and overly complex rules and procedures that discourage potential applicants from seeking funding or prevent the successful completion of projects. It was discussed in 20 focus groups across all regions except Cyprus,

Limburg and Western Transdanubia. It was an important discussion theme in the West region of Slovenia. These are some examples that build the narrative:

Participant 1 (SI 1): *"You need a lot of resources to apply for a project."*

Participant 3 (SI 1): *"And sometimes you pay or invest too much."*

Participant 1 (SI 1): *"I personally was preparing and applying for a project, but I must say that it took a lot of time. [...]"*

Participant 4 (SI 1): *"Project preparation takes a lot of time, money and knowledge."*

Participant 5 (SI 1): *"And the reason for complexity of our projects is not our stupidity, but we invented such control mechanisms that nobody knows them. Well, I'm not talking technically, I'm not talking about content I'm talking about paperwork. We bureaucratized the matter to the end, to the end."*

Participant 1 (NL 1): *"I also know that those who carried out the project were under heavy administrative burdens. And that's a pity because a lot of money is actually not spent on the actual work, but on administration."*

Participant 2 (IT 3): *"They [acquaintances professionally involved with EU funds] perceive the impact of Cohesion policy on economic development to be negligible: the administrative structure needed for this program has huge costs which are not justified by its outcome."*

Participant 7 (RO 2): *"There are many projects that did not get finalized, so they did not get the funds, because of the bureaucratic system that exists."*

Absorption

Absorption challenges refer to the participants' discussions about the inability of national authorities to fully spend programme allocations in a timely manner. It was discussed in 15 focus groups in half of all the case study regions, most extensively in the West region of Romania, for example:

Participant 7 (RO 2): *"In my opinion, too little money is accessed and used. On the one hand, it's unbelievable. So, they give you so much money, and then we hear they had to return it, because they didn't do it in time, the projects did not correspond to what they were intended for, and so on. [...]"*

Participant 9 (RO 2): *"[Fund have been accessed] in a small proportion."*

Participant 2 (RO 2): *"Probably just a fraction from what could be accessed."*

Participant 7 (RO 2): *"In our region, compared to other regions in the country, I think many more funds have been accessed, as much as it was possible given these aspects we just mentioned. Because if we compare to countries, regions in the country, Valea Jiului, Vaslui, this area in Moldova, and the East, Galati, Braila, even the South region, including even Hunedoara, Mehedinti... So, compared to these, yes. Cluj, Timisoara, Bucharest, Constanta, Brasov, Sibiu, Iasi, Oradea, yes. But the rest no."*

Administrative capacity

Administrative capacity refers to issues related to the bad governance of EU funds at the level of national authorities. It also includes the belief of participants that the success of projects depends on administrative capacity. It was discussed in 12 focus groups in six case study regions, with minimal difference in the attention paid to the theme. This is an illustrative example from a Polish group:

Participant 3 (PL 5): *"I have friends in the town hall, I have heard that some project has slipped through our fingers, we forgot to do something and the deadline has been missed. And this happens very often; they get some documents, put them aside or put them away, the documents are buried somewhere in a file, the deadline is coming or passing, and only then will we remember about them. It just happens. Are we going to do anything?"*

Partnership and citizens engagement

Partnership refers to problems related to the insufficient involvement of stakeholders in the planning of the programmes and projects. It includes the perception that citizens are insufficiently interested in Cohesion policy or policies in general. The theme was discussed in 11 focus groups in eight regions, extensively in Pomorskie, the West region of Romania and Baden-Württemberg:

Participant 1 (RO 1): *"In my opinion, when I talk to my friends, they are very poorly informed. Not because they don't have access, but because they are not interested. If I take ten friends of mine, maybe two of them know what a European project is, what the EU is. If I ask them what the European Commission is, they don't know. They know we are in the EU, that we can travel abroad, and that's about it."*

Brain drain and foreign benefits

Foreign benefits were discussed in 5 focus groups in Central Macedonia, Pomorskie, Podkarpackie and West (Slovenia). The theme covers participants' references to EU funds being spent in the country, while the benefits go to foreign firms and other Member States e.g. the participation of foreign firms in calls because of public procurement rules and the provision of training for workers that end up seeking employment opportunities abroad. Compared to other regions, it was extensively mentioned in the Polish regions, for example in this exchange of opinions:

Participant 1 (PL 5): *"Most of the investments implemented in Poland were done by firms from the 'old' EU, and so the bulk of the funds which were invested went as profit back to Germany, France, United Kingdom."*

Participant 3 (PL 5): *"We cannot think like that, this is wrong thinking."*

Participant 1 (PL 5): *"It's not about thinking, I'm only saying what happened because this is what actually happened."*

Participant 3 (PL 5): *"But the benefits in the form of roads, buildings, various things, remain here."*

Centralised management

Centralised management of the programmes and projects refers to management that is perceived to be too distant from the implementation on the ground. It was discussed in 4 focus groups in Scotland, West (Romania), West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia. However, only in Scotland was it mentioned extensively:

Participant 2 (UK 3): *"Every country will have its own quirks so how can a centralised body understand that. You would have to have regional, subregional and local EU representatives and money coming down to understand the problem of communities."*

Participant 6 (UK 3): *"That should be the solution rather than a centralised body. There should be a lot more connection with the community. I feel like at the minute it seems like the EU come in from nowhere build it and leave again. There should be communication with the community. But the issue is that its not the EU responsibility to do that. The fact that the communities of the UK are falling apart is not the fault of the EU it is down to the government."*

Table 6: Cohesion policy challenges by importance and region

Challenge	Case study regions
Communication	Andalusia, Baden-Württemberg, Central Macedonia, Castile and Leon, Cyprus, Flevoland, Limburg, Lombardy, North East England, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, Scotland, West (Romania), West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia
Mismanagement	Andalusia, Central Macedonia, Castile and Leon, Cyprus, Flevoland, Limburg, Lombardy, North East England, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, Scotland, West (Romania), West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia
Accountability	Andalusia, Central Macedonia, Castile and Leon, Cyprus, Limburg, Lombardy, North East England, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, Scotland, West (Romania), West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia
Project utility	Baden-Württemberg, Central Macedonia, Castile and Leon, Cyprus, Flevoland, Limburg, North East England, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, Scotland, West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia
Fraud and corruption	Andalusia, Central Macedonia, Castile and Leon, Cyprus, Limburg, Lombardy, North East England, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, Scotland, West (Romania), West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia
Bureaucracy	Andalusia, Baden-Württemberg, Central Macedonia, Castile and Leon, Flevoland, Lombardy, North East England, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, Scotland, West (Romania), West (Slovenia)
Absorption	Central Macedonia, Flevoland, Lombardy, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, West (Romania), West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia
Administrative capacity	Lombardy, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, West (Romania), West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia
Partnership	Baden-Württemberg, Cyprus, Flevoland, Podkarpackie, Pomorskie, West (Romania), West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia
Foreign profits	Central Macedonia, Pomorskie, Podkarpackie, West (Slovenia)
Centralised management	Scotland, West (Romania), West (Slovenia), Western Transdanubia

5. Cohesion policy and European identity

A key question for this study is whether Cohesion policy contributes to European identity. To address this question, we asked the participants about the notion of European identity and whether they believed Cohesion policy could contribute to their or other citizens' identification with the EU. In this section, we present how participants constructed the potential contribution of Cohesion policy to enhancing notions of European identity.

The common view expressed in the discussions in all focus groups was a rather negative stance about the potential of EU Cohesion policy to contribute to citizens' sense of European identity. Only a minority of participants believed that Cohesion policy can play a role in promoting European identity. The rationales and impediments underpinning the view that Cohesion policy cannot lead towards European identity were varied, but the bottom line was that Cohesion policy has limited potential to enhance a greater sense of Europeaness.

A first line of argumentation disputing the contribution of Cohesion policy project to the sense of European identity was the view that Cohesion policy projects did not carry a message for transferring a positive image. Participants held this view despite their appreciation of the benefits of the projects. In other words, participants expressed their understanding and awareness of the projects implemented through Cohesion policy but they disputed the ability of materialistic benefits to affect them at a deeper attitudinal and emotive level with respect to their identity. This type of argument was present among almost all focus groups echoing the phrase "money doesn't buy love". Some typical extracts can be seen below:

Participant 3 (CY 4): *"I don't think because the EU does some things like infrastructure, that this makes me automatically feel more European."*

Participant 1 (IE 1): *"I don't really know how demonstrating the effects of EU membership or EU funding in infrastructure here would generate identity"*.

Participant 4 (NL 4): *"No, I think as an organization - in my view, and for quite a lot of people - is fairly far away. It's beautiful if they do a project in your backyard, that is nice. If there's a flag on a folder, I do not immediately think of European identity."*

Participant 2 (EL 2): *"I don't think that they feel more European in this way. They just see the EU as a source of money that gives them some support. There is no European message."*

Participant 6 (SI 2): *"Money itself cannot work as an identity factor. Money is a very alienated concept."*

A similar line of argumentation that disputed the potential of EU funds to contribute to the notion of European identity was informed by deeper ideological underpinnings mostly in relation to the dominance of national identities and differences. To illustrate these arguments, we provide below some indicative extracts from the focus groups discussions:

Participant 2 (It 1): *"EU funds do not make any contribution to EU identity. In this sense, a problem derives also from the enlargement of the EU. You feel close to an institution if it is similar to you. If the institution is embracing too many cultures, languages and values, how can you feel part of it? In my opinion, for instance, the enlargement to Turkey is a big mistake, because it is likely to weaken the identification of EU citizens to the EU."*

Participant 1 (DE 1): *"I think that this is a matter of latent identity that is mediated somehow about the national state and that the structural policy that is targeted to the regional level has not the means to be able to prove concretely the performances that make somehow the difference. This kind of thinking is not realistic."*

Participant 4 (PL 5): "No, it can't. At least I don't think so. I don't think it affects in any way your feeling [to be] more European, that you're an EU member, especially because people know – because they travel a lot and work abroad – people know how huge the gap in the earnings is and that we don't have equal chances, we cannot afford to do what our neighbours across the River Oder can afford to do. People are grateful, for sure, for all the infrastructure, but certainly they don't feel equal."

Participant 1 (PL 6): "Well, I don't know if they can improve their image with the Polish people because, as a nation, we are contrary, wilful. The more the EU interferes in what they give us money for, the more Poles are contrary. And they either should not give money at all and simply close the subject, as we are the EU, but this is all, well, some things are interfering in Poles' national identity and it shouldn't be like this, in my opinion. As goes for the [EU] funds, well I am not quite convinced if we do not put in more than we get from the EU. What is more, we get such funds for specific things, while we could have things done differently, right? And we could buy ourselves other things for such money than for the money that is put into such investment, being an EU member."

What is noticeable from these excerpts is that participants evaluate the received funds and projects through a national lens. More specifically, they construct national differences and cultures as latent yet dominant factors, which pose difficulties for citizens' understanding of the potential of the EU to influence their identities. National differences are represented in terms of culture and values or power and inequality among the various member states. These are portrayed as inherent problems which cannot be addressed by the benefits of EU funding. In reality, such arguments echo a rather old yet constant discussion regarding the dominance of national identity over European identity tackling wider political debates in Europe. While in some cases participants attempt to disavow themselves personally from such views, they still construct them as important barriers to achieve a greater sense of Europeaness.

The third line of argumentation put forward that undermines the potential of Cohesion policy to contribute to a sense of European identity is even more negative. Despite the fact that this argumentation is less frequent among the focus groups, it is rather strong as it disputes the utility of EU funds for member states. More specifically, participants employing this argumentation construct the EU's financial contribution to the member states and regions as a mechanism of control and power. A hierarchical relationship between member states and the EU is constructed, in which Cohesion policy funds are portrayed as a mechanism used by EU institutions to exercise authority over the recipient member states and regions. In this way and due to the asymmetric nature of this power relation in favour of the EU, the funds and their potential benefits are not seen as a channel through which the beneficiaries can derive positive representations of the EU that can contribute positively to their feeling of being European. Instead, EU funds are represented as a 'stick' for member states to conform with EU rules. This is evaluated, as expected, negatively by the participants, for example:

Participant 1 (NL 2): "No. No. Because it is used a bit like a weapon that once a particular country does not agree, it is immediately threatened to stop that entire subsidy."

Participant 2 (NL 2): "Yes, but do citizens really have to do with that? There are more countries, governments, who experience it as weapons."

Participant 7 (PL 4): "I think the European Union is something that, in a sense, subdues its members. Not necessarily by force, by military force, but by, say, EU grants, financing, various other means, in my view at least."

A similar line of reasoning for the limited potential of Cohesion policy to enhance the notion of European identity relates to discussions about the rationale of the policy and redistributive politics. We consider this reasoning to be part of the third line of argumentation presented previously which

advances the notion of power and politics as a central barrier for achieving a deeper sense of Europeaness. While many participants appreciate the value of EU funds, this is not a generalised feeling for all citizens and this is attributed mostly to politics both at the national and European level. Politicians for their own interests seem to blur with their actions the respective rationale and potential of the opportunities presented by the Cohesion policy funds so citizens become unable to understand the overall project. This way citizens are presented as being victims of national and European politics. This is particularly evident in the way certain governments deal with the politics involved in the distribution of funds. Certainly, this notion is close to what is known as the issue of conditionality that explains the conditions attached to various member states that need to fulfil the prescribed criteria in order to receive the financial contribution by the EU. In relation to this, a specific reference was made by participants to the governments of Hungary and Poland, as characteristic cases with a Eurosceptic position. So, in this set of arguments, the potential of the funding mechanism is recognised as positive yet the implementation seems to be problematic due to the political manoeuvres around it, for example:

Participant 2 (SI 1): *"I do not think so. People see this as a financial operation in which they do not participate, they may even be unprivileged, without knowing... Yes, I think that is the case."*

Participant 3 (DE 3): *"I am not quite sure. Surely, money makes a difference. But, finally, we see in the behaviour of certain governments, for example Hungary and Poland, that the funding of projects in these countries does not lead to a greater identification of the government with the idea of the EU, but it turns out that the governments often express themselves in a contrary way [to its citizens]."*

Participant 2 (RO 2): *"So, the cohesion problem we discuss here and the removal of these disparities appears also at that high level of politics, not only at our level."*

As mentioned previously the participants in almost all focus groups dispute the potential of Cohesion funds to contribute to the European identity yet there are a few instances in which a more positive view is also expressed. In fact, this view does not provide a totally different picture since it maintains the difficulty for acquiring European identity through the Cohesion policy funds. However in this view, European identity is perceived to be blocked due to some strong structures that are either related to classic social cleavages or personal tastes. By classic social cleavages, we refer to social class, which in the view of participants imposes a certain way of thinking. Social class therefore guides the way social dynamics such as European identity are interpreted. When this way of thinking was present, participants linked attitudes and identification with the EU with the belonging to the middle class and being capable of evaluating positively EU Cohesion policy funds and projects. These are some examples:

Participant 4 (UK 3): *"When I came back to Britain, I couldn't understand the class system that everybody is stuck in. I was shocked by it. People's attitudes are completely shaped by it and how could the EU fix that. There is such a problem in this country with behaviour and attitudes and belief in yourself. What funding stream is going to fix that?"*

Participant 1 (NL 2): *"I have such a suspicion the kind of things they [referring to Cohesion policy projects] do, such as the museum of antiquity somewhere in Spain and the nature park shown in the video, and similar things, are aimed at the people who are probably already EU fans. This is a kind of middle-class idea that you like the EU, and that's all the people who have hobbies and who like the EU. I do not think that Johnny or a Tokkie [lower class stereotypes] will soon be in a nature park [laughing] and that's probably, yes, more people who are somewhat already convinced [about the positive benefits of the EU]."*

In a similarly deterministic way, another structural problem mentioned by participants is individual differences in preferences and beliefs that are not particularly related to nationalism or other known

sources of tension regarding the EU identity. Instead, participants expressed their conviction that despite the benefits derived from the implementation of Cohesion policy, there will always be citizens that will not understand or appreciate them because this is a matter of taste or personality. This argument is interpreted as an effort by the participants to undermine the negative views against the EU funded projects by citizens since this is an inherent behaviour of human nature. For example:

Participant 4 (NL 2): *"Yes, well, the points have already been mentioned, but I think people are happy with projects from Europe, and they may be proud of living in Europe, but there are of course people who are always against it."*

Participant 2 (NL 2): *"Yes, but that is the one who thinks things are very beautiful, the other who finds things waste of money, but it both affects one, so I guess it's sure to have an effect. Good or bad. That's the person himself."*

A minority of participants expressed the view that Cohesion policy can contribute to a European identity. As already mentioned above, most of the participants felt that the material benefits of Cohesion policy (e.g. the improvement of the quality of life and economic development) are intrinsically inadequate for encouraging a European identity. On the other hand, a minority of participants recognised that material benefits can play a role in establishing a European identity. However, the material benefits can cultivate positive as well as negative feelings and identification, for example:

Participant 3 (HU 1): *"What comes to my mind is that these billboards may be counterproductive, because it's not good to face the fact that we have to be supported. It does not add a positive sense of Europeanness."*

Participant 3 (CY 4): *"You feel better when you know that the EU fixes your roads or gives money to make your town better."*

To summarise, the material benefits of Cohesion policy are likely to be insufficient for the promotion of a European identity. Yet, in some cases they can play a positive role. The discovery of conflicting mechanisms underlies the complexity of European identity as a social phenomenon.

Finally, a minority of participants talked about the solidarity dimension of Cohesion policy and positive feelings associated with knowing that the EU is contributing to improving citizens' daily lives, for example:

Participant 6 (PL 2): *"Do I feel a stronger bond with the people I know in the West because the EU funds come to Poland? I'd say so, because there's an obligation of sorts, that we're taking money now, but at some stage we will also have to give money. At least I'm sure such a time will come and, therefore, I feel more connected with the people who are now helping us. Before, you had nothing of the kind. Every financial flow binds people together, because it is a bond that is forged between the giver and the recipient. The money doesn't come from nowhere. It is generated somewhere by someone, there's an element of a bond, and one should realise that."*

6. A comparison of citizen narratives and media frames

Prior to the focus groups, a media framing analysis of national and regional media sources was carried out in the COHESIFY project.⁴ This allows us to compare the citizens' narratives discerned from the focus groups with those that emerged from the media framing analysis. This is a relevant comparison, since the focus groups results show that media are alongside signs an important source of awareness of Cohesion policy. Moreover, engagement with the media has long been recognised in EU regulations and guidance on publicity and information as a core mechanism to raise awareness among the public. A comparison between the two analyses confirms that citizen narratives on Cohesion policy are similar to the media frames.

In the focus groups analysis, we identified eight different themes of projects awareness. Seven of these fall under the two most dominant frames identified in the media framing analysis: "economic consequences" and "quality of life".⁵ The "quality of life" frame points out the positive consequences of EU Cohesion policy in citizens' lives, by focusing on the implementation of a number of infrastructure projects, by supporting vulnerable groups through specific policies, and by supporting public services. Infrastructure is one of the most discussed topics both by the media and by the focus group participants.⁶ The "economic consequences" frame denotes the positive consequences of Cohesion policy in revitalizing economic activity. In addition, both the media analysis and focus groups, found references to cultural projects.

Table 7: Correspondence of focus group project themes with media frames

Focus group project themes	Media frames
Road infrastructure	Quality of life (frame 2) Infrastructure (sub frame 2.4)
Human resources development and social inclusion of disadvantaged groups	Economic consequences (frame 1) Job creation (sub frame 1.1) Quality of life (frame 2) Social justice (sub frame 2.2)
Sustainable development	Quality of life (frame 2) Environment (2.1)
Public transport and other forms of sustainable transport	Quality of life (frame 2) Infrastructure (sub frame 2.1)
Culture	Culture (3)
Urban regeneration	Quality of life (frame 2) Infrastructure (sub frame 2.4)
Business support: small and large businesses	Economic consequences (frame 1) Development (sub frame 1.2)
Research and innovation	Economic consequences (frame 1) Research and innovation (sub frame 1.3)

The media framing analysis found news references to "power" (frame 5) defined as political actors seeking to increase their power and influence on the EU decision-making process.⁷ This frame is

⁴ Triga, V. and K. Vadratsikas (2018) Framing of Cohesion Policy. COHESIFY Research Paper 9. Available at: http://www.cohesify.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Cohesify_ResearchPaper9_Framing1.pdf#zoom=100 (25 April 2018).

⁵ Triga and Vadratsikas, p. 19.

⁶ Triga and Vadratsikas, p. 20.

⁷ Triga and Vadratsikas, p. 14.

mirrored in the citizens' discussions. In fact, when the focus group participants were asked to discuss the allocation mechanisms of Cohesion policy, some of them spoke about political actors influencing the distribution of Cohesion policy funds between member states and locally. However, in both the media (especially in local and national sources) and citizen focus group analysis, this topic was not a dominant one.

The comparison between the focus group and media framing analysis shows one difference in the results. While focus group participants discussed more frequently the challenges of Cohesion policy as opposed to its achievement, which indicates a negative representation of Cohesion policy, most of the media frames provide a positive view of Cohesion policy. Nonetheless, the type of achievements or positive frames and the type challenges or negative frames of Cohesion policy are very similar between the two analyses. For example, participants spoke about improved infrastructure, the quality of life, economic opportunities, which can all be identified in the media frames of "quality of life" and "economic consequences".

Table 8: Correspondence of focus group challenges with media frames

Focus group challenges narrative	Media frames
Communication	Incompetence of local government (frame 4) Failure to inform the public (sub frame 4.4)
Mismanagement	Incompetence of local government (frame 4) Mismanagement of funds (sub frame 4.1)
Accountability	Incompetence of local government (frame 4) Mismanagement of funds (sub frame 4.1)
Project utility	Incompetence of local government (frame 4) Mismanagement of funds (sub frame 4.1)
Fraud and corruption	Fund abuse (frame 8)
Bureaucracy	Incompetence of local government (frame 4) Bureaucracy (sub frame 4.3)
Absorption	Incompetence of local government (frame 4) Mismanagement of funds (sub frame 4.1)
Administrative capacity	Incompetence of local government (frame 4) Mismanagement of funds (sub frame 4.1)
Partnership	Cohesion (frame 7) Civic participation (sub frame 7.1)
Foreign profits	National interest (frame 6), but the valance to the topics are different between the focus groups narratives and the media frame.
Centralised management	Incompetence of local government (frame 4) Mismanagement of funds (sub frame 4.1)

In addition, focus groups participants discussed the challenges of Cohesion policy, such as mismanagement of projects and programmes, weak accountability and bureaucracy, which were also identified in the media discourses (Table 8). Both analyses also identified communication as an area of citizens' concerns and a media topic. However, there are two differences. First, while the media discusses communication as a lack of awareness of the public and potential applicants regarding Cohesion policy funding opportunities and procedures, the participants in our focus groups add that it is the media itself that does not provide information to the public. Second, while the media discusses brain drain positively (i.e. Cohesion policy stops brain drain), focus groups participants had the opposite impression (i.e. Cohesion policy provides training for youngsters, which then leave the country or region).

The final observation we can make by comparing the media discourse with citizens' narratives is that Cohesion policy has for now had a limited impact on European identity. The media framing analysis has in fact shown that only a small minority of article conveys the positive message on Cohesion policy from a European perspective, thus, limiting the media's impact on European identity. The focus groups analysis supports this finding, since most of the participants did not feel that Cohesion policy projects contribute to their sense of Europeanness. What is telling is that citizens perceive the media as part of the European identity challenge.

7. Conclusion

This research paper has investigated citizen perceptions of EU Cohesion policy and their European identity through a focus group methodology. The sample included 47 focus groups with 240 citizens in 16 EU regions (across 12 Member States), conducted by the COHESIFY project consortium. The use of focus group allowed us to explore in depth and interpret issues that emerged as crucial from other studies of the project, such as the citizens' survey and the media analysis. While the results of this analysis cannot be generalised, they nevertheless provide us with an interpretative quality that serves for understanding the variety of meanings attributed by EU citizens to a list of important issues that were discussed in the focus groups.

The main conclusion is that the citizens of the EU have an implicit and cursory knowledge of Cohesion policy. Citizens recognise the importance of Cohesion policy for addressing regional disparities and improving the quality of life, but feel they are inadequately informed. Citizens want to have more say on how funds are allocated or governed in their area and expect the responsible authorities to improve their communication on Cohesion policy. Only a minority of participants considered that Cohesion policy has had a direct impact on their feeling of European identity, although many positive views were expressed about the impact of Cohesion policy on their region or city's development.

Knowledge of Cohesion policy and EU Funds:

- Most of the participants did not have an in-depth knowledge of Cohesion policy, but could discuss EU funded projects.
- When knowledge was present, participants associated the rationale for Cohesion policy with development and convergence. A small minority of participants understood Cohesion policy to be a means of cooperating and creating unity among Europeans.
- The individual funds were not well recognized and well-known among the participants. When there was awareness, the European Social Fund appeared to be the most recognized based on the number of times it was mentioned.
- Participants viewed the allocation of funds from an efficiency and equity perspective.

Awareness of EU-funded projects:

- Participants identified projects in 8 thematic areas of funding. Infrastructure projects, followed by investments in human capital, were the most recognized.
- While participants in the Polish case studies had above average knowledge of EU-funded projects and those of Baden-Wurttemberg below-average knowledge of EU-funded projects, awareness of EU-funded projects did not vary among the participants in other case study regions. Participants in the Dutch case study regions could name projects, but were uncertain of the source of funding.
- Participants become aware of EU-funded projects through different means of communication. However, signs, such as flags and posters, are the dominant source of awareness across all the studied regions.

The impact of Cohesion policy:

- Participants spent more time discussing the challenges of Cohesion policy than its achievements.

- The added value of EU funds, broadly defined, was the most referenced positive impact. In line with participants' awareness of projects, many of the positive impacts were associated with improved infrastructure.
- Participants identified eleven negative challenges. The lack of communication and the mismanagement of projects were the most discussed topics.

European identity:

- The common view expressed in the discussions in all focus groups was that Cohesion policy has limited potential for promoting European identity. The following four narratives in the citizens' discussions support this finding:
- Citizens do not think that the materialistic benefits of Cohesion policy affect them at a deeper attitudinal and emotive level with respect to their identity.
- Citizens think of their European identity from a national point of view.
- Citizens perceive the EU's financial contribution to the member states and regions as a mechanism of control and power.
- Some citizens perceive the EU and Cohesion policy as a project for the middle class and devoid of impact for the poorest and neediest strata of society.
- In the view of a minority of participants, Cohesion policy can play a role in promoting European identity through its material benefits (e.g. improving the quality of life and stimulating economic growth) and when citizens understand and cherish the value of solidarity between nations.

Media frames and Citizens' narratives:

- Citizens' narratives on Cohesion policy are similar to how the media frames Cohesion policy.
- The comparison corroborates the focus groups finding that Cohesion policy can affect European identity, yet its impact is far from being realised.

Based on the focus groups analysis, our recommendations are the following:

1. Communicate

Participants identified the lack of communication – defined as the insufficient publicity of Cohesion policy – as an important problem in the implementation of Cohesion policy. People think they are inadequately informed and expect European, national and regional government authorities to step up their communication about EU policies and fulfil their obligation to inform the public. The effort to communicate Cohesion policy be reinforced. In this respect, focus groups have shown that traditional methods of communication, such as signs and traditional media are the most important sources of citizens' knowledge of Cohesion policy. On the other hand, social media were rarely mentioned. This shows the need for the professionalization of the use of social media to reach citizens.

2. Communicate solidarity

In line with the EU Treaty objective of cohesion, people recognise the importance of Cohesion Policy for convergence – narrowing differences in quality of life – and common action to address regional and local development problems. Yet, they are less familiar with the principle of solidarity in the EU, which is also frequently mentioned in the EU Treaty. An increased promotion of the principles underlying the functioning of the EU in the communication activities on Cohesion policy

can increase people's awareness of solidarity. This can further contribute to a positive sense of European identity. Hence, we recommend that the Cohesion policy messages should not be limited to its material benefits, but also to the principles and values that Cohesion policy promotes and are agreed in the EU Treaty. On the flip side, policymakers need to be mindful of citizens' negative understandings of the policy as a power and control mechanism through conditionality provisions. EU policymakers ignore this at their peril.

Annex 1: List of focus groups

Group ID	Country	Region	Location	Date	Participants N	Female N	Age range
CY1	Cyprus	Cyprus	Limassol	21/10/2017	4	2	1984-1992
CY2	Cyprus	Cyprus	Limassol	21/10/2017	3	0	1981-1989
CY3	Cyprus	Cyprus	Limassol	21/10/2017	3	0	1979-1947
CY4	Cyprus	Cyprus	Limassol	01/11/2017	4	2	1993-1996
DE1	Germany	Baden-Wurttemberg	Mannheim	27/07/2017	3	2	1990-1996
DE2	Germany	Baden-Wurttemberg	Mannheim	10/01/2018	4	0	1950-1960
DE3	Germany	Baden-Wurttemberg	Mannheim	28/02/2018	3	1	1987-1954
EL1	Greece	Central Macedonia	Thessaloniki	28/09/2017	3	1	1955-
EL2	Greece	Central Macedonia	Thessaloniki	28/09/2017	3	0	1980-1965
HU1	Hungary	Nyugat-Dunantul	Gyor	06/07/2017	8	3	1955-1995
HU2	Hungary	Nyugat-Dunantul	Szombathely	11/07/2017	8	4	1963-1994
EI1	Ireland	Southern and Eastern	Dublin	19/09/2017	4	2	1980-1992
EI2	Ireland	Southern and Eastern	Dublin	21/09/2017	4	1	1984-1992
EI3	Ireland	Southern and Eastern	Dublin	28/09/2017	4	2	1975-1980
EI4	Ireland	Southern and Eastern	Dublin	13/10/2017	5	2	1948-1965
IT1	Italy	Lombardia	Milan	26/09/2017	4	1	1995-1982
IT2	Italy	Lombardia	Milan	03/10/2017	5	1	1954-1989
IT3	Italy	Lombardia	Milan	05/10/2017	5	3	1953-1987
NL1	Netherlands	Flevoland	Lelystad	21/09/2017	5	3	1962-1950
NL2	Netherlands	Flevoland	Delft	28/09/2017	4	2	1998-1993
NL3	Netherlands	Flevoland	Almere	04/10/2017	5	4	1986-1944
NL4	Netherlands	Limburg	Delft	19/09/2017	6	3	1980-1992
NL5	Netherlands	Limburg	Maastricht	21/09/2017	3	0	1942-1993
NL6	Netherlands	Limburg	Maastricht	28/09/2017	3	1	1943-1953

PL1	Poland	Pomorskie	Slupsk	10/10/2017	5	3	1945-1974
PL2	Poland	Pomorskie	Gdansk	10/10/2017	7	4	
PL3	Poland	Pomorskie	Czluchow	10/10/2017	5	3	1940-1965
PL4	Poland	Podkarpackie	Rzeszow	29/09/2017	7	3	1957-1982
PL5	Poland	Podkarpackie	Przemysl	30/09/2017	4	2	1947-1998
PL6	Poland	Podkarpackie	Brzozow	01/10/2017	5	3	1948-1997
RO1	Romania	West	Timisoara	15/07/2017	8	4	1938-1996
RO2	Romania	West	Timisoara	15/07/2017	9	4	1938-1996
SI1	Slovenia	West	Ljubljana	25/09/2017	5	3	1963-1971
SI2	Slovenia	West	Ljubljana	26/09/2017	5	3	1952-1992
SI3	Slovenia	West	Ljubljana	27/09/2017	5	4	1962-1979
ES1	Spain	Castilla y Leon	Salamanca	23/10/2017	5	2	1975-1987
ES2	Spain	Castilla y Leon	Salamanca	24/10/2017	6	4	1995-1992
ES3	Spain	Castilla y Leon	Salamanca	10/11/2017	6	3	1951-1984
ES4	Spain	Andalusia	Seville	19/10/2017	7	4	1967-1993
ES5	Spain	Andalusia	Granada	25/10/2017	6	3	1950-1989
ES6	Spain	Andalusia	Durcal	25/10/2017	6	3	1971-1975
UK1	United Kingdom	Scotland	Glasgow	06/12/2017	4	1	1953-1960
UK2	United Kingdom	Scotland	Glasgow	14/12/2017	5	2	1975-1993
UK3	United Kingdom	Scotland	Glasgow	06/12/2017	6	4	1998-1976
UK4	United Kingdom	North East England	Newcastle	21/11/2017	7	2	1950-1987
UK5	United Kingdom	North East England	Newcastle	14/11/2017	8	2	1941-1986
UK6	United Kingdom	North East England	Newcastle	21/11/2017	6	4	1945-1975

Annex 2: Recruitment Method

Member State	Case study region	Recruitment methods						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Cyprus	Cyprus	x	x			x		
Germany	Baden-Württemberg							
Greece	Central Macedonia					x		
Hungary	Nyugat-Dunantul							x
Ireland	Southern and Eastern	x	x	x	x		x	
Italy	Lombardy	x	x			x		
Poland	Podkarpackie	x	x			x		
Poland	Pomorskie	x	x			x		
Romania	West		x	x	x		x	
Slovenia	West	x	x					
Spain	Andalucia	x						
Spain	Castilla y León	x						
Netherlands	Flevoland		x	x		x	x	
Netherlands	Limburg	x	x	x		x	x	
United Kingdom	North East England	x	x			x		
United Kingdom	Scotland	x	x			x		

Legend:

- 1- Research team's social network: The research teams had the choice to select some of the participants through their personal network. This was usually followed by snowball.
- 2- Snowball: This strategy involved recruitment through individuals who were known to the research team or through individuals who already agreed to participate in the focus groups. Individuals were asked to suggest others who would potentially be interested to participate.
- 3- COHESIFY citizens' survey: In autumn 2017, the consortium launched a citizens' survey in each of the case study regions. One of the final questions in the online survey asked the participants whether they wished to be contacted by phone for participating in focus group research.
- 4- Adds on bulletin boards or newspapers
- 5- On location: Some participants were randomly asked to participate in the focus groups a couple of days before the focus group was held.
- 6- Social media advertisement on selected Facebook groups
- 7- External recruiter via a company

Annex 3: Question protocol

a. Awareness and benefits

1. Have you heard about any EU funded projects to improve the area where you live? Can you mention any project that has been co-financed by EU funds?
2. Financing projects in your region (country) is part of what is known as Cohesion Policy or regional policy? Have you heard of this term before?
3. Do you know how funds that have been invested for actions in your region are distributed across the various regions in Europe?
4. Do you appreciate this EU contribution in your region's development?
5. Do you think that the specific projects you are aware of, funded by the EU, had any impact in your daily life? In what ways?
6. Do you think that Cohesion policy funds help our understanding of how the European system works? Is this important?
7. Do you think that other citizens in your area know about these EU-funded projects?

b. Factors shaping attitudes to the EU and identity

8. Does EU funding make citizens feel closer to the EU as an institution?
9. What would help Europeans feel closer to the EU?
10. Do you think that feeling closer to the EU makes one more European?

c. European identity

11. What is it for you to be European?
12. What unites Europeans? What unites the [e.g. Greeks (national citizenship)]?
13. Are some common characteristics between [e.g. Greeks (national citizenship)] shared also among other Europeans?
14. Are there territorial divisions within your member state?
15. What divides Europeans?
16. How would you define yourself (e.g. European, Greek, Cretan) and why?