

If President Juncker wants to use the EU budget to demonstrate 'solidarity', it is EU Cohesion Policy that makes a real difference to how citizens perceive and identify with the EU

The launch of the European Commission's proposals for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) throws a spotlight on how the EU budget should be used to maximise the added value of EU spending. In presenting the MFF proposals, President Juncker referred to the fundamental EU principle of "solidarity" and the need for spending to make "a real difference to the lives of citizens and businesses." Yet, new research indicates a potential contradiction between the MFF proposed by the Commission, and what makes a difference to citizens' perception of the EU.

On 26 April 2018, the multi-disciplinary Horizon2020 project COHESIFY presented its main research results at the European Committee of the Regions. For two years a consortium of 8 universities and 2 SMEs investigated the question of how EU citizens perceive Cohesion Policy and whether they identify themselves with the EU.

- The study found clear evidence of **the impact of Cohesion Policy on citizens' perceptions of the EU and European identity** .
- A key finding is that **Cohesion Policy improves the recognition of the advantages of the EU and EU integration** .

The key recommendations and results of the project were presented to EU policy-makers and to the Commissioners responsible for the EU budget and Cohesion Policy just in time for the finalisation of the **Multiannual Financial Framework** (MFF) which sets out the annual budget of the EU for the period 2021 – 2027 – and actually proposes major cuts to spending on Cohesion Policy after 2020.

According to **Prof. John Bachtler**, lead COHESIFY researcher from the **University of Strathclyde** and responsible for coordinating the 10 project partners, there is a contradiction between the EU's ambitions and its proposals in the MFF.

"Public trust in EU institutions has deteriorated over the past decade. A key message from our study is that citizens recognise the importance of Cohesion Policy for their region or locality and want to see more control of EU spending at local level. The MFF is going in the reverse direction: proposing the biggest cuts in Cohesion Policy in its history and centralising rather than decentralising EU spending."

The COHESIFY study is ground-breaking in providing a new and much more comprehensive view of how Cohesion Policy – currently accounting for one third of the EU budget – is perceived by citizens on the ground. The project applied an innovative methodological approach by combining case studies in 17 pilot regions across 12 Member States, stakeholder interviews, a large-scale telephone survey among 8,500 citizens, a cross-national media framing analysis (including over 110,000 posts and comments on social media) as well as 47 focus groups including 240 citizens.

Dr Carlos Mendez, COHESIFY Project manager from the **University of Strathclyde**, added:

“Our study found that perceptions of the EU and specifically EU Cohesion Policy are influenced by the scale of funding under the policy as well as its performance and good management. The results also show the importance of EU spending being regionally and locally differentiated – and considered by citizens to be addressing the needs and development changes that matter to them. Introducing a more participatory citizen-focused approach to the programming and communication of EU funds is therefore needed and would undoubtedly further strengthen people’s identification with the EU.”

The study also has important implications for how the EU communicates with citizens. Although many people recognise the importance of the policy for addressing regional disparities and improving their quality of life, they do not feel adequately informed about it. Future communication strategies therefore need to be given a higher priority and need to target citizens more explicitly so that they feel an ownership of the projects in their area. *“It needs to be a two-way process,”* **Dr. Andreja Pegan** from **Trinity College Dublin** stressed, *“ citizens want to have more say on how funds are allocated or governed in their area .”*

Another part of the study also analysed the way Cohesion Policy is currently framed in the media. **Dr. Vasiliki Triga** from the **Cyprus University of Technology** explained that *“ indeed Cohesion Policy frames are rich and diverse and overall positive since the two dominant frames describe the positive economic effects of Cohesion Policy for Member States as well as the dominant impact on the citizens’ quality of life.”* However, the analysis also brought to the fore a difference between regional and national media: the former frame the effects of Cohesion Policy more positively while the national media focus more on criticising national governments or authorities regarding the way Cohesion Policy is being implemented.

All the results of the project and the presentations of the final event are available at www.cohesify.eu/final-conference