European Parliament

The Visibility and Communication of Cohesion Policy in Online Media

Regional Development

EN

Research for REGI Committee - The Visibility and Communication of Cohesion Policy in Online Media

Abstract

This study evaluates the visibility and communication of cohesion policy in online media. It employs a mixed methods approach to investigate media coverage, representation and user perceptions of cohesion policy in online media. The research draws on an original dataset of over 60,000 news articles and 100,000 user-generated comments. It also analyses social media – over 11,000 Facebook posts and over five million tweets on Twitter – and 13,000 EU press releases. The key conclusion is that cohesion policy visibility is relatively low in online media. Policy recommendations are provided to improve cohesion policy visibility particularly through citizen engagement.

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development.

AUTHORS

EPRC Delft: Carlos MENDEZ, Vasiliki TRIGA, John BACHTLER, Costas DJOUVAS, Fernando MENDEZ, Sebastian STIER

Research manager: Marek KOŁODZIEJSKI
Project and publication assistance: Jeanette BELL
Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, European Parliament

Please use the following reference to cite this study:
Mendez, C, Triga, V, Bachtler J, Djouvas C, Mendez F, Stier S (2019), Research for REGI Committee - The Visibility and Communication of Cohesion Policy in Online Media, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels
Please use the following reference for in-text citations:
Mendez and Triga (2019)

CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
CoR	European Committee of the Regions
CPR	Common Provisions Regulation
DG REGIO	Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
ECR	European conservatives and Reformists
EFDD	European Freedom and direct Democracy
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
ESI funds	European Structural and Investment Funds
ETC	European Territorial Cooperation
FB	Facebook
GREENS	Greens-European Free Alliance
GUE-NGL	European United Left-Nordic Green Left
INTERREG	Interregional Cooperation Programme
MA	Managing Authority
MFF	Multi-annual Financial Framework
OP	Operational Programme
PA	Partnership Agreement
REGI	Committee for Regional Development
SUD	Sustainable Urban Development
S&D	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UGC	User Generated Content

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study evaluates **the visibility and communication of cohesion policy in online media** and the effectiveness of communication activities. A mixed methods approach is employed to investigate the coverage, representation and user perceptions of cohesion policy in online media, including quantitative text mining techniques, as well as more qualitative approaches based on framing analysis and expert interviews. The research draws on a database of 60,000 online news articles in ten Member States and over 100,000 reader comments. It also analysed social media - over 11,000 Facebook posts and over five million tweets on Twitter - and 13,000 EU press releases.

The visibility of cohesion policy in online news media stories is relatively low, with many references to the policy being little more than an acknowledgement of their contribution to projects. Cohesion policy is more visible in national media, but regional and local media are more likely to provide some depth to their coverage at the project level.

The tone of news media coverage is generally positive, particularly so in regional/local media. News stories tend to be framed around the socio-economic consequences of the funds in terms of economic development, jobs, infrastructure and social inclusion. Institutional bargaining is a very dominant theme, with stories giving prominence to the reform of the Multiannual Financial Framework.

There are significant differences across countries in visibility, tone, framing and bias. Member States with higher levels of cohesion policy funding tend to have greater visibility and more positive tone. The proportion of bias (or myths) in cohesion policy news stories is less variable and relatively low (7 percent of stories). Most of the myths propagated in online news are about fraud, mismanagement and the lack of added value. News stories with myths are most prevalent in some (though not all) of the net payer countries.

Turning to social media, **the visibility of facebook posts on cohesion policy by EU institutions, European political parties and interests groups is relatively low,** constituting 6 percent of their total facebook activity. Of these, almost 60 percent are by DG REGIO followed (a long way behind) by the CPMR and Commissioner for Regional Policy. Most FB posts are neutral in tone, providing factual information, although DG REGIO posts are generally more positive than posts by other actors.

The visibility of cohesion policy in Twitter is low among the 2019 European Parliament election candidates relative to their overall Twitter activity and in terms of frequency. Around 15 percent of the candidates with a Twitter account tweeted about cohesion policy during the period January-June 2019, on average 3 times, and generally in positive terms. DG REGIO produced the largest number of tweets followed by 'EU influencers' (typically journalists, EU officials and academics) and interest groups. The tone was overwhelmingly positive, significantly more so than for the EP candidates. Public discussion about cohesion policy are relatively low key but often lively in terms of politicisation and sentiment.

Cohesion policy is well represented in European Commission press releases relative to other EU policy domains, but less so in the press activity of other EU institutions and political parties. Overall, press releases from EU institutions tend to focus on socio-economic issues, whereas the political parties are more likely to frame their press releases in terms of power issues (institutional bargaining, empowerment, conditionality etc.).

The main conclusion is that the communication of cohesion policy in online media has been weak in recent years, despite the increased political priority placed on communication by EU institutions. Media coverage is often shallow, with limited depth of understanding or analysis and there is little appreciation of the role of the EU or wider impact of the policy.

A key precondition for greater visibility and better communication is greater citizen engagement in the policy, particularly at the programming stage. The main recommendation of this study is the need to promote a citizen-centred approach to programming through democratic innovations, including the piloting of participatory budgeting. The European Parliament should strive to ensure that the public have a real say on what is funded in their local area by one of the largest and most visible areas of EU expenditure impacting on their daily lives.

1.   INTRODUCTION

There has been a significant increase in the priority placed by European Union (EU) institutions on improving the visibility and communication of EU cohesion policy in recent years. This is part of a broader EU agenda to reconnect with citizens by demonstrating the benefits of the EU for their daily lives in the aftermath of financial, economic and political crises that have increased mistrust in EU institutions and eurosceptic public opinion in parts of the EU. Online and social media provide crucial communication channels for pursuing this reconnection, especially given their growing use as sources of information on the EU by citizens across all Member States.

While public awareness of cohesion policy among EU citizens has increased over time, it remains relatively low overall with only 40 percent of citizens being aware of EU-funded projects in their region or city in 2019.[1] Over eighty percent of citizens that are aware of projects consider that the impact has been positive but only 28 percent of citizens that have heard of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) or Cohesion Fund (CF) think that they have benefitted in their daily life from EU-funded projects. Interestingly, the internet is the third most important source of knowledge on cohesion policy - after the television and newspapers – and is witnessing the most rapid increase in usage by citizens as an informational channel on cohesion policy.

Set against this context, this study analyses the visibility and communication of cohesion policy in online media in terms of its coverage, representation and perceptions by media users. To do so, the study has collected original data in the form of 60,000 online news articles in ten Member States, over 100,000 reader comments on news stories, 11,000 Facebook posts, over five million tweets on Twitter, and around 13,000 press releases by EU institutions and political parties. A mixed methods approach is employed to investigate the coverage, representation and user perceptions of cohesion policy in online media, including quantitative text mining techniques, as well as more qualitative approaches.

This report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 begins by setting out the research **objectives, analytical framework and methodology**. The empirical analysis is structured around analysis of three media channels – online news, social media and EU press releases.

- Section 3 analyses cohesion policy in **online news media**, including readers' commentary, through framing analysis and text mining of media visibility, thematic coverage and tone.

- Section 4 turns to **social media**, providing an assessment of the visibility, engagement and tone of Facebook posts and Twitter activity.

- Section 5 assesses **EU-level Press Release activity** by EU institutions and political parties in terms of volume and visibility and with other policy domains.

- Section 6 explores challenges and lessons for **improving the visibility and communication of cohesion policy**, drawing on in-depth interviews with communication experts and a literature review.

- Section 7 draws out the main **conclusions and presents recommendations** to inform the future work of the REGI Committee.

---

[1]   TNS (2019) Citizens' awareness and perceptions of EU regional policy, Flash Eurobarometer 480, DG Communication, European Commission, Brussels.

2.   OBJECTIVES, FRAMEWORK & METHODOLOGY

The four specific research aims of the study are to analyse:

1. the **coverage** of cohesion policy in online media;
2. the **representation** of cohesion policy in online media;
3. the **perceptions** of cohesion policy as experienced by online media users; and
4. the **effectiveness** of communication activities on cohesion policy by the EU institutions, MEPs and candidates.

The analytical framework of the study is structured according to these four overlapping research aims, which are operationalised through a series of indicators. The **coverage** of cohesion policy in online media assesses the volume of media content in popular channels of online news (in ten Member States), social media (Facebook and Twitter) and EU institutional press releases (covering all EU institutions and political parties). A second analytical component maps out the **representation** of cohesion policy is represented by news and in public discussion on online media in terms of visibility, the topics emphasised, the tone and the degree to which bias is detected. The **perceptions** of stakeholders and the wider public is analysed through measures of volume and tone, as well as social media engagement (e.g. tweets, likes, retweets relative to followers), the visibility of MEP twitter activity, and the views of communication and media experts. The overall **effectiveness** of communication activities draws together these different analytical dimensions.

The methodological approach comprises four tasks: (1) online news media analysis; (2) social media analysis; (3) institutional and policy perspectives; and (4) conclusions and recommendations. A mixed methods approach is employed included automated techniques for state-of-the-art data collection and web crawling, computational text analysis as well as more qualitative techniques in the form of framing analysis, in-depth interviews and desk-based research.

Online news media analysis

Online news media analysis requires the collection and analysis of cohesion policy related stories disseminated through online media channels. A Python script was developed to search the News API of Event Registry, a leading media intelligence platform for searching past news content. Over 60,000 news articles were generated from ten Member States. The countries/languages have been selected to ensure variation in cohesion policy awareness, funding allocations, and online activity.

The core of the analysis was an in-depth framing analysis. The primary focus was on how cohesion policy stories are represented as the visibility of cohesion policy across news stories, the thematic coverage and tone, the nature of the topics covered, the geographical level (national or regional/local) and the presence of bias. Quantitative analysis was employed to analyse the frames.

Two supplementary analyses were undertaken to investigate the thematic coverage, tone and public reactions to online news covering a larger volume of news stories. First, a subset of the news articles with the highest visibility and among the most prominent media organisations was translated into English using machine learning tools. Topic modelling and sentiment analysis were then applied to the sample to investigate thematic coverage of news stories (topic modeling) and their tone (sentiment analysis). A second dimension of the analysis focused on the analysis of news comments by readers of the stories, so-called User-Generated Content (UGC). The architecture of the web pages allowed a subset of countries (seven altogether) with a sufficient volume of data to be crawled and analysed

quantitatively. This exercise generated a corpus of over 100,000 user-generated comments to enable analysis of the key issues that are actively discussed by readers of cohesion policy news stories.

Social Media analysis

The second task analyses social media with a specific focus on Facebook and Twitter. Both platforms provide certain features (likes, shares, retweets, etc.) that allow for quantitative analysis of the volume. For Facebook the data collection method involved the creation of an automated tool (web crawler) to collect posts from Facebook pages. A total of 23 Facebook pages ranging from EU institutions and agencies, through to interest organisations and European political party groups were crawled generating over 11,000 Facebook posts from 2014 onwards. Standard quantitative analysis (as well as computational text analysis techniques such as sentiment analysis) could then be performed on the Facebook post data.

Twitter historical data was purchased from Twitter directly based on a search for tweets with relevant keywords and hashtags over the period January 2019 to June 2019. A collection of over 5 million tweets was generated from the query in all EU languages. Since a core research request for this study was to follow the use of Twitter during the European Parliament elections and the visibility of cohesion policy therein, it was necessary to build a separate database with the list of candidates competing in the 2019 election. Over 8,000 candidates were identified and coded as to whether they had a Twitter account. Merging the two datasets (Twitter data with candidate profiles) allows analysis of the degree to which cohesion policy was actively discussed and disseminated ('likes', 'shares', retweets etc.).

Improving visibility and communication – academic, expert and institutional perspectives

The third research task investigated EU institutional and policy perspectives on communication and online media. It was divided into three main sub-tasks: (1) analysis of EU institutional news outputs on cohesion policy; (2) interviews with experts and practitioners; and (3) desk research and literature review to gain comparative insights.

The analysis of EU news output involved crawling EU institutional and political party websites for all press releases by the Commission, the Council, the European Parliament and the European groups of political parties. To ensure comparability across the institutions and parties only documents that were press releases were stored, generating a dataset of approximately 13,000 press releases that is analysed using quantitative and automated techniques.

Finally, desk research of academic and policy research and interviews with experts in cohesion policy communication and in broader EU digital media and citizen engagement was undertaken to provide a wider perspective on the challenges and lessons for increasing the visibility and improving the communication of cohesion policy.

Conclusions and recommendations

The final research task synthesising the results and provides conclusions and recommendations.

3. ONLINE NEWS MEDIA

KEY FINDINGS

- **The visibility of cohesion policy within online news stories is low,** with many references being little more than an acknowledgement of funding. Visibility is greater in national media, but regional/local media are more likely to provide depth to their coverage.

- **The tone of media coverage is generally positive,** particularly in regional/local media. News stories tend to be framed around the socio-economic effects or implications in terms of economic development, jobs, infrastructure and social inclusion. Institutional bargaining is a very dominant theme, especially the reform of the MFF.

- **There are significant differences across countries in visibility, tone and framing**. Member States with higher levels of cohesion policy funding tend to have greater visibility and more positive tone.

- **The visibility of bias or myths in news stories about cohesion policy is relatively low**. Most myths are about fraud, mismanagement and lack of added value. News stories with myths are most prevalent in some (though not all) of the net payer countries.

- **There is a duality in the thematic coverage of cohesion policy in news stories**. There is significant coverage of important thematic objectives of the policy. However, the politics of the policy is also a significant focus, especially of actual or proposed conditionalities of the Funds, and the budget negotiations.

To analyse cohesion policy in online media, this section draws on the corpus of online news stories to employ (1) Framing Analysis, (2) Topic and Sentiment Analysis and (3) Analysis of User-Generated Content. Since it will condition the range of analytical strategies deployed, it is important to begin by describing the attributes of this database of online news stories. Figure 1 lists the results of the news search for ten EU member states using a set of harmonised keywords for cohesion policy, the funds (ESIF, Structural Funds) and individual funds (ERDF, CF, ESF). This amounted to just over 60,000 news stories over the period 2014-2019, after the removal of duplicates.

There is high variability in the number of stories. Most cases generated a substantial volume of stories with the exception of Finland. The low volume of news in the Finnish case prevent the application of topic modelling, sentiment analysis and user-generated content analysis, although it was possible to incorporate Finland for the core and more in-depth Framing analysis.

Figure 1:   Total number of online news stories on cohesion policy in 2014-19 by country
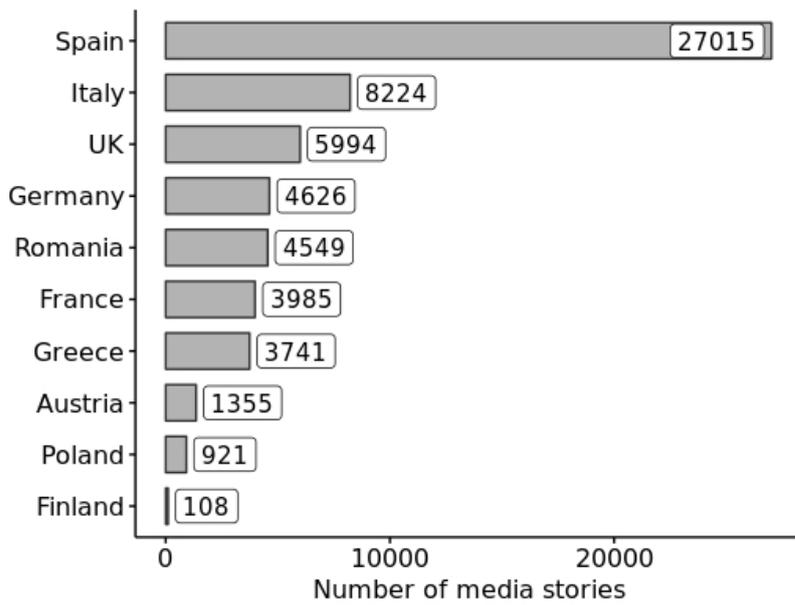
Figure 2 shows the evolution of online media stories over time revealing a general increase in most cases, as depicted by the regression line in red. At the same time, the peaks and troughs in activity suggest a clustering around specific events.

Figure 2:   Evolution of media stories over time
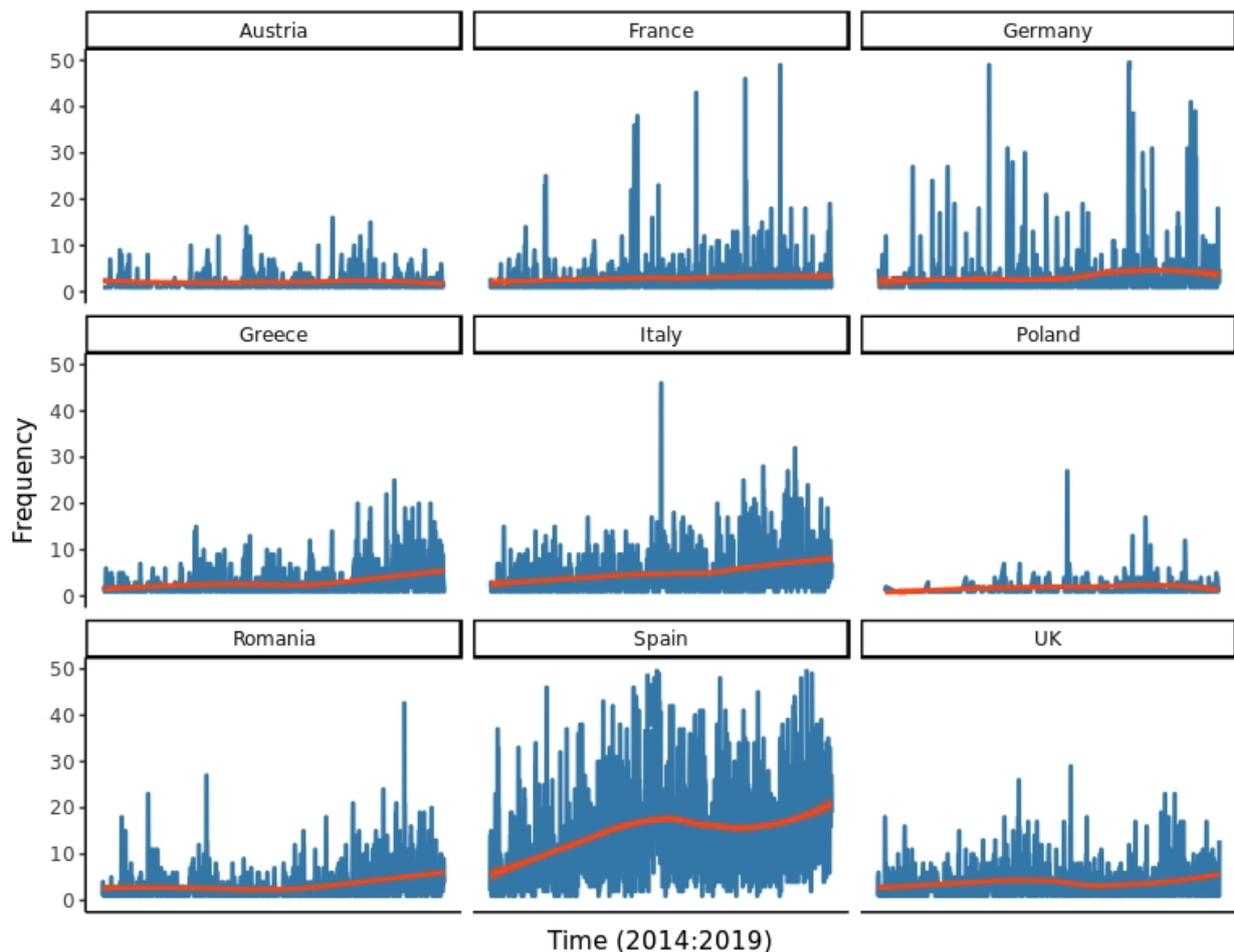
The visibility of key cohesion policy terms in online news media across countries is illustrated in Figure 3. For visualisation purposes, the acronym are used for the ERDF, ESF and ESIF (rather than the full terms) and in English (rather than the national language). The distribution of key terms shows that tn some countries, such as Germany and Austria, the relative focus of online news media is on the terms 'Structural Funds' or 'EU regional policy'. In the case of Italy, we found that a very high number of stories on 'regional policy' were about domestic policy and the term was therefore excluded. The umbrella term cohesion policy is the most visible in Poland and Romania. With respect to the individual funds, the term ERDF is relatively more visible in UK news media, while others such as Spain have a high volume of ESF news. Notable by its relative infrequency is the term ESIF - European Structural and Investment Funds, a more recent umbrella term introduced in the 2013 reform that has gained limited traction in online news media.

Figure 3:   Distribution of key terms per country
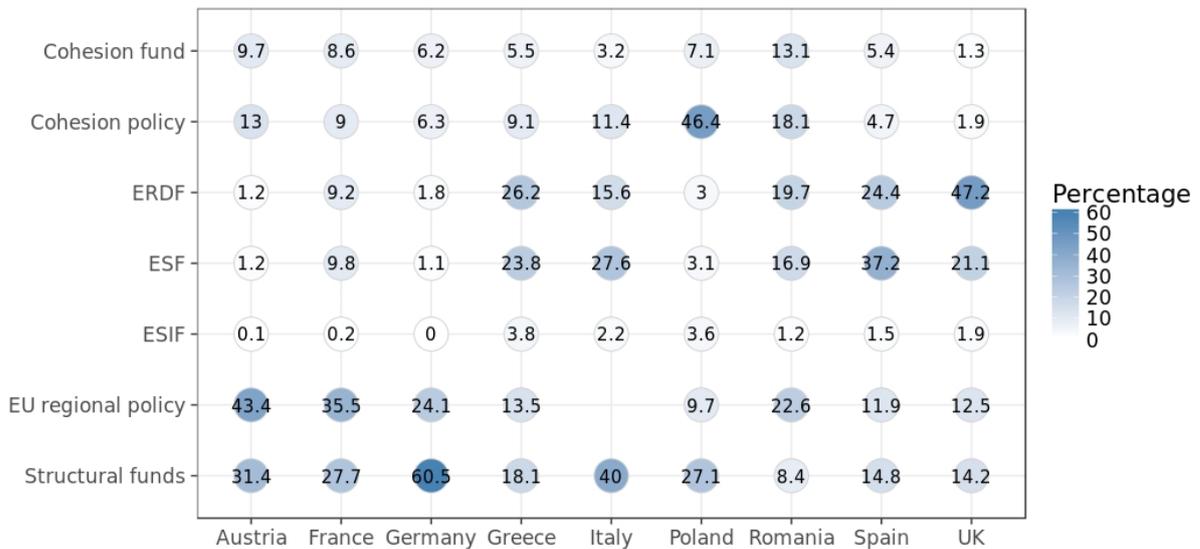
3.1   Media framing

To analyse how cohesion policy is represented in online media, a framing analysis of media coverage was undertaken. Media framing analysis is grounded on Entman's paradigmatic thesis that framing is to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation".[2] This entails that media outlets can communicate the same issue in several different ways, by placing emphasis on different aspects of the issue in question, and thus trigger different evaluations in the public's perception.

The presence of news frames in media coverage of EU-related issues has been well-documented by empirical research.[3] Scholars have applied a range of methodological approaches to record and

---

[2]   Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. Journal of Communication, 43(4), 51–58.

[3]   Semetko, H. A. and Valkenburg, P. M. (2000) 'Framing European Politics: A ContentAnalysis of Press and Television News', Journal of Communication (50(2)): 93–109; de Vreese, C.H, Peter J and Semetko H.A (2001) 'Framing Politics at the Launch of the Euro: A Cross-National Comparative Study of Frames in the News', Political ommunication 18(2): 107–122; Schuck, A. R. T. and de Vreese, C. H. (2006) 'Between Risk and Opportunity: News Framing and its Effects on Public Support for EU Enlargement', European Journal of Communication 21(1): 5–32; Azrout, R., Spanje, J. V. and Vreese, C. D. (2012) 'When News Matters: Media Effects on Public Support for European Union Enlargement in 21 Countries', JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies 50(5): 691–708.

categorize media framing and its effects.[4] The analytical framework employed here draws on a pre-defined list of generic frames from the existing literature that are pertinent to the study of cohesion policy, complemented with additional sub-frames that have been validated in a previous study (Table 1).[5]

Table 1:   Framing analytical framework

Frames	Subframes
Socio-economic consequences	1) job creation 2) social justice 3) social awareness/inclusion 4) economic development 5) research and innovation 6) tackling brain drain 7) public services 8) infrastructure 9) environment 10) cultural heritage 11) cultural development 12) civic participation 13) territorial cooperation 14) ineffective in achieving goals
Values	15) solidarity 16) financial burden
Governance	17) improving governance 18) bureaucracy and delays 19) mismanagement 20) fraud and corruption 21) poor communication
Power	22) empowerment 23) lose sovereignty 24) political leverage 25) institutional bargaining over funding 26) political capital/interests

For each of the 10 countries, 100 articles were sampled randomly from the corpus of news media stories. The sample was taken from the most popular news media sites in the corpus using the well-known Alexa rank metric based on the volume of site visitors. The precise threshold varied across countries, but in most cases it involved selecting among the top thirty ranked media sites from our corpus. Each story was coded by researchers with expertise on cohesion policy and/or framing analysis using the list of 26 subframes.[6] The research team also assessed each news story for the visibility of cohesion policy in the story, the tone of the frame/subframe and for the presence of bias or myths.

Visibility of cohesion policy

The starting point for the analysis was to assess the visibility of cohesion policy in the news stories. Figure 4 shows the distribution of visibility as measured on two different scales, a five-point and a three-point scale. The key finding is that the visibility of cohesion policy in terms of its prominence within stories is low. On the five-point scale, the most frequent value is very low. This suggests that in almost half of the media stories in prominent country-level press, the visibility of cohesion policy takes the form of a single acknowledgment of the principal funds, the ERDF or the ESF, typically in terms of the co-financing to a specific project. This is hardly surprising given that a news story about a project would primarily focus on what the project is about rather than discussing cohesion policy.

---

[4]   de Vreese Claes H. and Kandyla Anna (2009) 'News Framing and Public Support for a Common Foreign and Security Policy', Journal of Common Market Studies 47(3): 453–481; de Vreese, C. H., Boomgaarden, H. G. and Semetko, H. A. (2011) '(In)direct Framing Effects: The Effects of News Media Framing on Public Support for Turkish Membership in the European Union', Communication Research 38(2): 179–205.

[5]   Triga, V. and Vadratsikas, K. (2017b) Framing of cohesion policy, COHESIFY Research Paper 9, http://www.cohesify.eu/research-papers/

[6]   The framing analysis team included Alina Dragos, Fabian Gal, Stefan Kah, Carlos Mendez, Vasiliki Triga and Katarzyna Szoka, as well as the core study authors.

Figure 4:   Visibility of cohesion policy in media stories
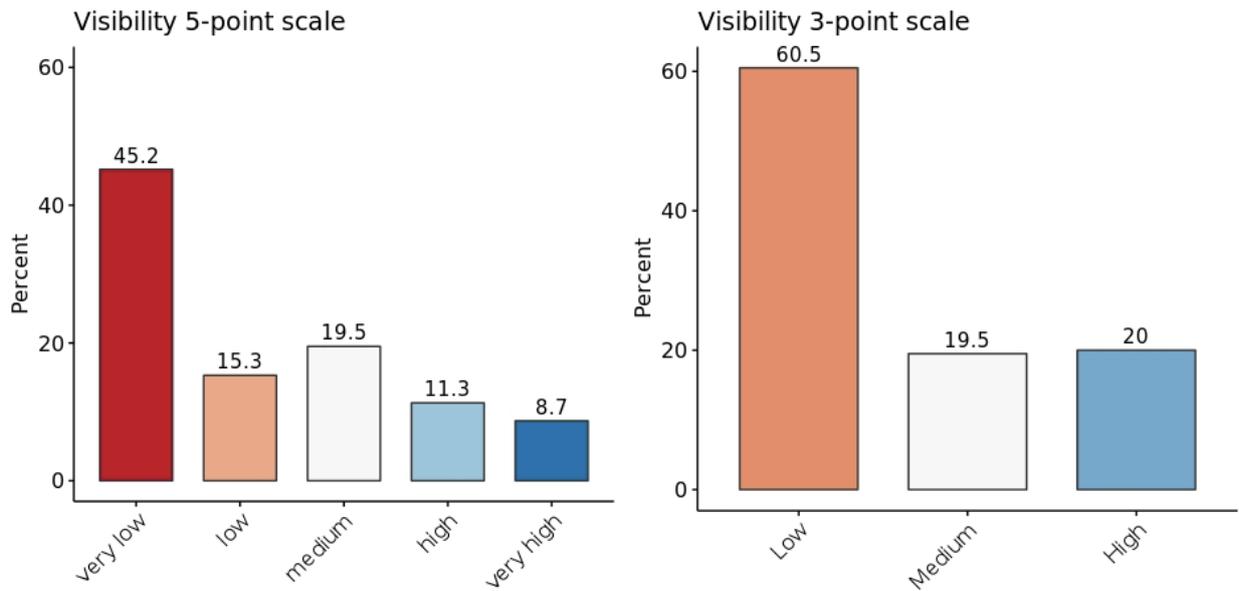
Further inspection of the data reveals that there is a significant association between the visibility of cohesion policy within news stories and whether the website is a regional/local news source or a national one.

Figure 5 shows the chi-square residuals for testing the association between the territorial level of a news source and a story's visibility. The plots shows whether an observed count for a category is above, below or within an expected range. Blue bars indicate that observed count is significantly higher than expected, while red bars indicate the inverse i.e. that the count is significantly lower than expected. Grey bars indicate that the observed count for a particular category is within an expected range. Figure 5 shows that there is a clear and significant association between the territorial level of a news source (regional or national) and the visibility of cohesion policy in news stories. In national media cohesion policy is more likely to have a high visibility in a story. The opposite is the case for regional media, where the visibility of cohesion policy in a news story is significantly lower than expected.

Figure 5:   Association of visibility by territorial level
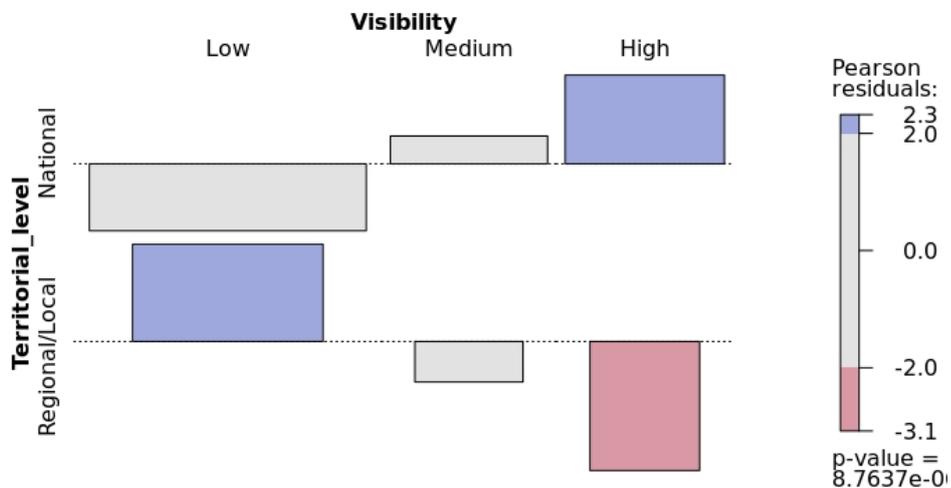
Note: For each category in the plot, the size of the bars (or blocks) are proportional to the number of observations for that particular category. The Low Visibility and Regional/local territorial level category is much bigger than the adjacent Medium Visibility category because there are many more observations in the former category.

On the other hand, the reporting of cohesion policy by regional/local media is most likely to take the form of acknowledgement and/or citing of funds and EU co-finance to specific projects. This is in line with expectations as regional and local news are more likely to contain stories on projects in their area.

It is important to note that there is striking country level variability across the ten countries, as shown in Figure 6. The second plot (three-point scale of visibility) shows that there are two groups. On the one hand, Italy, Greece, Poland and Romania have a more uniform looking distributions where the low visibility is below the 50 percent mark, depicted by the dashed horizontal line. On the other hand, for the remaining countries the percentage of stories with low visibility of cohesion policy is much higher with a range of 62 percent (Finland) to 82 percent (Germany).

Figure 6:   Visibility of cohesion policy in media stories by country
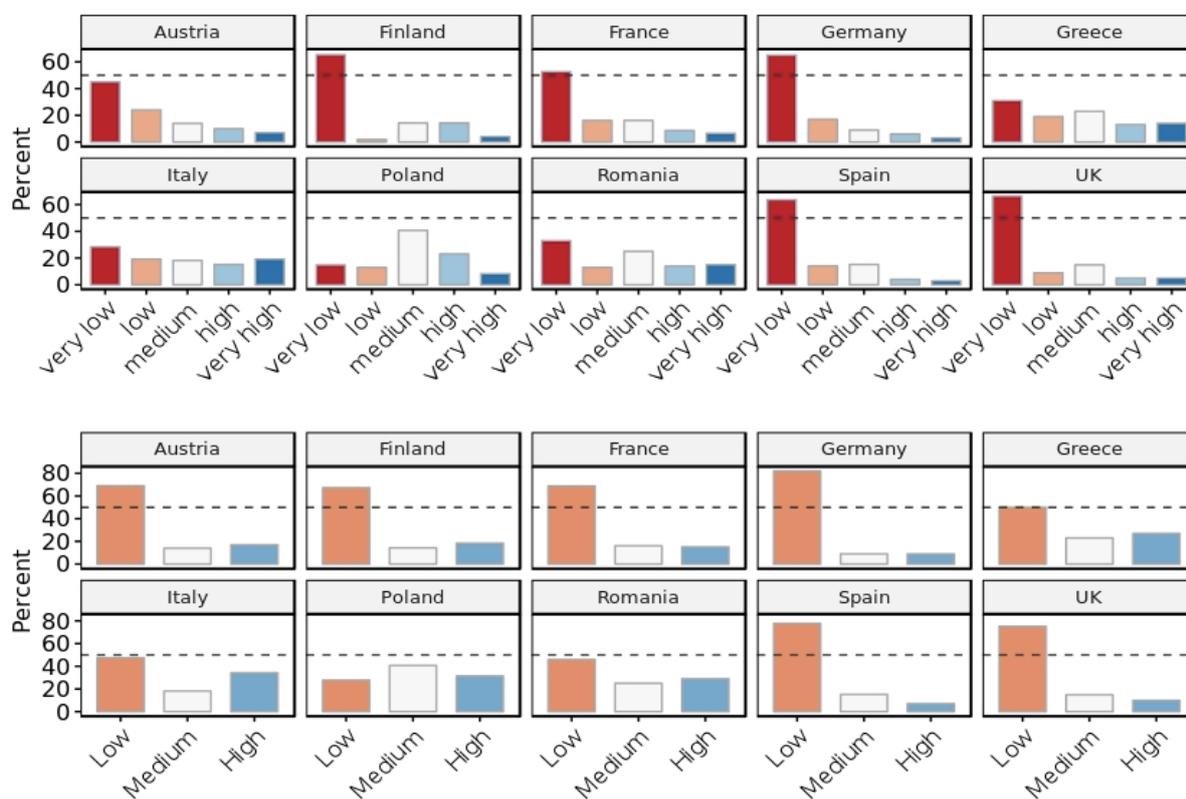
Tone of media coverage

To investigate the tone of the news stories, the analysis distinguishes between positive and negative tone, balanced tone (combining positive and negative tone), and factual tone when the story is descriptive. Looking at the tone of media stories in Figure 7 reveals an overall positive picture at the aggregate level. News stories are much more likely to be positive and far less negative, factual or balanced in tone.

Figure 7:   Tone of news stories across ten Member States
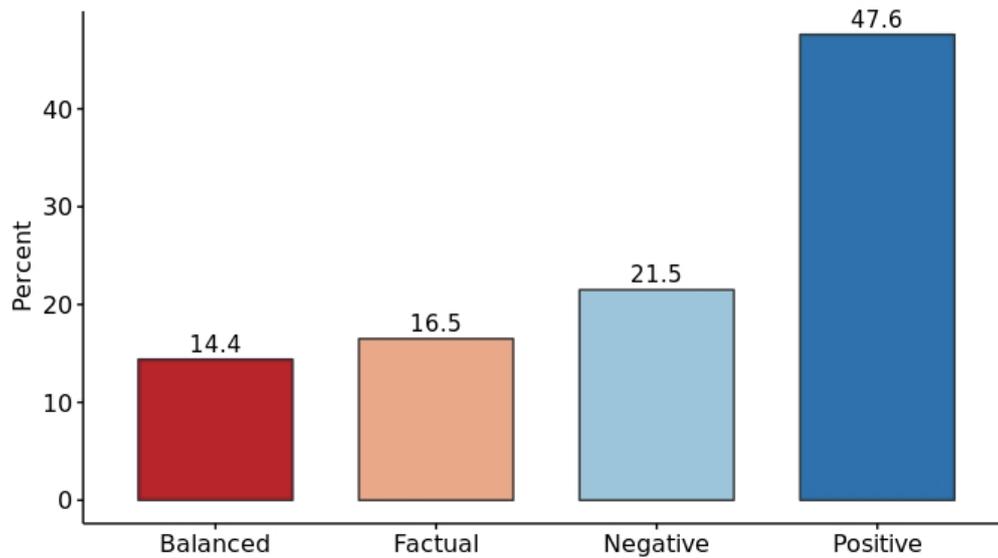
National news is more likely to be neutral (balanced and factual) or adopt a negative tone than regional/local news (

Figure 8). The inverse is the case for regional/local news, which tends to be less neutral and more positive than national news.

Figure 8:   Association between tone and territorial level
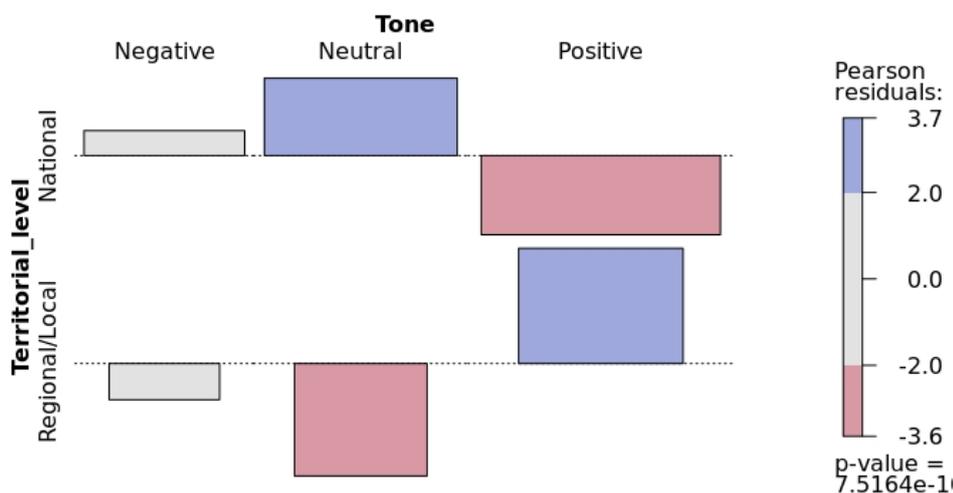
Note: For each category in the plot, the size of the bars (or blocks) are proportional to the number of observations for that particular category.

There are notable variations among countries in terms of the tone of news media stories (Figure 9). Countries with the most positive tone are the UK, Greece, Spain and Finland. By contrast, the most negative tone can be found in Austria, Germany and Romania. There is also a high level of balanced news combining both positive and negative view-points in Germany, Italy and Austria. Finally, there is a high level of factual reporting on cohesion policy in France and to a lesser extent Finland.

Figure 9 Tone of cohesion policy news stories grouped by country
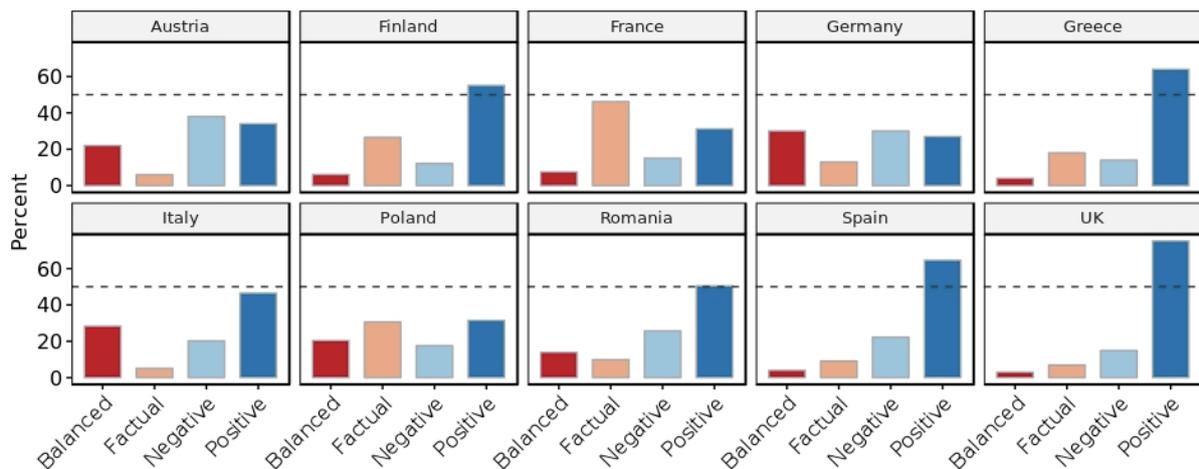
A more graphic picture emerges in Figure 10 where the negative score is subtracted from the positive score to give an overall view of positive tone across the ten Member States. Only in Austria and Germany are the negative tone scores higher than positive scores leading to an overall negative score.

Figure 10:   Difference between positive and negative percent scores
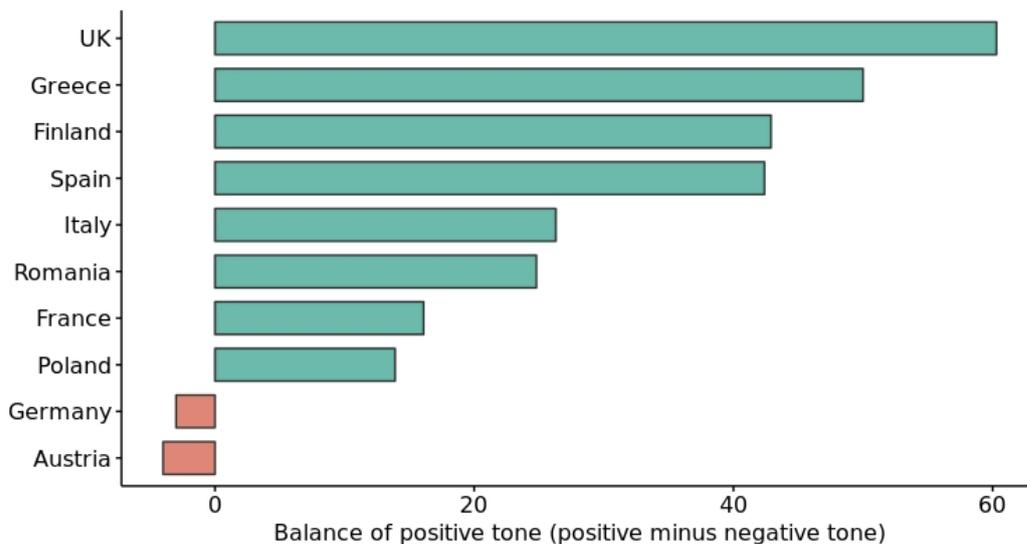
To better understand the tone distribution it is crucial to take into account the dominant frames underpinning the news stories. As shown in Figure 11, most media stories are framed around the Socio-Economic consequences frame, followed by the Power frame.

Figure 11: Dominant frames in media stories
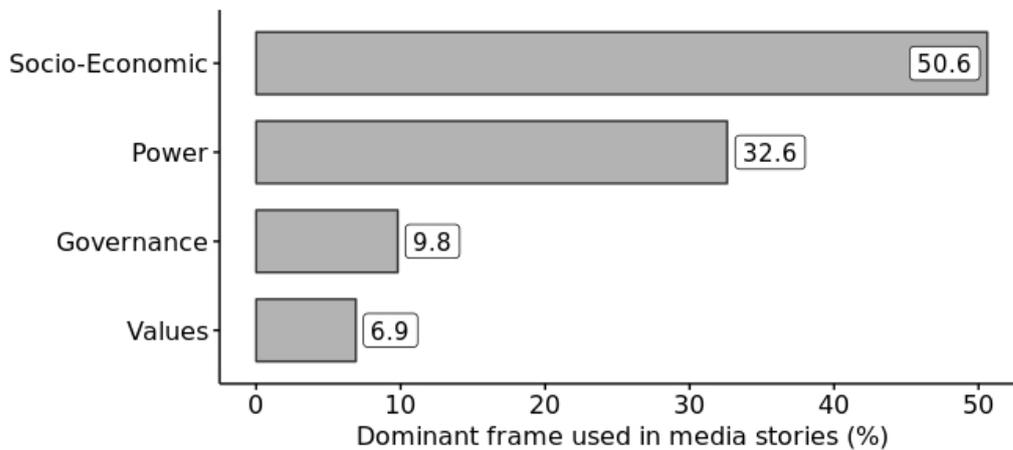
The territorial level of the news sources is also important in understanding the distribution of frames. The residuals in

Figure 12 show how the territorial level of the news source is significant for two of the main frames. While the national level news media is less likely to frame cohesion policy news in terms of Socio-Economic consequences and more likely to employ the Power frame, the inverse is the case for the regional/local media. The latter's focus is more likely to be on the Socio-Economic consequences of cohesion policy (for their region/locality) than the high-level politics associated with the Power frame.

Figure 12: Association between Frames and territorial level
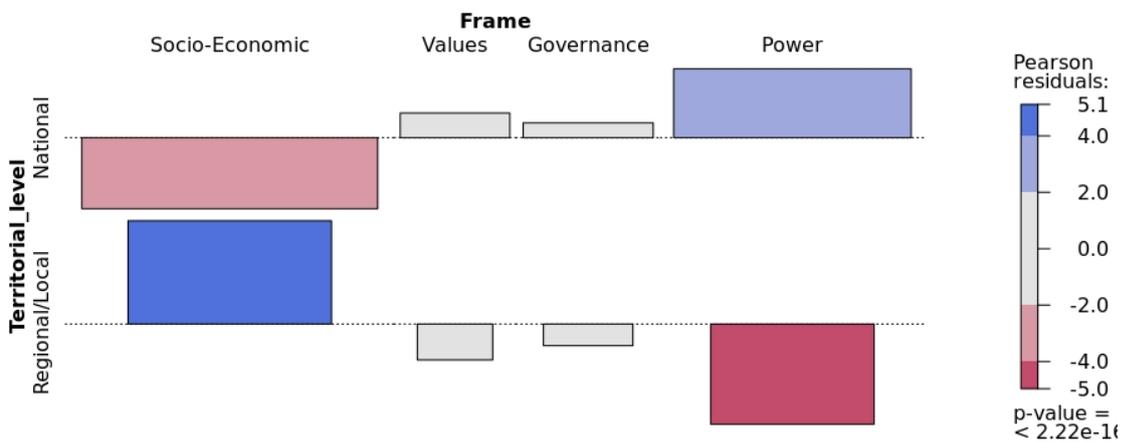
Note: The size of each block in the mosaic plot represents the proportion of observations for each group

Figure 13 gives an indication of the sources of the overall positive scores. For most countries, the socio-economic consequences frame is dominant. Since this frame is about the potential or actual socio-economic benefits of cohesion policy funding and projects it is typically positive, and helps to explain why most countries - Finland, Greece, Spain and the UK in particular – have such high scores. On the

other hand, only in Austria and Germany is the Power frame more prevalent than the socio-economic frame. The Power frame has some distinctive sub-frames that are negative.

Figure 13: Dominant frames in media stories grouped by country
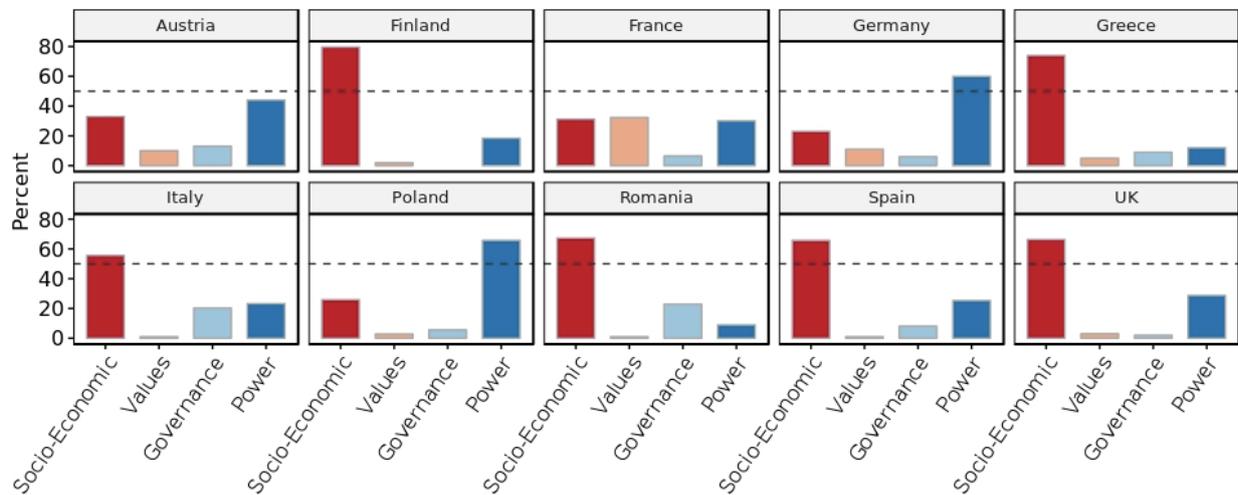
Figure 14 below includes a list of all the subframes and their prevalence across the media stories in the ten Member States. It shows that the institutional bargaining over funding frame is the most dominant, accounting for around a fifth of all subframes. This reflects the redistributive nature of the policy and is particularly prominent in media coverage of debates on the reform of the Multi-annual Financial Framework.

In the UK case, this subframe includes a significant number of stories on Brexit and the potential loss of cohesion policy funding for the UK. Similarly, a substantial number of stories in the Austrian, French German cases highlight the increased contributions that Brexit will imply for funding cohesion policy. By contrast, there are many Polish media stories highlighting how Brexit will lower the funding for Poland, although most of the Polish stories focus on the amount of funding that Poland received or will receive from the EU budget.

The second dominant subframe, also under the 'power' frame, is 'political leverage' accounting for 11.8 percent of all subframes. This subframe is particularly prominent in Austrian, French, German and Polish media (Figure 12), where there is a large number of stories discussing debates on making EU funding conditional on compliance with the rule of law or accepting migrants.

The next four subframes on economic development, jobs, infrastructure and social awareness/inclusion all belong to the socio-economic consequences frame. The economic development frame is most prominent in the UK case, where there are many project stories, especially in regional/local media sources. The same applies to the Romanian case, where there are many stories under the infrastructure and jobs subframes describing EU funded projects. On the other hand, negative stories under the 'fraud and corruption' and 'mismanagement' subframes are also over-represented in the Romanian media relative to other countries.

Figure 14:   Subframes in media stories across all ten Member States
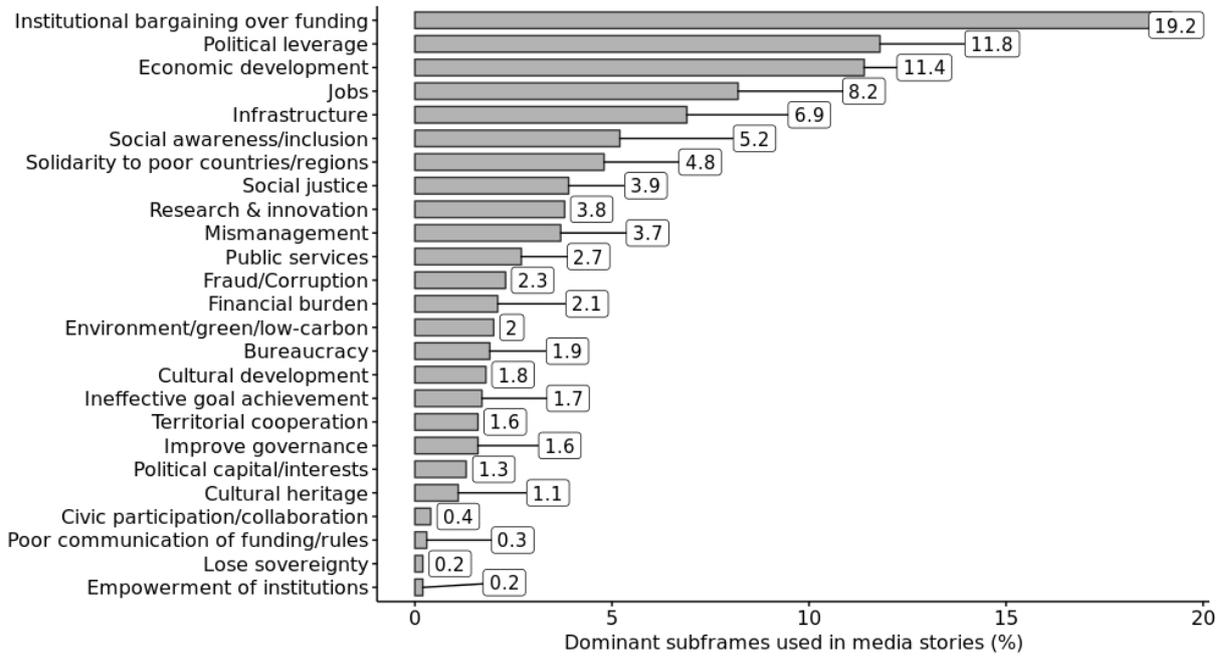
Figure 15:   Subframes in media stories by Member States
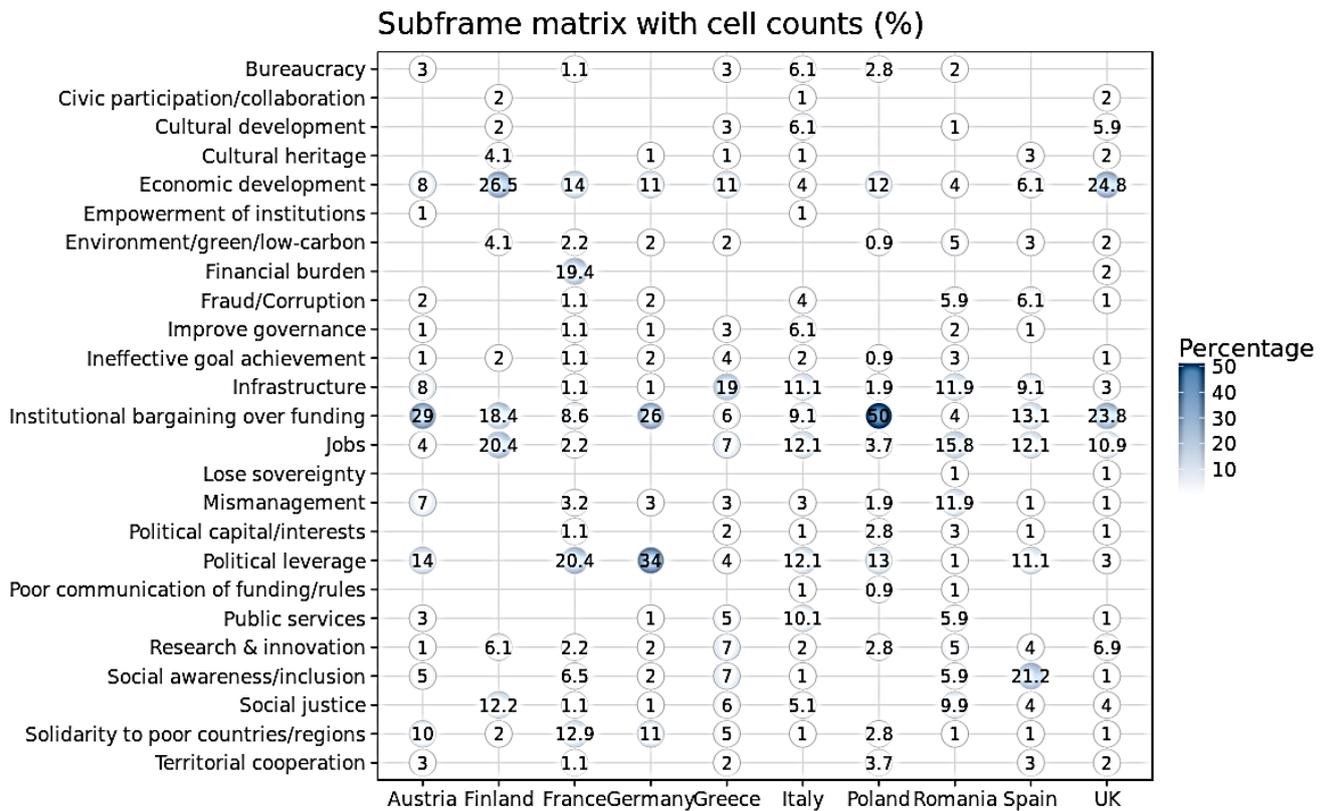
Bias and myths

This final section analysis media bias in terms of the presence of common myths on cohesion policy in online news. Specifically, the news stories were assessed for the presence of the ten most common myths about EU cohesion policy as identified by DG REGIO (Table 2).

Table 2:   Ten myths about cohesion policy

Myth	Myth description
1. Poor regions funded only	CP only helps poor regions
2. Rich countries pay	Only less developed countries are benefitting from cohesion policy, while rich ones are paying for it
3. Firms/jobs relocate to poorer countries	CP causes job losses in richer countries by supporting companies' relocation to poorer countries
4. No added value	CP has no added value e.g. in reducing disparities, economic impact, results
5. Useless projects	Useless projects are funded with EU money
6. Does not defend EU values	CP does not contribute to defending EU fundamental values (gender equality, non-discrimination, freedom, democracy)
7. Fraud	CP is all about fraud
8. Mismanaged	CP funding is often mismanaged
9. Inaccessible	CP funds are inaccessible
10. Slow spending	Some countries have a very low rate of spending CP funds

Source: DG REGIO: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/EN/policy/what/myth-busting/

Figure 16 shows the proportion of myths detected across the ten Member States. The percentages are on the whole very small for the individual myths. Very few cohesion policy news stories contain myths as defined above. Nonetheless, the number of myths do add up just over 6.6 percent of stories.

Figure 16:   Myths detected in media stories across all ten Member States
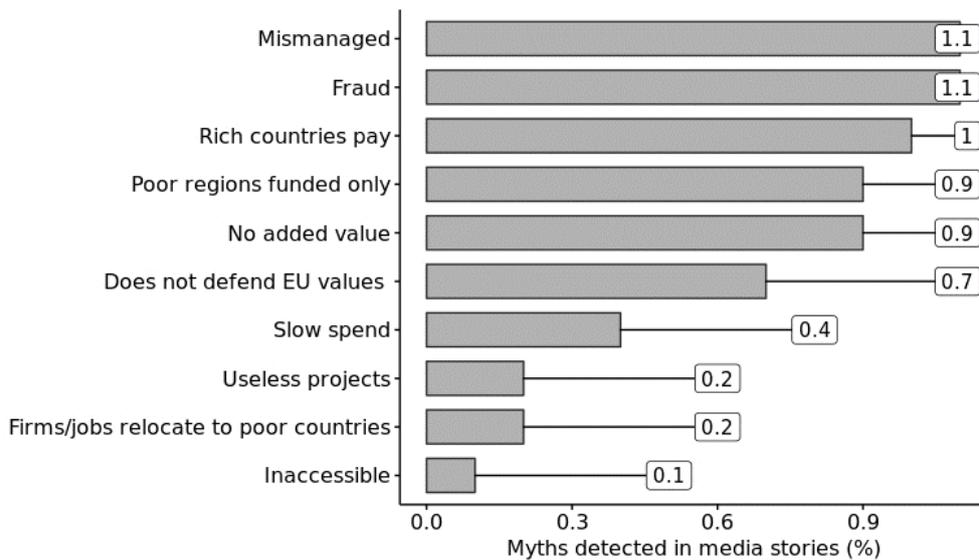
There is high variability in the distribution of myths across the Member States. Some countries contain a very low level of detected myths (notably Poland, Greece and Spain), while others have high levels. Germany, Italy France and Austria have around 10 percent, followed by the UK and Finland at 8 percent. In Germany, the dominant myth is that cohesion policy does not defend EU values (Table 3), notably in the context of debates about conditionality to encourage fair burden sharing of refugees during the migration crisis and to tackle deficiencies in the rule of law. In Italy, the fraud and slow spending myths account for the majority of the myths. Aside from Romania, the largest recipients of cohesion policy funding in our country sample have the fewest reported myths, mainly relating to 'poor regions being funded exclusively' (Poland), 'the relocation of economic activity' and 'mismanagement' (Greece), and 'fraud' (Spain).

Figure 17:   Myths detected in media stories grouped by country
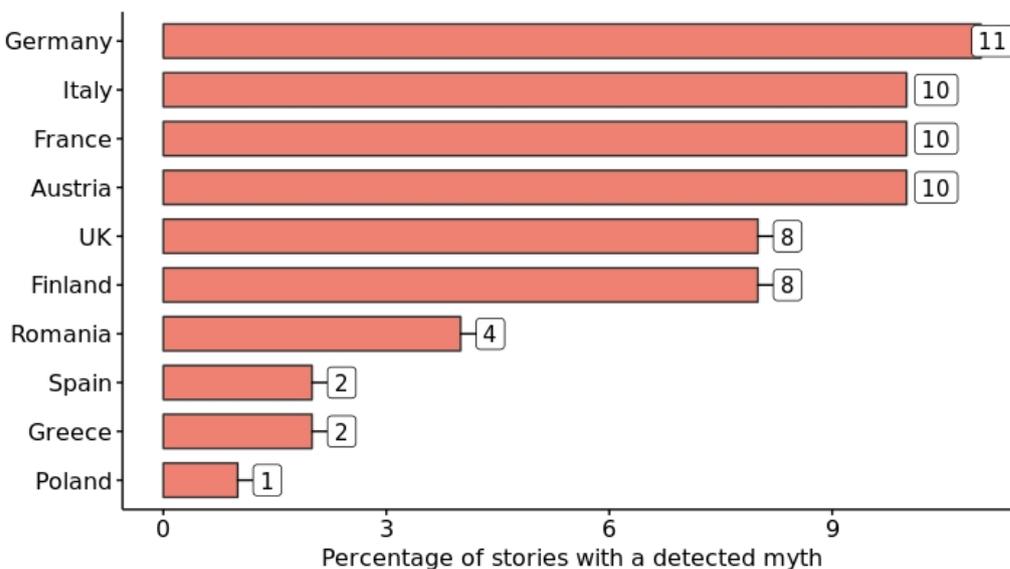
The 'rich countries pay' myth is present in some of the net payer countries (Austria, Germany and, in particular, the UK in the context of Brexit debates especially) though not in all net payer countries (e.g. Finland, France), yet in France a related myth about cohesion policy funding being only for poor regions is particularly dominant. The two myths that appear across most Member States (six countries in both cases) are about 'fraud' and 'mismanagement', followed by the 'no added value' myth (in five countries).

Table 3:   Ten myths detected in media stories by country

Myth	AT	FI	FR	DE	EL	IT	PL	RO	ES	UK
10.Slow spend	1					2		1		
1.Poor regions funded only			6	1			1			
2.Rich countries pay	2			2						5
3.Firms/jobs relocate					1	1				
4.No added value	1	2		1		1		2		1
5.Useless projects		1								1
6.Does not defend EU values	1	1		4		1				
7.Fraud	2		1	1		3			2	1
8.Mismanaged	3		2	2	1	1	1			
9.Inaccessible						1				

3.2   Topics and sentiment

A quantitative analysis was undertaken of the thematic coverage and tone of online news in a sample of 3,000 media stories (500 media stories from six countries). Six cases were analysed because the filtering criteria of 500 stories removed the Austrian and Finnish cases, and the available translation tools required to perform the quantitative analysis did not cover Romanian and Greek. The sample was stratified to select from the more visible media sites as determined by Alexa rankings. Random samples were drawn from the top 40 media sites for a country, while taking care not to oversample the same news source, very rare news sources or specific keywords.

To identify the dominant themes in the data, an automated topic modelling text analysis technique is used that is well-suited to identifying topical patterns in a large volume of documents. The analysis reveals a coherent pattern of topic clusters that are shown in Figure 18. Topics relating to core policy objectives and themes receive high coverage, notably 'Employment, Training and Education', 'Economic development, jobs and growth, and 'Research & Innovation' are among the most prevalent topics.

Figure 18: Topic distributions
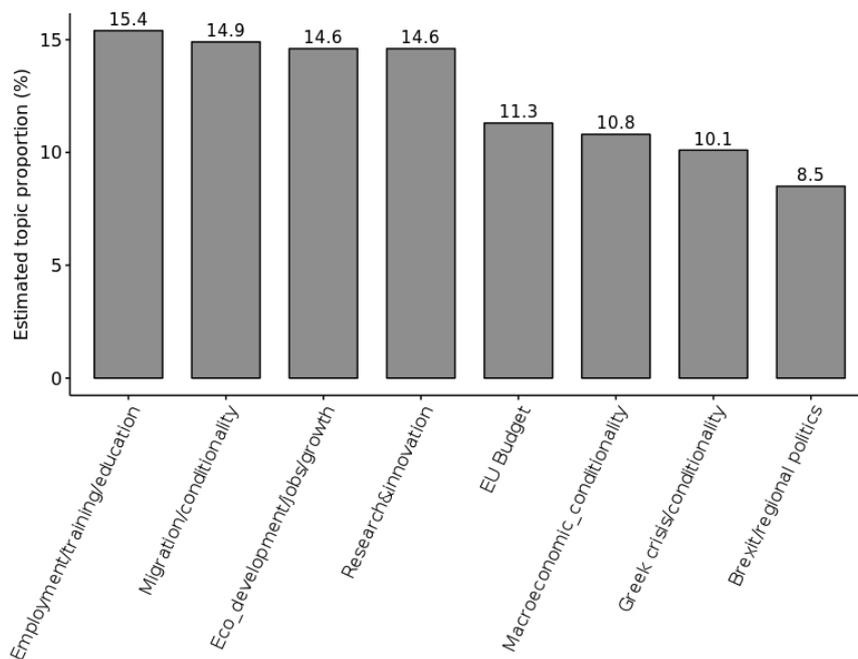
A second key finding is that there is a significant focus on the politics surrounding cohesion policy conditionality and EU budget negotiations. This finding echoes the results from the framing analysis in which there are two dominant frames structuring how cohesion policy is represented in the media: the 'Socio-economic consequences' and 'Power' frames. The clustering of topics identified by the topic modelling closely matches this ordering.

The evolution of each topic over time is shown in Figure 19. Some topics have lots of overlapping error bars, such as the topics 'Economic development', 'Employment, training and education' and 'Research and Innovation' (with the exception of the year 2019), which indicates a more equally distributed discussion of topics and themes over time. Other topics appear to be punctuated by emphasis during particular periods. This is quite obviously the case with the Brexit topic or the Greek crisis and conditionality topic. The latter is highly prevalent between 2014 through to 2016 then almost disappears and only reappears in 2019.

Figure 19: Topic distributions over time
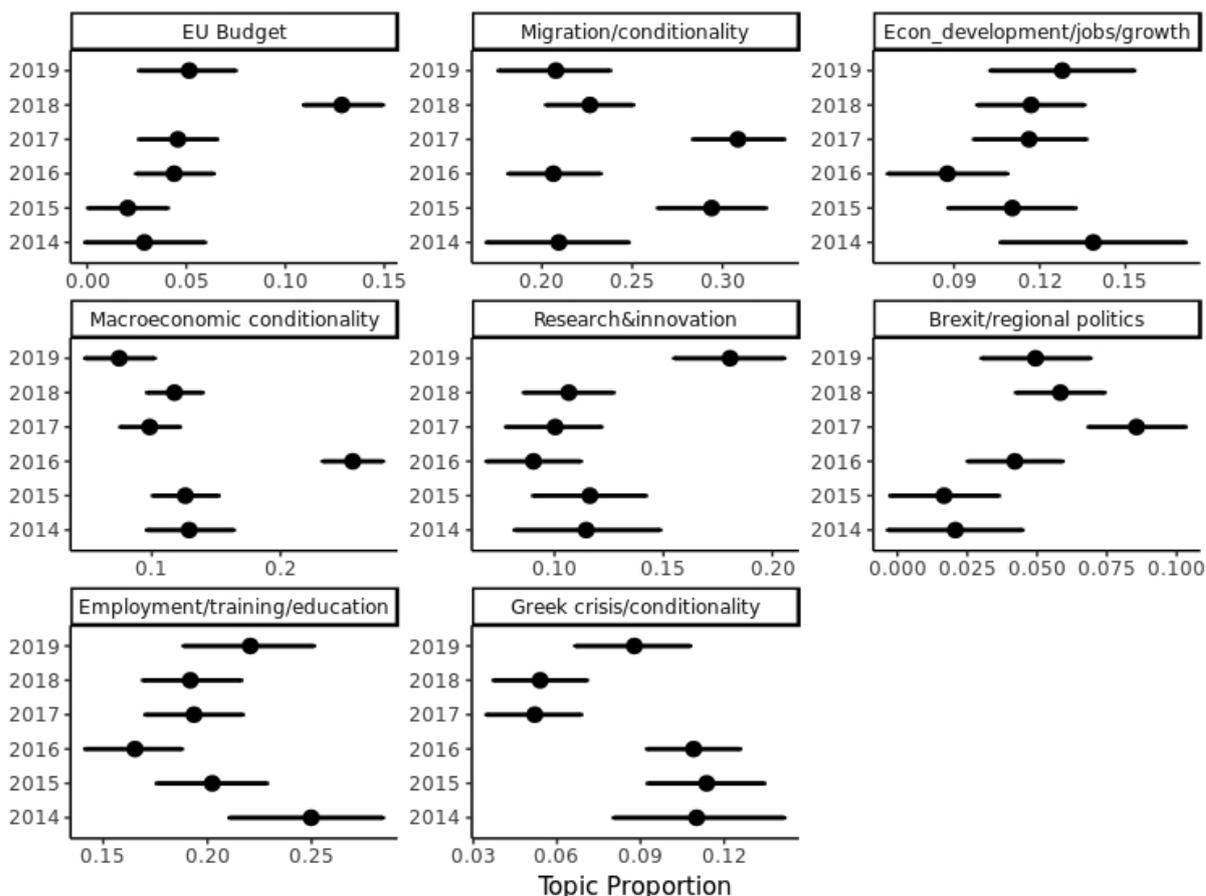
A third key finding is that conditionality is a prevalent and distinctive topic in several forms: migration crisis debates, notably in relation to debates about linking the acceptance of migration quotas to cohesion policy funds; macro-economic conditionality, with many stories focusing on the controversy surrounding whether Spain and Portugal would be penalised for breaching stability and growth pact rules in 2016; and the Greek crisis and associated conditionality and investment support through the bailout and adjustment programmes.

The dual nature of stories on policy objectives on the one hand, and more politicised EU budget negotiations and conditionality coverage on the other hand, can also be seen when conducting sentiment analysis of the tone of online news on cohesion policy. Figure 20 shows that there are topics which elicit more negative tone, namely those relating to Brexit and Conditionality. On the other hand, topics dealing with policy objectives tend to be overwhelmingly positive, notably 'Employment, training and education'.

Figure 20: Sentiment score per topic
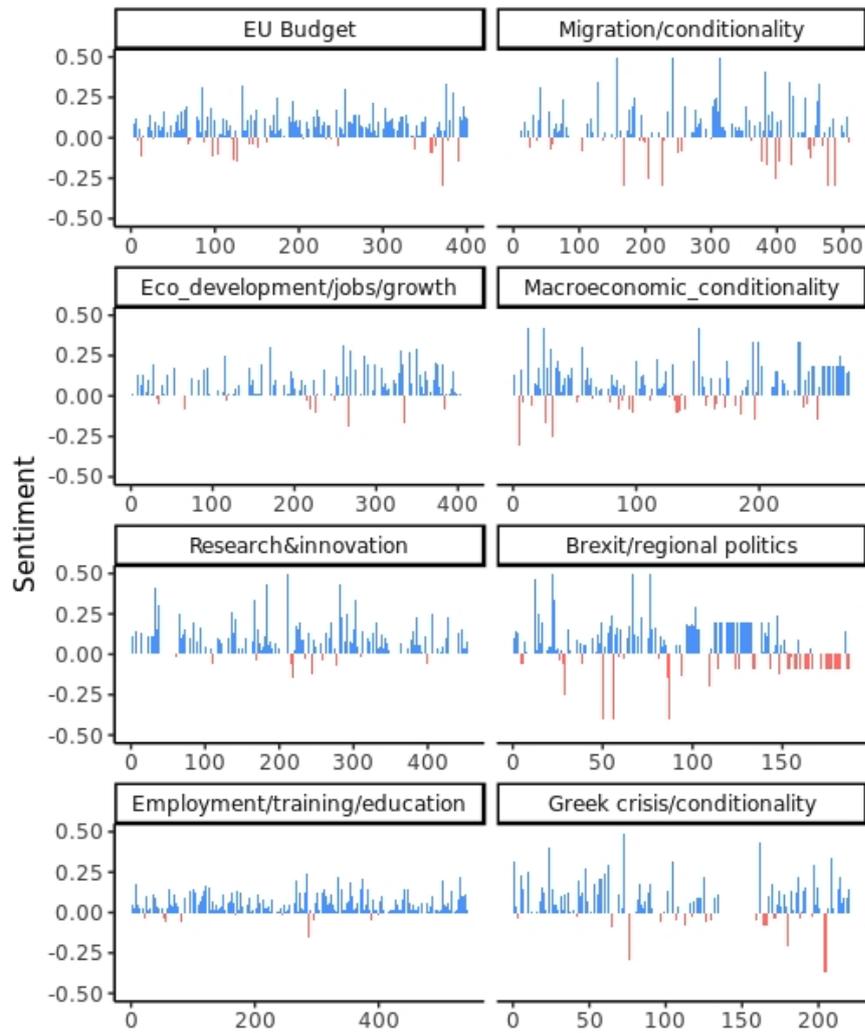
3.3   User comments

To explore public reactions to online media, this section analyses online commentary on cohesion policy news stories on media sites. As citizens increasingly consume their news via the internet, there are unparalleled opportunities for immediate citizen feedback in online discussions spontaneously generated among readers. This is especially prominent among some of the more popular news sites, and is a development that has proliferated across all countries albeit to different degrees. The term user generated content (UGC) is used in this report to refer to the comments and feedback that is generated by readers of online news content.

A number of criteria were used to select the sites. First, it was necessary for the website's comments section to be crawl-able, i.e., the absence of paywall or special user account requirements. Second, the focus was on the more popular websites. The third criterion was volume which is necessary for quantitative analysis. Lastly, that there were at least a number of stories from the same site such that averages could be calculated with some degree of reliability.

The data collection focused on two of the most popular news sites per country. Since text translation into English was applied to all the content, only the news site of those countries with languages that could be translated were crawled for online comments. Overall, around 100,000 user-generated comments were gathered from 14 online news sites across seven EU member states. The list of countries and news sites are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: List of online news site crawled with comments

Country	Site	Average comments per story	Max. #comments
UK	Daily Mail	162	1559
UK	Guardian	196	4833
Spain	El mundo	6	515
Spain	El Pais	23	1136
Italy	Il Fatto Quotidiano	45	504
Italy	Il Giornale	11	132
Germany	Spiegel	45	450
Germany	Weltde	130	308
Austria	der Standard	62	2587
Austria	die Presse	16	43
France	Le Figaro	24	3378
France	Le Monde	28	556
Poland	Dziennik	13	20
Poland	Interia	45	1160

In some cases, it was possible to gather data from the largest news organisations of a country, such as France, Spain and the UK. In other cases, it was a TV portal (Germany) or a web portal (Poland) that were crawled for comments. In some others cases, such as Italy and Poland, only smaller circulation news media had a sufficient volume of stories for calculating reliable averages.

Table 4 shows for each news site the maximum number of comments generated for a cohesion policy story. Some news sites, typically very popular ones, can have very lively comments. Only in the case of Germany was the maximum number of comments less than 500. In all other cases at least one site crossed that threshold and for some sites by quite a margin.

The average comments per story is also indicative of how cohesion policy stories generate commentary. It is important to note that the average number of comments in only for the cohesion policy stories that were collected and not the average for the site as a whole. It is highly likely that for some country cases other issue areas generate more average comments per story. For the sample of stories collected the average level of commentary appears to be rather high. Only in one case, Spain's El Mundo, is the rate lower than 10. Indeed, for some countries such as Germany and the UK the rate is high.

To illustrate some of the issues that are actively discussed by readers, Table 5 looks at the top two stories per media site. For Austria and Germany, the salient topics are related to conditionality, the migration crisis and Greek financial crisis. The migration issue is also important in Spain. In the French press it is stories about Polish workers and legal reform in the country, while in Italy issues related to employment are also important. All high commentary Polish stories are about political clashes over funds, while for the UK all stories are related to Brexit.

Many of the high commentary stories are about broader EU politics rather than specifically about cohesion policy. Such stories tend to be about problems and conflicts. To evaluate the overall tone across the stories, sentiment analysis was performed. Figure 21 shows the results of sentiment analysis performed on the corpus of comments grouped by media source. As expected, online commentary is generally highly expressive and polarising. The large amount of negative tone is not unsurprising given the sources. It should be noted that this does not mean the cohesion policy relevant aspects of the stories are perceived negatively since a story might be about a crisis event but the cohesion policy issue is portrayed positively. Instead, Figure 21 should be seen as an example of lively, but polarising debate among the citizenry. As revealed in the previous topic modeling section, when narrowing the focus to actual cohesion policy relevant sentences the tone tended to be overwhelmingly positive.

Table 5:   **Examples of stories with maximum comments**

Country	Site	#Comments	Main issue
AT	derstandard	2587	Migration/Conditionality
AT	derstandard	629	Asylum/Migration
AT	diepresse	43	EU subsidy for Croatia
AT	diepresse	37	Hungary clash over conditionality/migration
DE	spiegel	450	Greece crisis
DE	spiegel	447	Brexit
DE	weltde	308	EU funding for refugees
DE	weltde	278	Frontex border control
ES	elpais	1136	Domestic politics and EU funds
ES	elpais	1133	Germany and migrant quotas
ES	elmundo	515	Domestic politics and regional politics
ES	elmundo	32	Migration crisis and lack of EU response
FR	lefigaro	3378	France-Poland clash on relocated workers
FR	lefigaro	963	EU battle with Poland over legal reforms
FR	lemonde	556	France-Poland clash on relocated workers
FR	lemonde	313	Macron's plan for the future of the EU
IT	ilfattoquotidiano	504	Domestic regional politics
IT	ilfattoquotidiano	215	Citizenship and employment rights
IT	ilgiornale	132	EU and employment rights for immigrants
IT	ilgiornale	93	Italian government vs EU Commission
PO	interia	1160	Poland losses in Structural Fund allocation
PO	interia	922	Battle over EU funds
PO	dziennik	20	Government battle over EU budget
PO	dziennik	20	EU cuts for Poland
UK	guardian	4637	Breixt and National Health Service
UK	guardian	4603	Brexit and living standards
UK	dailymail	1559	UK divorce bill
UK	dailymail	732	Brexit and Nigel Farage

Figure 21: Sentiment scores per country source
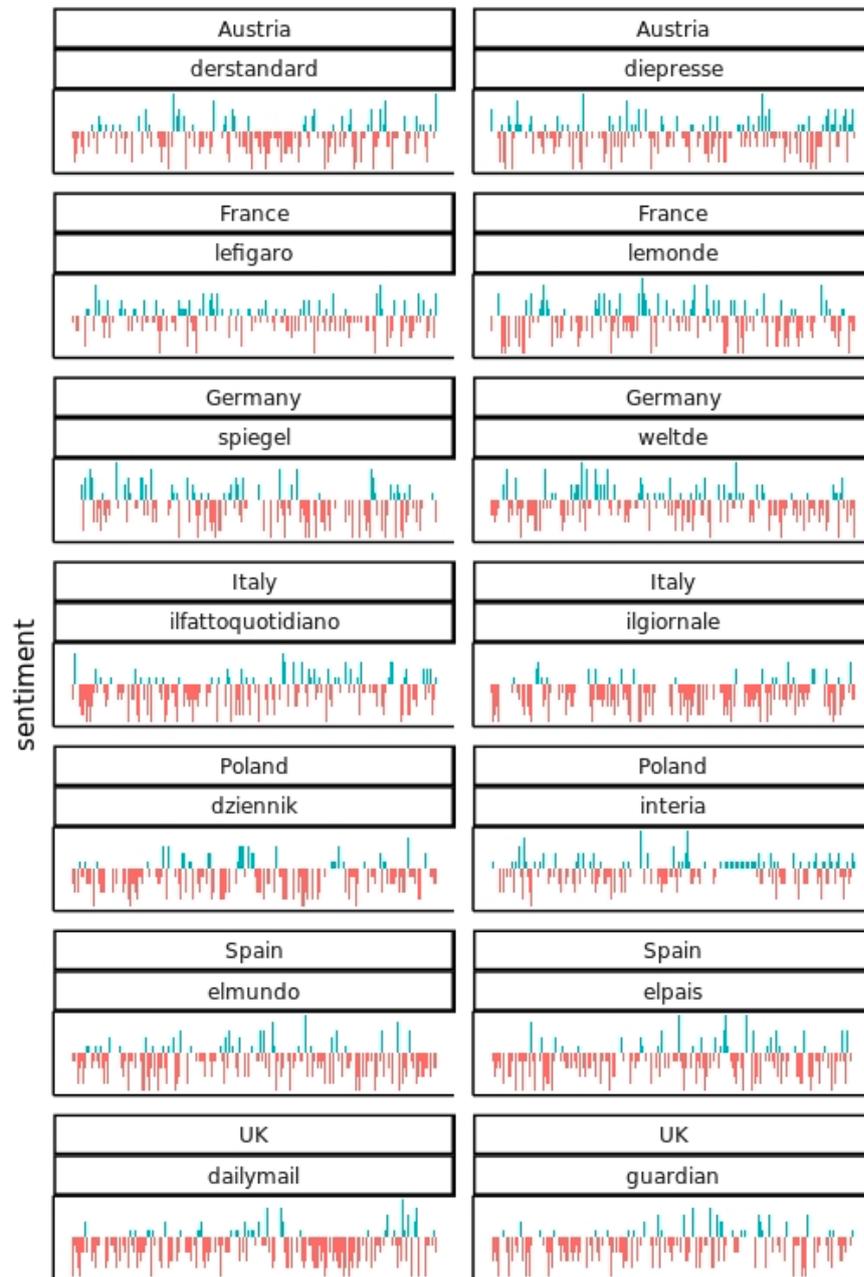
4.   SOCIAL MEDIA

KEY FINDINGS

- **Facebook (FB) posts on cohesion policy constitute a small share** of overall FB posts by EU institutional actors, parties and interest groups. The majority of analysed FB posts (almost 60 percent) are by DG REGIO (Europe in my Region), followed (a long way behind) by the CPMR and Commissioner for Regional Policy. Among political parties, the Greens dominate in using FB.

- **Most FB posts are neutral in tone**, providing factual information, although DG REGIO posts generally contain more positive sentiment.

- **Twitter visibility is relatively low among EP candidates**. Around 15 percent of EP election candidates with a Twitter account tweeted about cohesion policy during the period January-June 2019, on average 3 times and in generally positive terms.

- **The largest number of tweets were again by DG REGIO** followed by EU influencers (typically journalists, EU officials and academics) and interest groups representing regional/local actors. The tone was overwhelmingly positive, significantly more so than for the EP candidates

---

4.1   Facebook

The visibility of cohesion policy in social media is analysed through Facebook and Twitter platforms, the most popular social networks. Crucially, both platforms provide certain features (likes, shares, retweets, etc.) that allow for quantitative analysis of the volume and potential audience of social media activity. This first section provides analysis of Facebook media coverage of cohesion policy. To understand the scope of Facebook media being posted and the discussions generated, data was collected from the public pages of all EU institutions, bodies and prominent cohesion policy stakeholders/interest groups. The data include comments, reactions and users, as well as post characteristics (timing, type and length). The following analysis evaluates FB posts on cohesion policy in terms of visibility, reactions, the topics and tone of posts, and the determinants of engagement.

Visibility

The visibility of Facebook activity on cohesion policy can be measured by comparing the volume of FB posts by EU actors relative to cohesion policy relevant posts. Figure 22 below shows the distribution of Facebook posts grouped by actor. The first plot relates to all Facebook post. The figure includes the list of all Facebook pages that were crawled for the analysis. A total number of 11,285 Facebook posts were analysed. Note the actual number of Facebook posts crawled was higher, however, the analysis focused on the period since 2013. As shown in the second plot in Figure 22 only a subset of these Facebook posts were identified as relevant to cohesion policy based on a keyword content search. The number of relevant posts was 691 posts, which amounts to just over 6 percent.

Figure 22:   Number of Facebook posts by Actor
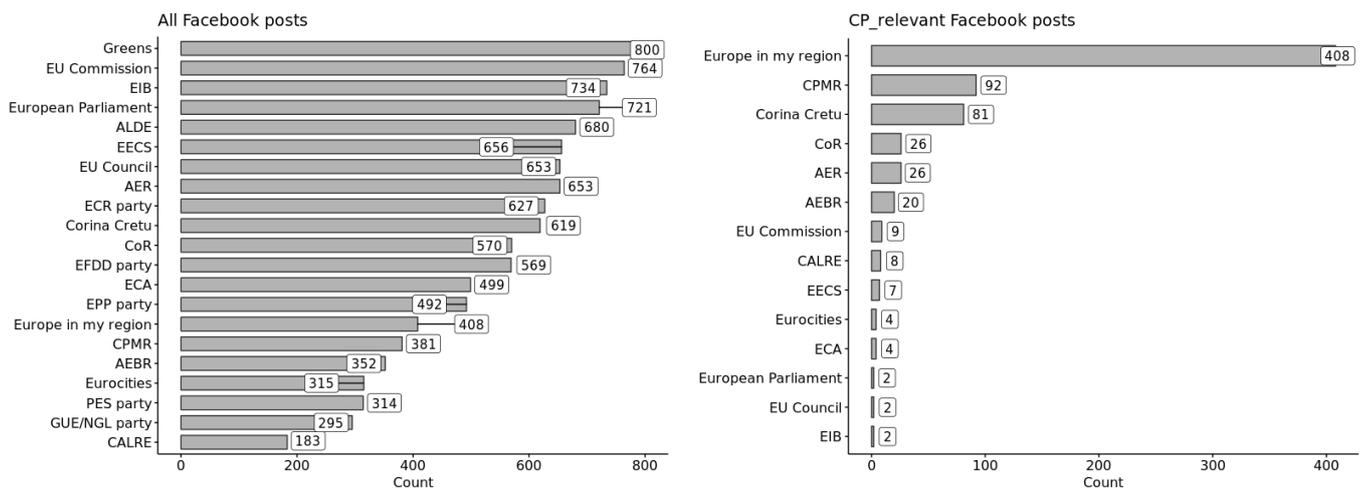
The largest share of cohesion policy posts by far are generated by DG REGIO's Europe in my region Facebook page (almost 60 percent of the total), as can be seen in the second plot of Figure 22. It is worth noting that a number of interest group associations are also well represented, accounting collectively for just over one-fifth of the total. The EU institutions (Commission, Council and European Parliament) as well as other EU institutional actors and bodies are very poorly represented in the aggregate numbers. Due to the very low count of posts for many EU institutional actors (EIB, ECA, EP, Council of Ministers), these organisations will be grouped together for some of the analyses conducted below.

Figure 23 shows the evolution of Facebook post activity over time**. An upward trajectory for the number of Facebook posts per year is evident, but much less clear for cohesion policy relevant posts**. In fact, the gap appears to be widening. In the year 2017 CP relevant Facebook posts accounted for approximately 13 percent of all posts. In 2018 that proportion had dropped marginally to 11 per cent, notwithstanding a significant increase in CP posts. By 2019, however, the proportion has dropped dramatically to approximately 5 percent of the total.

The declining visibility of cohesion policy posts relative to all posts could potentially be explained by two factors. First, there was a significant increase in FB post activity in relation to general EU institutional issues in the run up to the European Parliament elections. Second, the period saw an increasing corporate focus on the 'InvestEU' media campaign.

Figure 23: Facebook posts over time
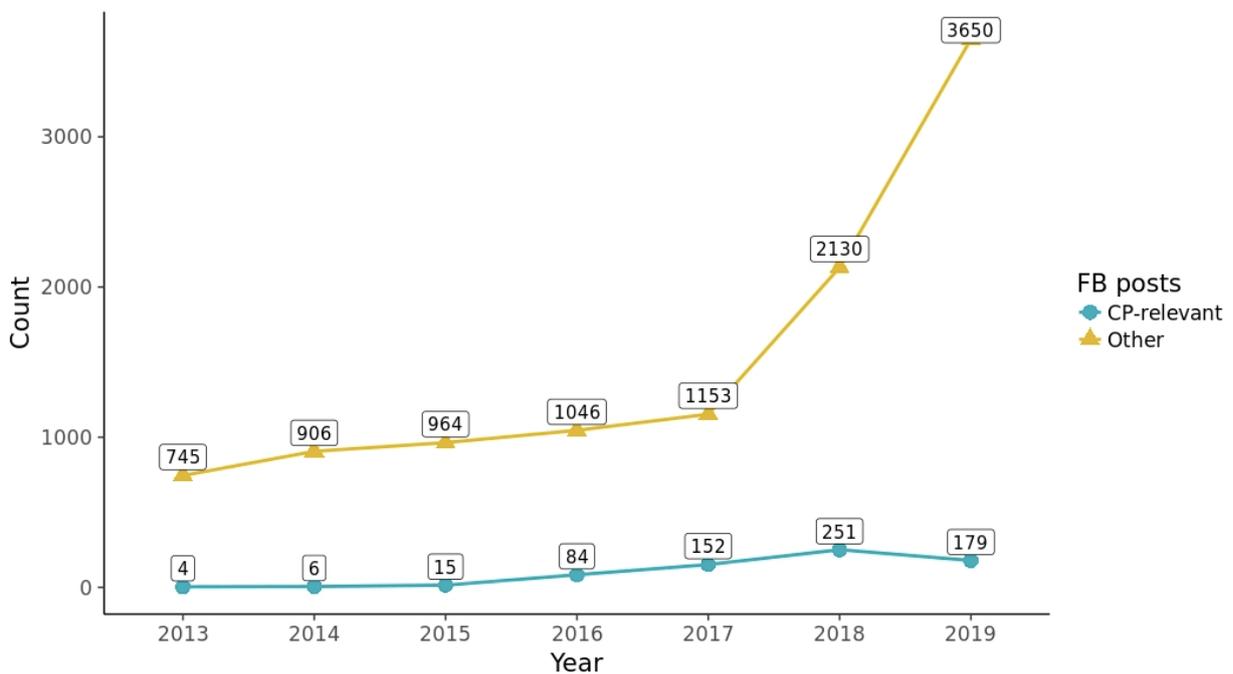
Engagement

To assess the impact of FB posts, an analysis of engagement is undertaken. Engagement is a marketing term that captures the commitment and the way a follower interacts with a brand. The term is used in analysis of social networks such as Facebook to measure the degree of interaction between posts and users. Measuring the engagement of a post facilitates comparison across different posts with a simple and standardised metric. Thus, the "brand" is a single post, and those followers who can interact with the post are "users".

For this analysis, the engagement ratio of a given post is defined by the interactions with the post (i.e. comments, likes…) over the number of followers of the FB Page. It is important to note that not all interactions can be considered equally important for the calculation of engagement. In social networks, more impact is generated by commenting on a post than a simple "like" as there is a stronger level of two-way interaction. Therefore, the final formula for the calculation of engagement ratio is:

$$Engagement_{ratio} = \frac{Num.\ Reactions * 1 + Num.\ Comments * 2 + [Num.\ Shares * 3]}{Num.\ Followers}$$

where Num.Reactions includes the total number of 'likes', 'love', 'ahah', 'grrr', 'wow' and 'sigh' reactions.

Figure 24 plots the average rate of engagement of all FB posts on cohesion policy by actor. It is clear that the posts with the highest engagement are by DG REGIO ('EU in my region'), which accounts for 13 of the top 15 posts - represented by purple dots with engagement values greater than 2.5. However, the box plots also show that other actors score higher engagement ratios on average across all of their posts. In particular, the interest groups CALRE, CPMR and AEBR have particularly high engagement rates. While the European Parliament has the highest engagement rate, it is important to note that it only has two cohesion policy posts under its corporate account and that the high score is accounted for by a single post.

Figure 24:   Engagement with FB content posted by EU actors
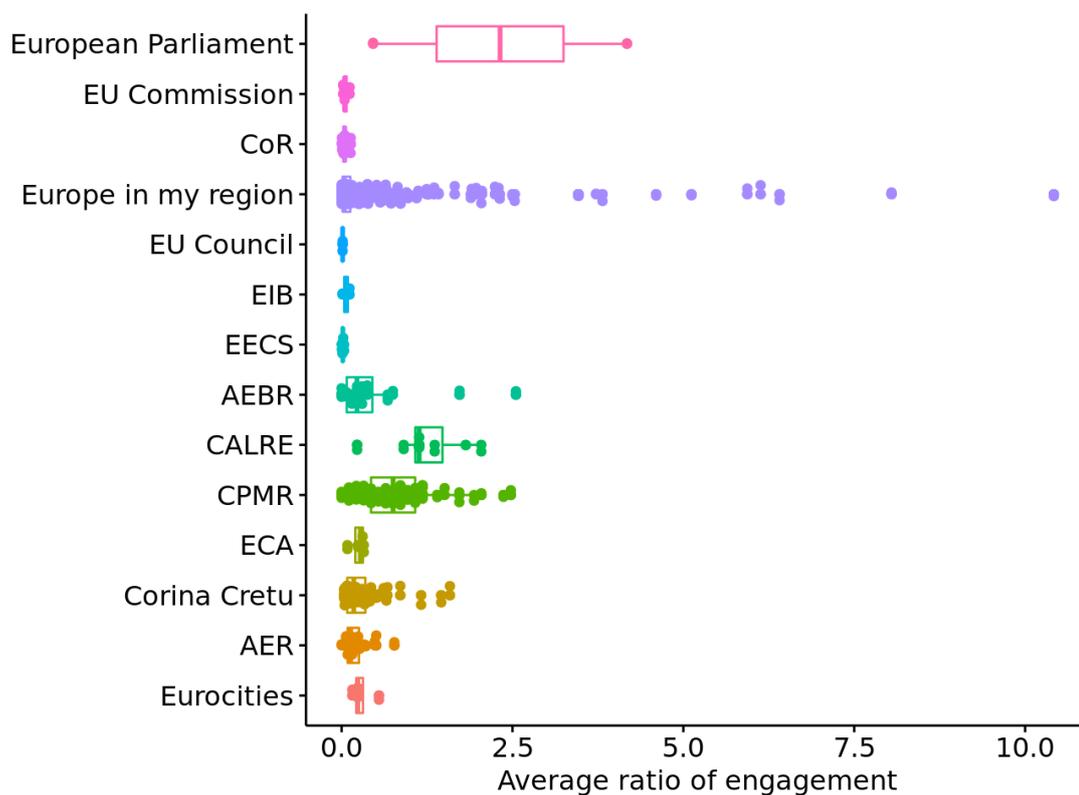
To provide an illustration of the topics covered in the most popular posts, Table 6 provides a subset of the top 15 posts and their content as well as the total number of reactions, likes and engagement scores. As noted, 13 of the most engaging post are by DG REGIO, notably posts on quiz and blogging contests (ranked 1, 3, 7, 11, 12, 15) and targeting youngsters through a European 'roadtrip' event (5, 8, 9, 10 14) and training on journalism (6). Posts on the RegioStars awards (2) and photo competition (4) also have high engagement.

Aside from DG REGIO posts, only two of the most engaging 15 posts are by other EU actors. These include a post by the corporate account of the European Parliament on its report on the ESF+ Regulation for 2021-27; and a post by the AEBR interest group announcing a meeting of project beneficiaries, which has a much smaller number of reactions but high engagement relative to the number of followers (Table 6).

The content of FB posts across a broader range of actors is provided in an Annex to this study, which includes the top-3 FB posts for all of the 14 EU actors/FB accounts covered by the analysis. This shows that a high number of the most engaging posts relate to cohesion policy reform (Council of Ministers, Commission, AEBR, CALRE, CoR, CPMR, EECS), events/seminars (AEBR, Commissioner Cretu, CoR, EECS, EIB), awareness raising about the policy or projects (AEBR, EECS, European Parliament, European Commission), prizes and competitions (AEBR, DG REGIO), training (ECA, Eurocities) and reports/studies (ECA).

Table 6:   Most popular cohesion policy posts in terms of engagement

Actor	Post	Reactions	Likes	Engagement
Europe in my region	The new winner of the #EUinmyRegion summer quiz will be selected at the end of July. It could be you! Seize the opportunity to win a box full of European regional delicacies! https://bit.ly/2yd2mmL	5100	5100	10.42
Europe in my region	, and contributes to better connected territories? Apply for the EU Broadband Award in the "Territorial cohesion in rural and remote areas" category!	3900	3800	8.05
Europe in my region	"SOLIDARITY in Europe: We're all sitting in the same boat!" by Jasmine Kanditt Interreg South Baltic Youth Volunteer for the #EUinmyRegion blogging contest 'I hope that my experiences shared with you on the blog will encourage in the future many more young Europeans like me to join the growing "Interreg Youth family" of the European Solidarity Corps.' Read, Rate, Share and Join!	3100	3100	6.41
Europe in my region	Each year the EU invests in thousands of projects in candidate countries: find one somewhere near you! Enter your photos with EU funded projects from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia or Turkey :	3000	2900	6.13
Europe in my region	It's time to MEET OUR TRAVELLERS and get ready to follow an incredible journey! Now let the Mediterranean Route begin (on 14 April!) - first stop: Athens! #roadtriproject	2900	2700	5.94
Europe in my region	If you are studying #journalism, this might be for you! http://europa.eu/!dF37BN Applications for this year's edition of the #Youth4Regions media programme are now open! Find out how you could take part in #EURegionsWeek, together with 27 other students!	2500	2400	5.12
Europe in my region	Week 1 of the Road Trip Project went by really fast! Watch our full-length video about the history of Athens, the nature of Konitsa, the food in Thessaloniki, boat adventures between Greece and Albania, and more here https://bit.ly/2vDLAP1 #roadtriproject	2200	2000	4.60
European Parliament	✅ It fights poverty. ✅ It tackles unemployment. ✅ It is the EU's oldest financial instrument to invest in people. What is it? It's the European Social Fund and you can find out more about it here @ http://epfacebook.eu/qgYj	1900	1700	4.18
Europe in my region	After 4 weeks of landscapes, people, languages, and food, our journey along the Danube brought us to our final destination: the Delta. Look back at our last week, while we get ready for the next adventure! #roadtriproject	1800	1600	3.82
Europe in my region	What to do in Budapest when you have so much to see, and little time? We asked Norbert Lepsik - the coolest photographer in Budapest - for tips and let our friends on Instagram choose for us. Here's what we've been up to! #roadtriproject	1700	1500	3.72
Europe in my region	"Walking Bus and Bike Train to Promote Sustainable Mobility" blog post by Petra Očkerl for the blogging contest! As the traffic lights change to green, a long line of children on their bikes accompanied by adults wearing reflective safety vests crosses the road. It is the bike train. Read, Rate and Share! Georgian People's Address to Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili Emergence of the country and the people brought to…	1700	1700	3.47
Europe in my region	"MamaPan, the bakery that employs mothers with many children or single mothers" blog post by Irina Bartolomeu for the blogging contest! "Women with children are a vulnerable group with regards to employment" to understand how Bucharest dealt with this problem, read the following post: Like and share!	1700	1700	3.46
AEBR	Good morning! 😊 Today we are at Brussels ✈ with Europe in my region attending the meeting of project beneficiaries for #bsolutions. Get to know your neighbour! 👋 #EUBorderRegions #CohesionPolicy	34	34	2.55
Europe in my region	If you haven't visited Serbia or Hungary yet, you should definitely start thinking about it! Catch up with our third week along our Danube route. Next week: Romania, and a quest for the Danube Delta! #roadtriproject	1200	1000	2.53
Europe in my region	"This App is (still) a Secret Tip: Why DIVERCITIES MUST Get Started Throughout Europe" by Miriam Reif Leitmotiv Europe for the #EUinmyRegion blogging contest One crisis after another – and the EU is far-removed from the people. Ever thought that too? No problem! Today, I present to you a very cool EU project, which is happening right on your doorstep and on digital receiving devices: The Future DiverCities project, with its DIVERCITIES app. Ready to join? Rate and Share!	1200	1200	2.50

Finally, to analyse the determinants of engagement with cohesion policy posts, a regression analysis was undertaken. The results of the OLS regression are shown in Table 7 revealing that engagement has been increasing over time and that posts with photos have higher levels of engagement. It also shows that the type of actor matters, with interest groups (e.g. AEBR, CPMR) most likely to generate high engagement. By contrast, the sentiment or length of posts is not associated with the level of engagement.

Table 7:   Regression explaining engagement ratio

	Dependent variable: Engagement	
Length	-0.0003	(-0.001)
Post type:		
Photos	0.418***	(-0.104)
Type of actor:		
Other Institution/body	-0.185	(-0.141)
Institution	0.14	(-0.237)
Interest group	0.390***	(-0.08)
Time	0.0003***	(-0.0001)
Sentiment	-0.21	(-0.206)
Constant	-5.709***	(-1.841)
Observations	691	
R2	0.056	
Adjusted R2	0.046	
Residual Std. Error	0.838	(df = 683)
F Statistic	5.792***	(df = 7; 683)

Note: $p<0.1$*; $p<0.05$**; $p<0.01$***

DG Regio was the reference category for Type of actor; Story was the reference category for Post type. Unstandardised residuals are in brackets.

Tone of posts

To evaluate the tone of FB posts on cohesion policy, sentiment analysis was undertaken. Sentiment analysis is the task of automatically determining what feelings a user is expressing in a text. Although sentiment is often split as a binary distinction (positive or negative) it is worth noting that most sentences from texts are neutral because they do not express any opinion. We employ a sentiment lexicon approach to analyse the sentiment of texts by matching the FB posts with a list of pre-defined words associated with a specific sentiment value.

The boxplot in

Figure 25 shows the average level of sentiment for the different actors at the level of posts, i.e., where each dot represents a Facebook post. Positive numbers on the x axis (Average sentiment level) reflect a positive score while negative scores are indicative of negative sentiment. Since group comparisons are affected by the number of posts per groups when the number is low, the grouping is based on the four largest groups of actors:

- Institution (Council of Ministers, Commission, European Parliament)
- Other institution (EIB, ECA, EECS, CoR, ECSC)
- DG REGIO
- Interest group (AEBR, AER, CALRE, CPMR, EUROCITIES)

The boxplots show that the groups, notably DG REGIO, have a large range with some very positive stories. In all cases, the mean level of sentiment is well above the dashed 0 line and in the positive side of the spectrum. Unlike the positive end of the spectrum, there are no posts that are clearly in the negative territory, i.e., below -0.5. Indeed, none of the posts cross the 0.3 threshold. What this suggests is that by and large most stories are rather neutral albeit with a significant number in the case of DG REGIO in the very positive side. Illustrative examples of FB posts with positive and negative tone are provided in Table 8.

Figure 25   Sentiment analysis grouped by type of actor
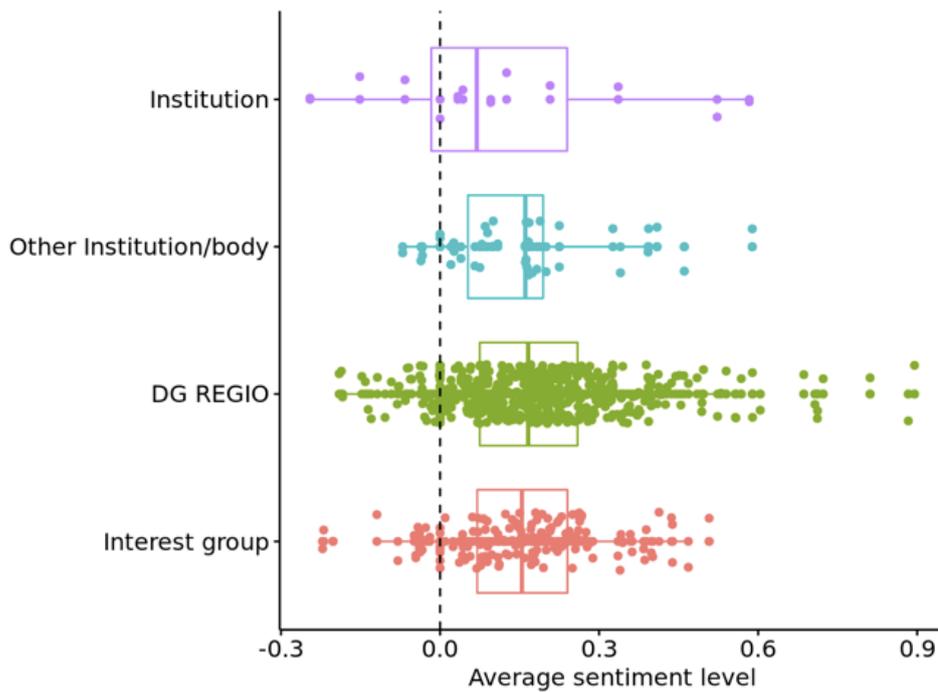
Table 8:   Examples of FB posts with positive and negative sentiment

Actor	Post	Type
Europe in my region	What does it mean to live in the EU? Let's see it through the eyes of Anna, an ordinary 🇩🇪 🇪🇺 citizen. The #EU improves the quality of your life in different fields: 💧 water quality 🌿 organic food 🔋 data protection 💨 clean air ♻️ recycling 🧸 safe toys 🛍️ consumer rights Discover more at: https://www.what-europe-does-for-me.eu/ #EUandME	Positive
Europe in my region	The Czech IT4Innovations Center hosts one of the most advanced supercomputer in 🇪🇺. Learn how #CohesionPolicy helped to accelerate research & innovation with data analysis and high performance computing: the new Euronews #SmartRegions episode is out 👇! Read more about this project: https://bit.ly/2HH8BFn	Positive
Europe in my region	Mob – why? by Sharing Europe for the blogging contest I was a victim of cyber bullying, even though when I went through it, there were no smartphones, Facebook, YouTube or WhatsApp. Rate and Share! If you want to fight cyberbullying: cc	Negative
CPMR	The CPMR is disheartened by the public consultation launched today by the European Commission on "EU funds in the area of Cohesion". CPMR Secretary General, Eleni Marianou said: "We fear that this questionnaire is misleading and poses a threat to the continuation of Cohesion policy". Read our press release > http://cpmr.org/cohesion/cpmr-disheartened-by-european-commission-consultation-on-cohesion-policy/16071/	Negative

4.2   Twitter

The second social media channel investigated is Twitter. The first step of the research involved altering the key terms list to include shorter terms related to cohesion Policy that are used on Twitter, such as hashtags (e.g. #CohesionPolicy), as well as acronyms for the key funds (ERDF, ESF, ESIF) in all European languages. These short acronyms, rather than the full name of the funding instrument, are more likely to be used given Twitter's text character restrictions. The key terms were used to make a Twitter historical search for the period January to June 2019. This returned approximately 3 million tweets posted after filtering out non-EU languages. This 'base' dataset constitutes the universe of 'potentially' relevant Tweets for the period under investigation. Evidently, a significant proportion of the 3 million Tweets in the base dataset are likely to be non-relevant since the key terms can have different meanings, especially in different languages (e.g. the ERDF acronym in Spanish, FEDER, also refers to a medical association). Furthermore, this dataset contains tweets and retweets.

The second step was to identify relevant Tweets based on account names. To this end, a database of all the candidates competing for the European Parliament elections of 2019 was created. In addition, a list of Twitter accounts for the EU institutions and organisations, as well as the top 40 EU influencers on Twitter in 2017 and 2018 (based on a list compiled by Euractiv.com), was created. The Twitter accounts of EP candidates, EU institutional actors and organisations as well the top EU influencers was then matched to the base dataset.

Distribution of cohesion policy twitter activity across actors

The analysis of candidates competing for the EP elections of 2019 identified a total of 8,055 candidates. Just over 38 percent of these candidates (3,099 individuals) had identifiable Twitter accounts. It was found that 1,292 cohesion policy tweets (including retweets) were made by the candidates. Since candidates frequently tweeted more than once, the actual count of candidates was a fraction of the total number of tweets. A total of 468 candidates were found to have tweeted at least once using a cohesion policy relevant term. This amounts to approximately 15 percent of candidates that competed in the EP elections and had a Twitter account, included a mention to cohesion policy in a tweet or a retweet. The relative small proportion of candidates tweeting about cohesion policy can be seen in Figure 26 depicted in yellow.

Figure 26:   Proportion of candidates by grouping
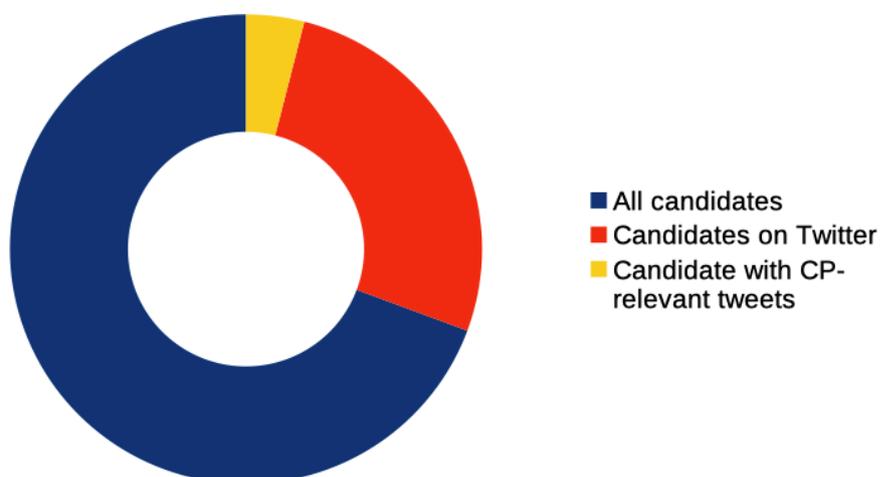
Looking at the actual number of cohesion policy tweets or retweets per candidate shows that the volume is small. As illustrated in Figure 27, the count of tweets per candidate, where the dashed vertical line represents the mean, was just below 3 tweets. A few outlier candidates tweeted quite actively on cohesion policy with more than 10 identified tweets/retweets.

Figure 27:   Cohesion policy tweets/retweets by candidates competing in the EP elections 2019
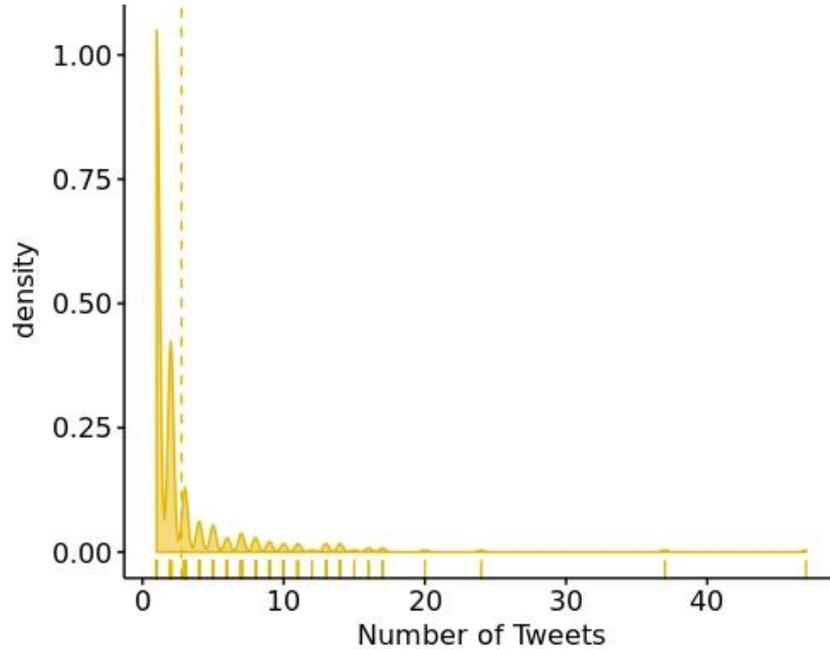
Moving on to the analysis of EU institutional actors, interest groups and influencers, a total of 1,159 tweets on cohesion policy were identified. **DG REGIO produced the largest number of cohesion policy tweets** with a total of 571 over the five-month period analysed (Figure 28). EU influencers (typically journalists, EU officials and academics) were also active with 179 tweets/retweets, followed by interest groups representing regional/local actors (145 tweets).

Figure 28:   Number of tweets/retweets per actor
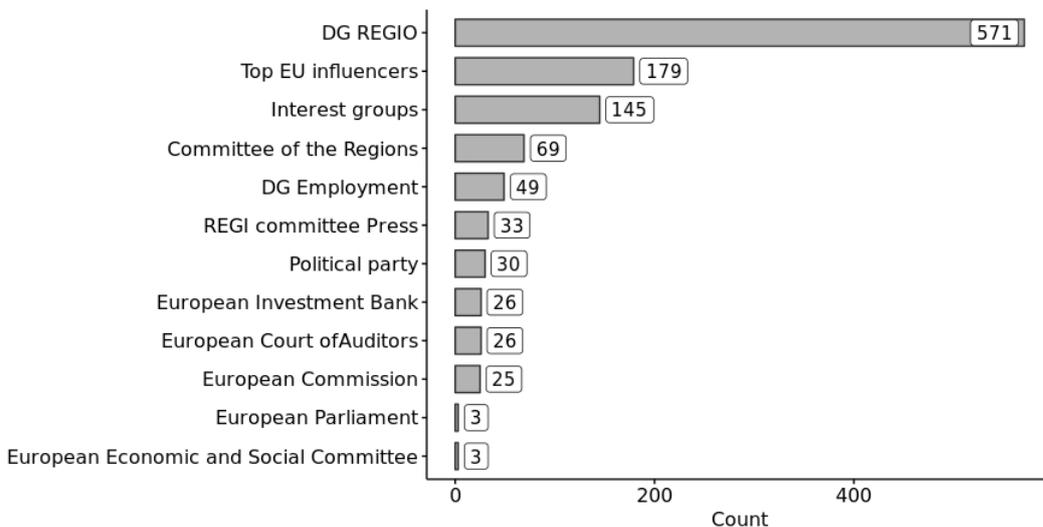
Engagement and reach

To conduct a more in-depth analysis of the engagement and reach of Twitter discussion, and to expand the range of users beyond the Brussels bubble of elite actors, a second dataset was created. It used unambiguous keywords (such as "European Social Fund". "European Regional Development Fund", "EU cohesion policy") as well as directly relevant hashtags (such as #euinmyregion) drawing on all EU languages. Combining step one, the Tweets identified in the base dataset from elite actor accounts (candidates, institutional actors and influencers), with the new targeted keyword search in step two, yielded a dataset of approximately 45,000 Tweets for the five month period in question. Crucially, this new dataset of relevant tweets contains ordinary users as well organisations such as media outlets.

It should be noted that as with most Twitter datasets, the overwhelming majority of tweets are retweets rather than original tweets. To measure the impact of tweets, the original tweet was identified along with the impact in terms of diffusion and engagement. From the 45,000 tweet/retweet dataset, a total of 4,895 original tweets were identified. The rest of the analysis focuses on this original tweets dataset.

The analysis of the language distribution of cohesion policy tweets reveals that English is the most popular language, accounting for more than half of all tweets (Figure 29). This is followed by Spanish and Italian, representing 13.7 percent and 13.2 percent respectively.

Figure 29: Original tweets by language
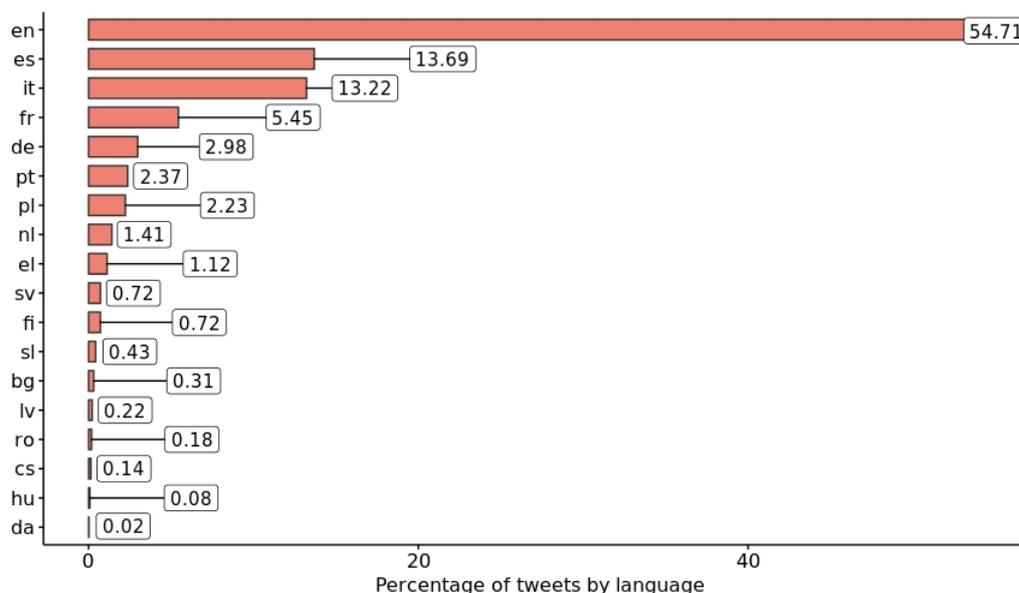
To distinguish between the different actors generating tweets we use a three-fold category:

(1) Candidates: for the EP elections of 2019
(2) Institutions: a wider category including EU institutions, territorial interest groups and EU influencers
(3) Other: all actors that were not specifically identified in categories 1 and 2. This group is mostly composed of ordinary citizens and organisations, such as media outlets as well as national/regional level stakeholders (including Managing Authorities and politicians that were not candidates in the EP elections).

Temporal dynamics

The evolution of Twitter activity does not reveal a pronounced change over time, as shown by the rather flat regression line in the first panel of Figure 30. However, there are some noticeable peaks in Twitter activity.

The first peak in Twitter activity on 4 March 2019 is Brexit related. It was provoked by the UK government's announcement of a 'Stronger Towns Fund' for the post-Brexit period. Much of the Twitter discussion was highly critical of the announcement arguing that the fund was being used to buy political support for Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement deal among opposition/Labour party Members of Parliament, and that the proposed £1.6 billion fund was in any case much lower than the £10 billion allocation by the EU through cohesion policy in 2014-20.

The second key peak on 9 May 2019 was 'Europe day', which corresponds with an EU-wide communication campaign by the Commission and managing authorities to publicise EU co-funded projects through events and by encouraging citizens to visit projects that are opened up to the public.

Figure 30: Distribution of original tweets over time, January-June 2019
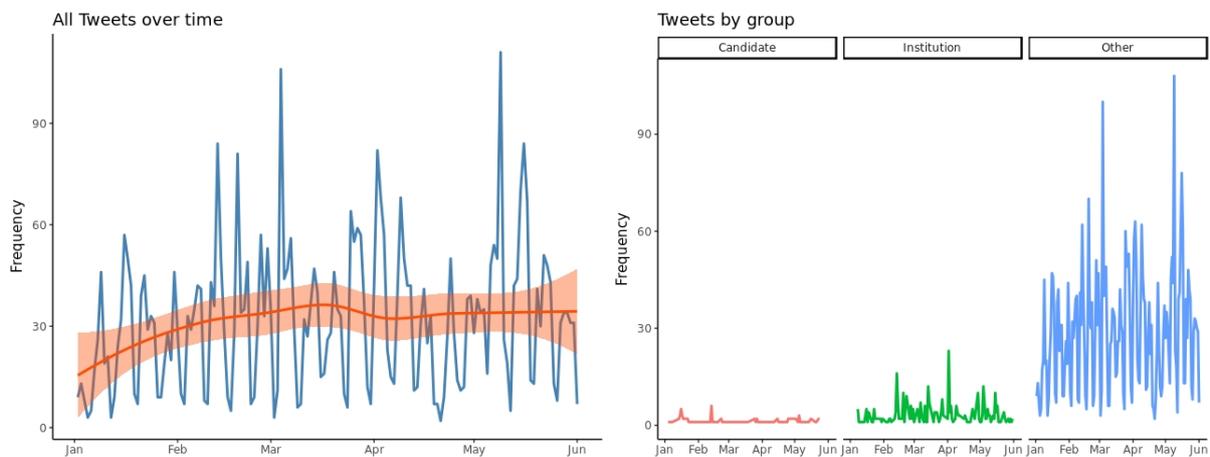
Engagement and reach

Retweets provide a useful indicator of twitter engagement. Figure 31 shows the overall retweet count per actor category. As can be seen in the first panel of the figure, among the 'Other' category there are some noticeable outlier Tweets on cohesion policy that have had generated a high volume of retweets. Closer inspection reveals that some of these Tweets at the high end are Brexit-related tweets.

Figure 31: Retweet count of original tweets
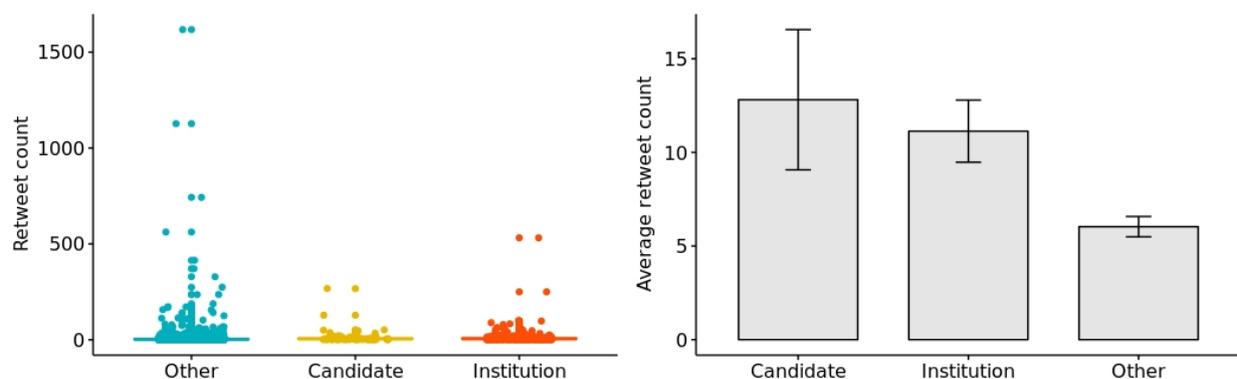
The second panel in Figure 31 estimates the average retweet count per group. The average is somewhat higher for the EP Candidate grouping. Both the EP Candidate and EU institutional categories have a significantly higher average retweet impact than the Other category. This is not surprising since the EP Candidate and EU Institutional categories are mainly composed of elite actors, while the other category contains ordinary citizens (as well as policy stakeholders, including managing authorities).

To further explore the engagement and reach of cohesion policy tweets, two metrics were created: (1) Engagement Index and (2) Potential Reach. The Engagement Index measures the level of engagement/commitment generated by a specific, original tweet. The index takes into account all the interactions that the content of a tweet has attracted as a proportion of the total number of followers. The Engagement Index takes account of different levels of commitment of Twitter interactions through the following weighting scores: Likes (weight=1), Retweets (weight=2) and Quotes and Replies (weight=3). It is formally defined as follows:

$$\text{Engagement}_{index} = \frac{(Favourite*1)+(Retweet*2)+(Quote*3)+(Reply*3)}{Num.Followers} * 100$$

This type of metric is most appropriate for analysing tweet engagement from accounts with similar numbers of followers. However, it is instructive to see the distribution of engagement grouped by category. As can be can be seen in the first panel of Figure 32, the "Other" category attracts greater engagement. However, this effect is driven by the relatively low numbers of followers on average within this category. This can be seen in the second panel in Figure 7 where the average number of followers per category are shown. The institutional accounts have the highest follower count.

Figure 32: Average level of engagement and followers by group
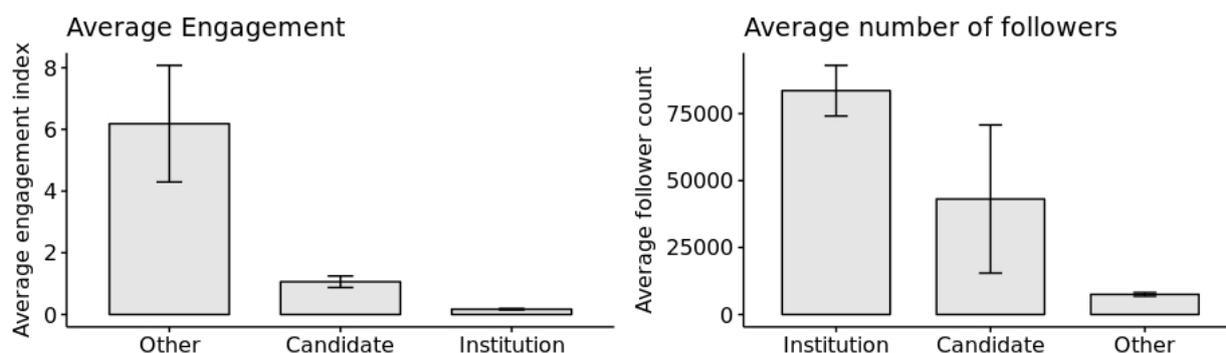
This suggests that Tweets from EU institutional actors are not especially engaging, in terms of interaction levels from other users, when controlling for the number of followers. An illustration can be seen in Figure 33, which shows the engagement ratio by follower count with some examples of outlier cases from each of the three groups. Amongst the EP candidates, the MEP Marine Le Pen has by far the largest number of followers. Further inspection reveals that this MEP posted one original cohesion policy tweet during the period under study that generated a relatively high number of retweets (26), which constitute a very small proportion of her follower count. Not surprisingly, among the EU institutional groups, it is the European Commission and the European Parliament with the highest following by some degree.

Figure 33: Engagement index by follower count
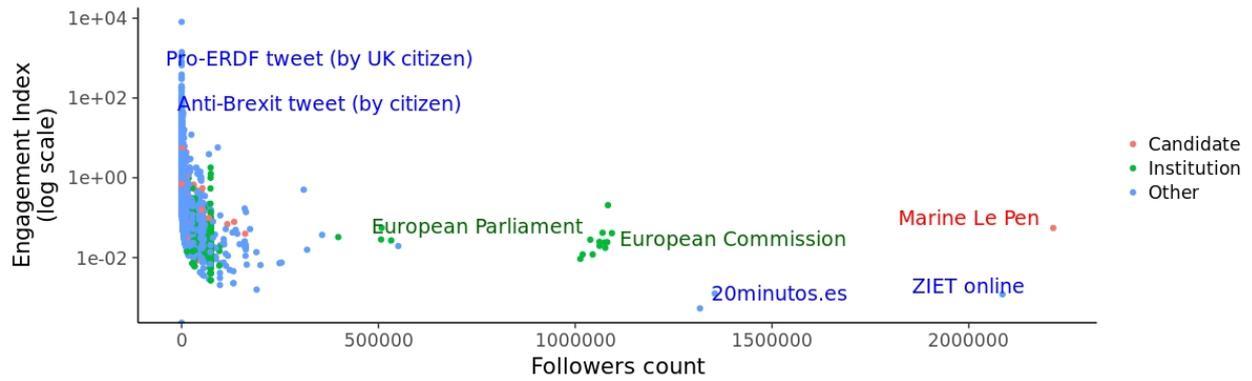
The 'Other' grouping includes some media organisations (e.g. the Spanish and German organisations 20minutos.es and ZIET online) that have very high follower counts, but did not generate any significant engagement – when measured in relative terms to their follower count. On the other hand, some Tweets by ordinary citizens can generate high levels of engagement, as shown by the two annotated tweets in Figure 33. . The two tweet examples depicted were either directly or indirectly related to Brexit and the loss of Structural Funds. These tweets generated high levels of engagement as measured by the index or by an even more straightforward measure - the number of retweets which was over 1000.

The Potential Reach index measures the maximum diffusion of a tweet within the social network. It is associated to the number of "viewers" (users) of the content. For this study, the Potential Reach index has been defined as follows:

$$PotentialReach = Num.Followers\_user + \sum_{i=1}^{n=UsersRT} Num.Followers$$

where Num.Followers_user is the number of followers of the user while

$$\sum_{i=1}^{n=UsersRT} Num.Followers\,(i)$$

is related to the number of followers of those users who have retweeted the tweet, thereby increasing the diffusion of the content.

It is important to note that the Potential Reach index focuses on the upper limits of diffusion while the final reach of a tweet is expected to be lower than this limit.

Figure 34 shows that the EU institutions actors category has the highest average potential reach, while the wide confidence bars for the EP Candidate category indicates high variability among candidates in terms of their potential reach.

Figure 34: Potential reach index by actor group
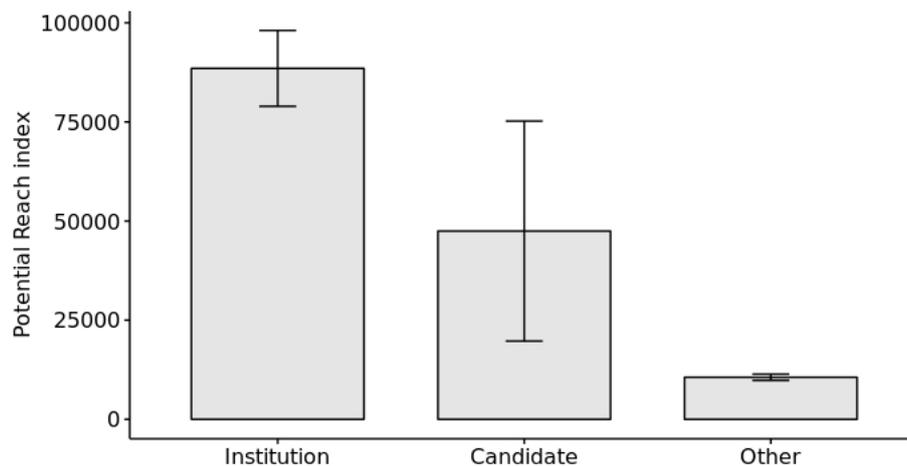
Tone of tweets

Sentiment analysis was performed on the tweets to assess the tone of cohesion policy discussions. As can be seen in Figure 35, the average sentiment polarity is in the positive range. This is particularly the case for the EU institutional actor category, and to a slightly lesser degree for the EP candidate tweets. The 'other' category, on the other hand, has more polarization in terms of positive and negative tone.

Figure 35: Sentiment polarity by actor group
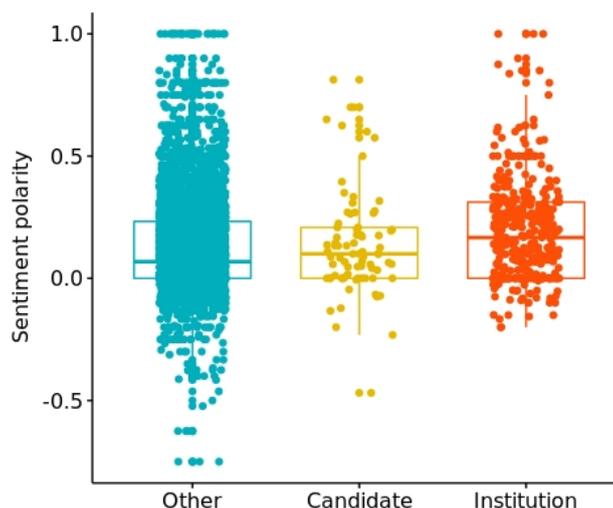
Determinants of twitter engagement

To explore the determinants of the diffusion of Twitter media content on cohesion policy, a statistical regression analysis was undertaken of the volume of tweets' retweets and favourites. The engagement and potential reach indices could not be used because the data was highly skewed. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 9. Whether the outcome is the Retweet count or the Favourite count, the significant factors remain the same in both models. EP Candidates and Institutions

(relative to the 'other' actor category) are both positively associated with higher retweet and favourite counts.

Higher sentiment scores (more positive content) is associated with lower diffusion rates, which could be indicative of more polarizing content generating higher retweet and favourite counts. Finally, an indicator variable was created for the campaign period of the EP election, where Yes indicates the six-week period leading up to the EP election at the end of May 2019. Here we find a negative association, indicating that tweets from the pre-election campaign period were more likely to have higher diffusion.

Table 9:   Regression of retweets and favourites

	Reetweet count	Favourites count
Actor (base = other)		
EP candidate	0.689***	0.879***
	(0.032)	(0.023)
Institution	0.622***	0.844***
	(0.017)	(0.012)
Sentiment	-1.325***	-1.097***
	(0.032)	(0.025)
Word length	0.042***	0.049***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Campaign period: Yes	-0.406***	-0.313***
	(0.013)	(0.001)
Constant	0.463***	0.566***
	(0.028)	(0.023)
Observations	4,895	4,895
Log Likelihood	-48,667	-88,178
Akaike Inf. Crit.	97,346	176,368

Note: Poisson regression. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; p *** < 0.01;

5.   EU PRESS RELEASES

KEY FINDINGS

- **Cohesion policy visibility in institutional press activity is relatively low**. For EU institutions, press releases have been a major channel of communication, with 13,000 issued over the 2013-19 period – some 5,000 from the EU institutions and 8,000 from political parties. The proportion of cohesion policy press releases is very low and averages just 30 per year.

- **Cohesion policy is more visible in the press release activity of the European Commission**, constituting 4 percent of press releases. It features not just in press releases about the policy itself, especially with reference to regions, but in releases on the EU budget and EU investment activity.

- **EU institutional press releases** tend to focus on socio-economic issues, whereas the European Parliament's **political parties** are more likely to frame their releases in terms of power issues (institutional bargaining, empowerment, conditionality etc.).

- **EU press releases do have some traction on social media**, although representing a very small proportion of all tweets relating to cohesion policy, and they are mainly diffused by EU institutions and stakeholders rather than the public

---

EU Press releases are official statements delivered to the news media with the aim of providing information or making an announcement. This section analyses the volume and visibility of cohesion policy press releases over time and compares the distribution of activity across EU institutions and political parties. It also examines the content of cohesion policy press releases through a comparison of the semantic and syntactic content across different policy domains, and through in-depth qualitative framing analysis.

5.1   Institutional and policy visibility

The total number of press releases crawled during the period covering the EP legislature of 2014 to 2019 was just under 13,000. This corpus of data was then divided into two groups, the main EU institutions (the Commission, Council and Parliament) and the different political party groups (e.g. the S&D and EPP). Approximately 5,000 press releases came from EU institutions while just over 8,000 were generated by the political party groups.

The distribution of press releases over time are shown in Figure 36 distinguishing those on cohesion policy from other all other EU policy domains. There is clearly an upward trend in the number of press releases. The drop in the number for the year 2019 is due to the fact that the data collection was for the first half of the year. The proportion of cohesion policy relevant press releases is very small. At 207 relevant press releases, the number of cohesion policy related press releases appears to be rather low, accounting for just over 1.5 percent of total press releases.

Figure 36: Press releases over time
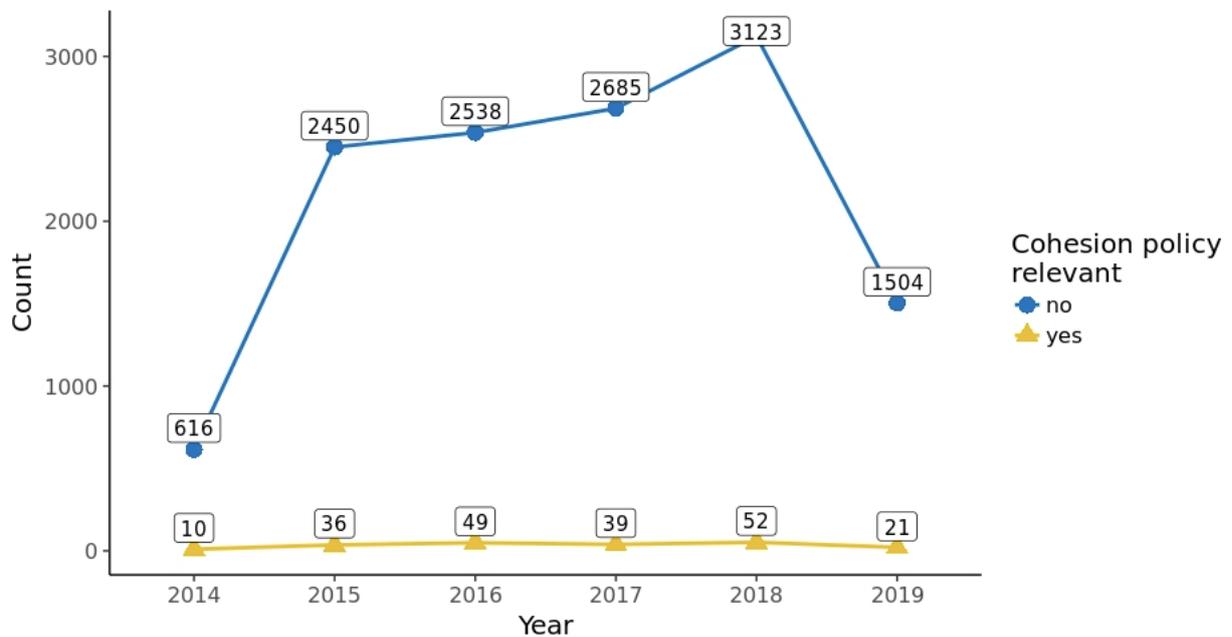
Figure 37 shows the proportion of cohesion policy press releases by source (on the y-axis) and grouped by type of actor. In breaking down press release activity by type of actor it is possible to see that among the EP party groups most attention is devoted to cohesion policy by the two main EP family groups, the S&D and the EPP.

Figure 37: Proportion of cohesion policy press releases by actor (percent)
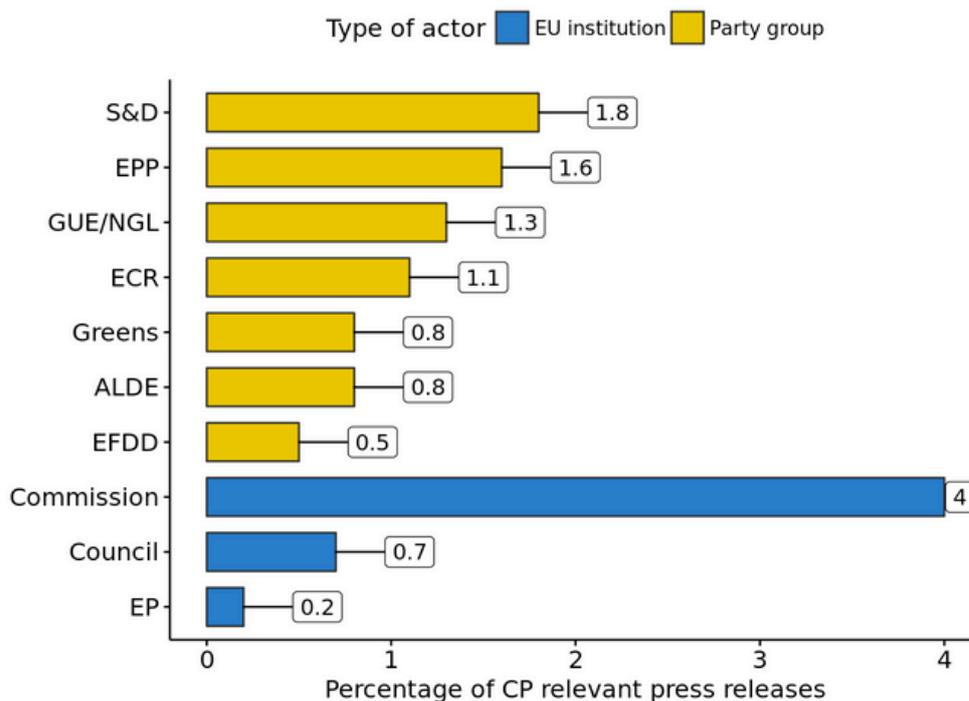
In terms of the EU institutions, cohesion policy is less visible as a proportion of total institutional press activity. This is particularly the case for the European Parliament and, to a somewhat lesser degree, for the Council. In both cases, cohesion policy press releases account for less than 1 percent of total activity. In short, the visibility of cohesion policy as represented in the press release activity of two of the main EU institutions is markedly low.

Cohesion policy is much more visible in the press release activity of the Commission, constituting approximately 4 percent of press release activity. Although this proportion may appear small at first sight it is important to note that, as with the other EU institutions, the Commission deals with many policy domains. What matters most for visibility is whether the level of observed Cohesion press release activity is below the expected proportion given the fact that Commission attention also needs to be devoted to other policy domains. Specifically, Commission press releases cover 28 different policy domains according to its own classification system. To investigate whether there are significant deviations from the expected proportions of press releases across policy domains, a chi square test is applied. Figure 38 below shows the results of this test.

Figure 38: Deviations by policy theme (observed vs. expected)
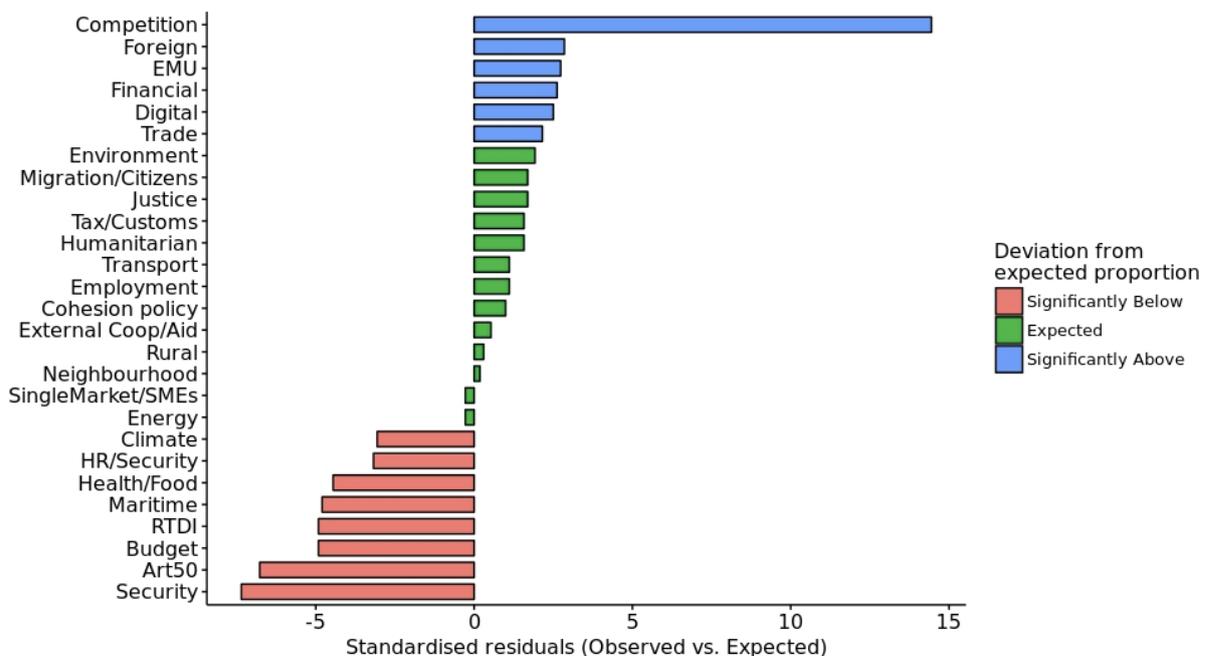
By inspecting the standardised residuals of the chi square test, it is possible to see in which policy domains deviate significantly from the expected distribution. The policy domains shaded in green are within the expected range, which includes cohesion policy alongside other policy domains such as the Environment and the Single Market. In other words, cohesion policy is fairly represented.

The EU policy domains that are significantly below the expected distribution include areas such as the Security Union, the Budget and Research and Innovation. On the other hand, Competition policy, in particular, is the most visible in terms of the Commission's press release activity.

The Commission's corpus of press releases provides scope for further analyses of the substantive content. To compare the semantic and syntactic content of the press releases across different policy domains, computational text analysis techniques (text vectorization and word embeddings) are

applied. The results are projected onto a two-dimensional plot depicting the centroids for each policy domain (Figure 39). Distances between the centroids of each policy domain are calculated to see which policy domains are closest in terms of content.

Figure 39: Similarity of press release content across policy domains

The first plot shows that the centroid for cohesion policy appears to be close to some specific policy domains, such as the Budget and much further away to others such as Tax/Customs. In the second plot, press releases content across the different policy domains is ranked in terms of how close it is to cohesion policy.

The results are intuitive. Cohesion policy is close to the EU budget because it represents, along with the CAP, the largest budget heading of the MFF. Cohesion policy is also closely connected to RTDI policy through the prioritisation of funding to 'Thematic Objective 1 - Strengthening research, technological development and innovation' underpinned by smart specialisation strategies. Similarly, tackling climate change, promoting a low-carbon economy and employment are core objectives. Lastly, the close links to the EMU and Financial policy domains reflect the increasing use of macro-economic conditionality in cohesion policy and its alignment with the European semester process.

To provide a visualisation of the word frequency in the press releases, a word cloud has been generated (Figure 40). This shows the most important words in the Commission's press releases include 'regions' 'investment' and 'fund'.

Figure 40:   Word cloud of Commission Press releases on cohesion policy

5.2   Framing analysis of visibility and content

The cohesion policy press releases are analysed in more depth through qualitative framing analysis. The same framing matrix used in the online news media is applied to see how cohesion policy is represented in the press releases, as well as the importance or visibility of cohesion policy within the press releases. As with the analysis above, it is most appropriate to make group comparisons at the level of type of actor.

Figure 41 illustrates how visible cohesion policy is as an issue within each press release. The scale varies from low visibility, where cohesion policy is only mentioned once or is an unimportant aspect of the story, through to high visibility where cohesion policy is the central topic of the story. There is little variation across the three levels of visibility for the press releases by EU institutional actors. On the other hand, for the political party groups cohesion policy appears to be a much more prominent feature of the story with high visibility for nearly half the press releases analysed.

Figure 41: Visibility of cohesion policy in press releases by type of actor

Turning to the specific frames and how cohesion policy is represented in the press releases, Figure 41 shows the distribution of policy frames. The four policy frames and corresponding subframes are:

- Socio-economic consequences: 1) job creation 2) social justice 3) social awareness/inclusion 4) economic development 5) research and innovation 6) tackling brain drain 7) public services 8) infrastructure 9) environment 10) cultural heritage 11) cultural development 12) civic participation 13) territorial cooperation 14) ineffective in achieving goals

- Values: 15) solidarity 16) financial burden

- Governance: 17) improving governance 18) bureaucracy and delays 19) mismanagement 20) fraud and corruption 21) poor communication

- Power: 22) empowerment 23) lose sovereignty 24) conditionality 25) institutional bargaining over funding 26) political capital/interests

The analysis shows that EU institutions' press releases are much more likely to focus on the socio-economic consequences policy frame than the political party press releases. On the other hand, political parties are much more likely to emphasise the 'power' policy frame, which is comparatively under-emphasised by the EU institutions.

Figure 42: Distribution of policy frames
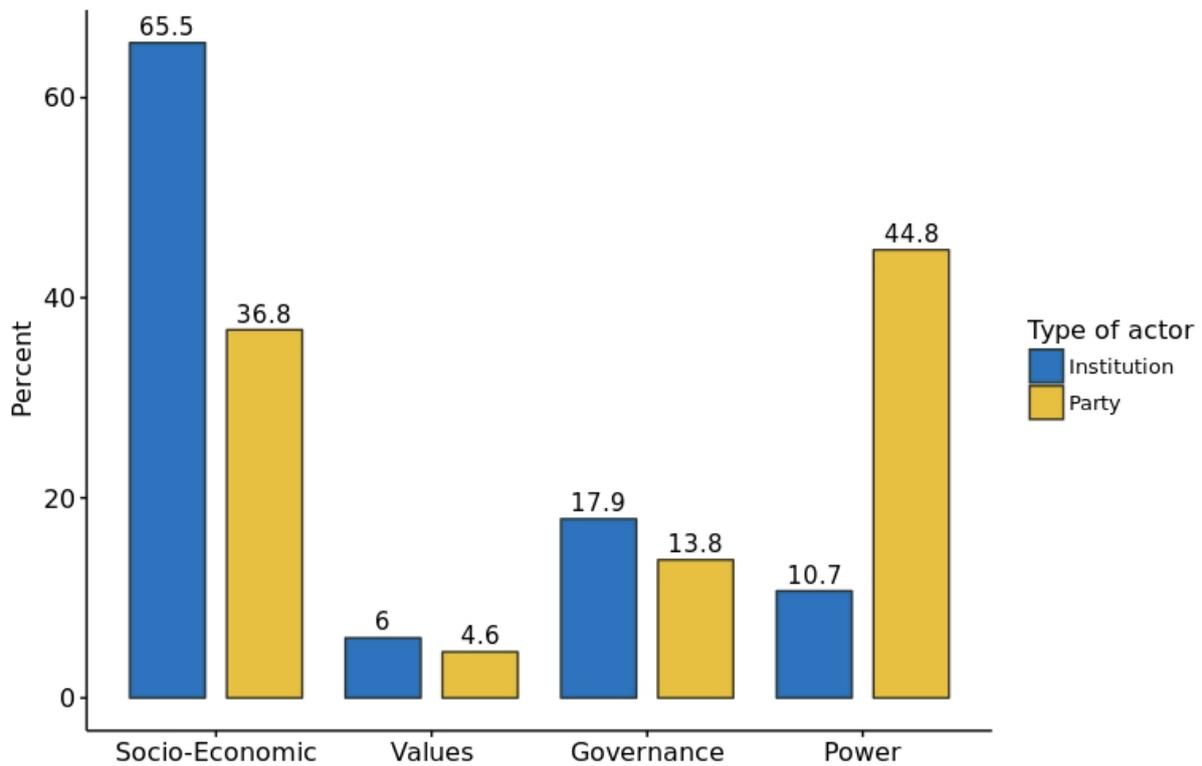
A more fine-grained analysis of the dominant subframes in Table 10 shows that 'institutional bargaining over funding' is the dominant focus of EP press releases within the 'power' frame, representing 38 percent of the total number of subframes. The press releases in this subframe are often critical of the inadequate level of cohesion policy funding and proposed cuts in the context of MFF negotiations. Economic development (9.2 percent) and social justice (8.2 percent) policy frames also feature highly in the press releases. The subframes with the most negative tone related to conditionality, mismanagement and spending delays, all of which appear in the middle of the distribution.

By contrast, the dominant subframes in EU institutional press releases are economic development and infrastructure, each of which account for 19 percent of the total. The 'improving governance' policy frame also represent a significant share (16.7 percent), mainly reviewing EU efforts to reduce bureaucracy, irregularities and fraud and framed in positive way. By contrast, the subframe with the most negative tone on mismanagement is the least frequent subframe to appear in the EU institutional press releases.

Table 10:   Subframes in press releases by EU institutions and EP parties

EU institutions' Subframes	%	EP Political Party Subframes	%
Economic development	19.0	Institutional bargaining over funding	37.9
Infrastructure	19.0	Economic development	9.2
Improving governance	16.7	Social justice	8.0
Territorial cooperation	11.9	Environment/green/low-carbon	5.7
Institutional bargaining over funding	10.7	Improving governance	5.7
Research & innovation	8.3	Jobs	5.7
Solidarity to poor countries/regions	6.0	Conditionality	5.7
Environment/green/low-carbon	2.4	Solidarity to poor countries/regions	4.6
Social awareness/inclusion	2.4	Bureaucracy and/or delays	3.4
Cultural heritage	1.2	Mismanagement	3.4
Jobs	1.2	Social inclusion	3.4
Mismanagement	1.2	Infrastructure	2.3
		Empowerment of institutions	1.1
		Poor communication of funding/rules	1.1
		Research & innovation	1.1
		Territorial cooperation	1.1

5.3   Social media impact

To assess the reactions to EU press releases in social media, a search was undertaken of the Twitter dataset for links to EU press releases over the 5 month period January-June 2019. This led to the identification of 23 tweets in which an EU press release was quoted and included as a link. These tweets were retweeted 126 times and liked (favourites) 175 times. Given that EU institutions issue around 40-50 press releases a year on cohesion policy, this indicates that the press releases do have some traction on social media, although this represents a very small proportion of the 45,000 tweet/retweets on cohesion policy in this period.

Analysis of the twitter accounts of the 23 tweets of EU press releases shows that they were virtually all EU or national institutions and policy stakeholders (including 4 EP candidates) with the exception of one citizen and one academic. The top-5 press release topics in terms of retweets covered the reform of the ESF (three tweets); a European Parliament debate on the themes of work-life balance Brexit and natural gas; and a final tweet on rule of law conditionality

A more robust analysis of the relative visibility of cohesion policy compared to the other press releases of EU policy areas would provide further insights, but would require the generation of a much larger dataset for other EU policies which is beyond the scope of this study.

6. IMPROVING COHESION POLICY VISIBILITY & COMMUNICATION

KEY FINDINGS

- **The political priority placed on improving the visibility of cohesion policy by EU institutions has increased in recent years.** Commission reform proposals aim to integrate communication into programming, ensure more consistent branding, and improve the dissemination of the results of strategic projects. The Commission has also taken steps to tackle misinformation and improve EU-level communication and cooperation with media organisations.

- **A more sophisticated and strategic approach to media communication is needed**, particularly the use of social media, underpinned by digital media strategies at EU, national and subnational levels.

- **Effective citizen engagement is a crucial pre-requisite to raise the visibility of cohesion policy in online media**. This would provide a foundation – and the feedstock – for much more citizen-focused communication, focusing on issues that matter directly to citizens, engaging in more substantive dialogues with citizens and providing opportunities to exploit multipliers.

- **Participatory budgeting should be encouraged in 2021-27 through pilot initiatives under 'PO5 - A European Closer to Citizens'**. As the direct representatives of European citizens, the European Parliament should be bold and strive to ensure that the public have a say on what is funded in their local area by one of the largest and most visible areas of EU expenditure impacting on their daily lives.

6.1 Academic perspectives - COHESIFY Project

Research into the visibility, content and consequences of online media coverage of cohesion policy and the EU more generally is underdeveloped. The COHESIFY project provides the first in-depth analyses of online media content with respect to policy narratives, thematic coverage and tone. Complementing the findings from this study, the framing analysis and text analysis of news stories on cohesion policy found that the key topics discussed in online news media mirror cohesion policy thematic objectives/priorities as well as broader EU political and policy themes.[7] National media were more likely to discuss cohesion policy in connection with broader EU political themes such as the Eurozone and Migration crises, and EU budgetary politics related to conditionality and spending irregularities. Regional news was found to be more positive in tone and topic focus.

---

[7] Mendez C, Mendez F, Triga V and Carrascosa J.M (In press, 2020) "EU cohesion policy in the Media Spotlight: Exploring territorial and temporal patterns in news coverage and tone" Journal of Common Market Studies; Triga, V. and Vadratsikas, K. (2017b) Framing of cohesion policy, COHESIFY Research Paper 9, http://www.cohesify.eu/research-papers/; Carrascosa, J.M., Mendez, C. and Triga, V. (2017) EU cohesion policy in the media: A computational text analysis of online news, user comments and social media, COHESIFY Research Paper 12: http://www.cohesify.eu/research-papers/

The COHESIFY project also found that cohesion policy social media activity (Twitter and Facebook) in English and Spanish, was largely driven by political and policy events and was mainly disseminated and discussed by policy stakeholders and practitioners. Network analysis of the use of the #cohesionpolicy hashtag shows that EU institutions are the dominant actors, with strong networking between EU institutions (DG REGIO, the EP and the CoR) in Twitter usage.[8]

The COHESIFY study also surveyed MEPs and European Commission staff views of cohesion policy communication, and conducted case study research in 17 EU regions based on documentary research, interviews, surveys and focus groups. European Commission staff in DG REGIO and DG EMPL perceived social media to be a popular but ineffectively used tool to promote cohesion policy visibility and public awareness.[9] Further, a large majority of Commission staff consider that politicians and the media do not sufficiently acknowledge the EU role and contribution to regional development when discussing cohesion policy. By contrast, Commission staff considered local and regional media/newspapers to be the most effective tools for communicating cohesion policy.

The MEPs surveyed considered that social media was one of the least used tools for communicating about cohesion policy, the main focus being on publications and information products and events, followed by cooperation with external multipliers. Further, only a quarter of MEPs considered that social media was used effectively to achieve communication objectives, even though the vast majority perceived social media to be the most effective tool for increasing citizen awareness, followed by local and regional newspapers. By contrast, the REGI committee's use of social media was rated as being highly effective.

At Member State level, the COHESIFY case study research reported several trends in relation to media usage by managing authorities and stakeholders in 2014-20.[10] First, there is a greater strategic focus in communication strategies than previously, which are more oriented towards involving beneficiaries, the media and other multipliers in the dissemination of information to the general public. However, communication remains a second order priority relative to other management tasks and goals (such as spending, performance and compliance) in most cases owing to a lack of resources especially in small programmes. Second, there is an absence of proactive and direct engagement with media organisations, often restricted to exchanging press releases with a low level of frequency. Third, traditional media are perceived by surveyed stakeholders to mainly report negative news about cohesion policy (e.g. scandals and corruption) because it attracts more public attention.

The COHESIFY study found evidence of increased social media usage but also widespread resistance to its use. There was recognition among policy stakeholders of the ineffective usage of social media for promoting programmes and projects and the need to increase social media usage because of the potentially significant impact in raising awareness of cohesion policy, funding opportunities and achievements.

Research on the impact of cohesion policy on citizen attitudes shows that regions receiving greater EU funding allocations are more likely to identify with the EU.[11] Independent of funding allocations, citizens' awareness of EU Funds has a significant impact on the likelihood of an individual developing a sense of

---

[8] Peters, M. (2018) Network Analysis of twitter #cohesionpolicy, Open Budgets blog, 1 September 2017.

[9] Corchado, L. Fernández, N. Martín, F and Mendez C (2017) Comparative analysis of cohesion policy communication strategies, COHESIFY Research Paper 11: http://www.cohesify.eu/research-papers/

[10] Corchado, L. Fernández, N. Martín, F and Mendez C (2017) Comparative analysis of cohesion policy communication strategies, COHESIFY Research Paper 11: http://www.cohesify.eu/research-papers/

[11] Borz, G. Brandenburg, H. and Mendez, C. (2017) The Impact of EU cohesion policy on European identity: Results from the COHESIFY citizen survey, COHESIFY Research Paper 14 http://www.cohesify.eu/research-papers/

European identity, when controlling for other relevant factors (e.g. EU funding levels, socio-demographic and political factors). Having seen placards or banners publicising EU-funded projects also contributes to European identity, as does media consumption, especially if the media in the country of residence frames cohesion policy as a common (rather than national) project.[12]

Public discussion about cohesion policy on online media is relatively low key. The COHESIFY project identified a very active community of users when analysing user-generated commentary in relation to online news in English and Spanish, but the user discussions rarely focused on EU cohesion policy directly.[13] Sentiment analysis of user comments on news was mainly neutral or positive in the case of Spain compared to a much higher bias towards negative opinion in the UK. The majority online discussion on the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook did not express opinions as they were mostly objective statements about, say, an event or a call. This was especially the case for Twitter. The largely neutral/positive sentiment associated with the social media sources analysed is not too surprising since the groups mainly comprised official channels or policy communities connected to cohesion policy. However, it also indicates that social media plays a limited role in raising the visibility of cohesion policy and connecting with citizens. Potential solution to address this disconnect are explored in the next section.

6.2   Communication expert perspectives

To provide a wider perspective on the challenges and potential lessons for improving EU cohesion policy visibility and citizen engagement, interviews were conducted with digital media and communication experts.[14] The main recommendations were

- **Strategic approach.** A more sophisticated and strategic approach to media communication is needed, particularly through social media, underpinned by coordinated digital media strategies at all levels (EU, national and subnational) with clear objectives and targets tailored to different groups.

- **Mobilise balanced participation.** There is widespread recognition of the need to reach out beyond the **'**Brussels bubble' to engage with wider audiences and avoid the tendency to 'preach to the converted'. Reaching out to all socio-demographic segments of the population requires creative engagement, commitment and resources. Social media advertising can be an effective tool to target groups during media campaigns.

- **Cooperation with multipliers.** Cooperating with influential social media users and bloggers is important to reach wider audiences. Blogs help to bridge the gap between social media and traditional media, especially in countries with low internet access and where the main source of information is TV or radio.

---

[12]   Borz et. al. (2018) *op.cit.*

[13]   Carrascosa, J.M., Mendez, C. and Triga, V. (2017) EU cohesion policy in the media: A computational text analysis of online news, user comments and social media, COHESIFY Research Paper 12: http://www.cohesify.eu/research-papers/

[14]   The interviewers were conducted by telephone/skype with: Aleksandra Atanasova, Social Media consultant, Brussels; Anthony Zacharzewski, President of the Democratic Society, Brussels. Gauthier Bas, Managing Director, Old-Continent SPRL, Brussels; Laure Van Hauwaert, Managing Director, EU Institutions, WPP Government & Public Sector Practice, Brussels; Matteo Salvai, Information and Communication officer, Communication Unit, DG Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission; Francesco Molica, Information and Communication officer, Communication Unit, DG Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission; Mathew Lowry, Digital Media and Communication consultant, Brussels.

- **Focus on issues that matter to citizens.** Light social media content relating to citizens everyday lives is more popular with the public than institutional messages on policies. This also applies to citizen engagement through democratic innovations, which should involve discussion around issues that have been selected through a bottom-up approach to increase interest and ownership. However, targeted public participation requires increased provision and awareness of reliable information about policies. EU institutions could support these processes with high quality information in formats that can be localised so that people can understand the issues and what is being done to address them by different government levels (European, national, subnational) in their area.

- **Effective EU media campaigns require adequate planning, resources and competences.** The resources dedicated to communication activities, especially at Member States level, are often low. Yet, effective media communication offers potentially large rewards in terms of shaping mainstream media coverage and as a consequence influencing the image of the EU.

- **Joined-up communication.** Citizen engagement initiatives (e.g. events, citizen polls/juries etc.) should be joined up with policy conversations at EU level and localised. The Commission's Citizen Dialogue approach, bringing senior officials or politicians to local towns and cities, provides a starting point that could be developed further. In particular, the outputs of these initiatives require common standards and clear objectives to feed results into EU policy-making debates effectively.

- **Continuous communication and engagement.** When seeking opinions on EU policies and on media campaigns, feedback needs to be provided to participants, allowing people to follow up the discussion and feed in. Related, EU actors must be able to show how consultation processes have impacted decision-making to generate legitimacy and future engagement.

Overall, a key message that permeated most of the expert interviews was **the need for stronger citizen participation** in a renewed debate about the EU's democratic future. An authoritative analysis of the key challenges facing governments' efforts to better connect with citizens in an age of technological and political disruption is The Leaders' Report by WPP. Produced by WPP's Government & Public Sector Practice, the Leaders' Report is based on interviews and surveys conducted across 50 countries and six multilateral organisations, with over 60 government communication leaders, 400 government communicators and 8,000 citizens.

The study shows that while governments want to engage with citizens and recognise the benefits of doing so, they are unsure about how best to devolve decision making to the public. A vital opportunity to rebuild trust with citizens is being missed because their input is not effectively included in policy-making and most governments are not committed to implementing the results of citizen engagement activities. Among the main survey findings from government communicators are that:

- Three quarters of respondents recognise that citizen engagement can create support for a policy and rebuild citizens' trust in government;
- However, a significant proportion (36 percent) think that citizens affected by a policy do not always get the opportunity to provide input and more than two thirds (77 percent) carry out engagement activities that deliberately minimise opportunities for citizen feedback;
- more than half of the respondents (54 percent) lack the resources to effectively evaluate engagement programmes; and
- only 8 percent consider that their organisation commits to act on public views before running a citizen engagement programme.

The core conclusion is that governments must rethink their citizen engagement strategies and create a meaningful connection with the people they serve by putting them at the heart of policy making in order to rebuild trust. Ten key drivers of citizen engagement – the ten c's - that governments should adopt to rebuild trust with the public include:[15]

- **Core narrative:** build and communicate a shared positive vision of the project.

- **Common good:** Working for the benefit of the community rather than interest groups.

- **Cohesion:** demonstrate equality and inclusion across communities, and a sense of unity within society.

- **Complexity:** Ensure all audiences and different options and viewpoints are adequately considered.

- **Coherence:** Maintain a consistent message and follow through with actions.

- **Communication:** Provide citizens with the information they need in the right format on the right channels.

- **Cognitive system:** Taking into account both emotional and rational influences on perception.

- **Capacitation:** ensure citizens feel capable and empowered to contribute to the project.

- **Contribution:** Involve citizens in designing the decision-making process.

- **Consideration:** Rewarding and incentivising citizens for their involvement so that they feel valued by thanking them for input and providing them with results.

Translating the WPP citizen engagement approach to the EU institutional context, Laure Van Hauwaert has provided ten tips for effective communication tailored to cohesion policy communication officers

10 TIPS FOR EFFECTIVENESS IN COMMUNICATION

Be citizen-centric	From rational arguments to emotion
Two-way engagement	From information to communication
Know where your audiences are and understand their needs	Reduce production Maximise distribution
Work with partners	Balance digital and real life experiences
Localised approach, but linking the levels	Plan, test, measure, adapt

The Government & Public Sector Practice   WPP [29]

Source: Van Hauwaert L (2018) Closing session at the meeting of the INFORM and INIO networks of EU cohesion policy communicators, 5-7 December 2018, Brussels, Belgium.

---

[15]   Kantar (2019) Activating the 10Cs of citizen engagement, May 2019.

Reviewing the weaknesses in the EU's Future of Europe consultation, the digital media expert Mathew Lowry highlights five success criteria for promoting effective EU public participation:[16]

- specific: participation processes focusing on a specific policy (circular economy, SME innovation support, etc), not something general and vague

- transparent: processes where participants clearly see that they will be able to see if and how their contributions are taken on board

- focused audience: processes addressed to people with enough Subject Matter Expertise to contribute meaningfully, even if they know nothing about the EU, rather than the 'general public'

- resource credibility: processes where participants can see sufficient resources in place to process their contributions
- institutional credibility: processes which extend an existing policy development process, rather than a one-off communications exercise

Looking outside of the EU, a good practice example of citizen engagement (also highlighted in the Leaders Report) by an International Organisation is the World Bank's 'Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Citizen Engagement.' The framework was developed to systematically mainstream citizen engagement by including beneficiary feedback in supported projects.

Box 1:   The World Bank's 'Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Citizen Engagement'

The World Bank's 'Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Citizen Engagement' is guided by five principles: a results focus; engaging throughout the operational cycle; seeking to strengthen country systems; context-specific; and it is gradual. In practical terms, the World Bank's citizen engagement mainstreaming commitment means that all Investment Project Financing operations financed with IBRD loans or IDA credits must meet three requirements:

1. Project design must be citizen-oriented, i.e., having at least one mechanism to engage with beneficiaries in the specific context of the project;
2. Projects' results frameworks must include a beneficiary feedback indicator to monitor citizen engagement throughout project implementation; and
3. Projects must report on the beneficiary feedback indicator by the third year of implementation

To strengthen country systems for engaging with citizens, Development Policy Financing can facilitate the adoption of national legislation on participatory budgeting monitoring. Investment Project Financing operations can contribute to building effective feedback and recourse mechanisms to improve service delivery in specific sectors, or empower citizens at the local level to participate in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of development interventions.

Source: World Bank: https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/what-we-do/brief/citizen-engagement

---

[16]   Mathew Lowry (2017) The limits of public participation in policy, medium.com.

In sum, the insights from communication experts and comparative experience across the world provide useful lessons for EU cohesion policy, which could lead to a new architecture of participation using democratic innovations to engage citizens in a modernised EU cohesion policy.

6.3   EU institutional perspectives

Improving communication and tackling bias

The EU has taken a wide range of actions to **tackle misinformation about the EU** since 2015. The establishment of a task force, high-level groups and public consultations led to policy initiatives and actions plans to improve communication and tackle misinformation. A review of the implementation of these initiatives provided a positive assessment of the work carried out distinguishing four complementary strands of EU action:[17]

- **Strengthened EU capabilities** to identify and counter disinformation, via the Strategic Communication Task Forces and the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell in the European External Action Service. It has also improved the coordinated response by setting up a Rapid Alert System to facilitate the exchange of information between Member States and the EU institutions.

- **Working with online platforms and industry** through a voluntary Code of Practice on disinformation to increase transparency of political communications and prevent the manipulative use of their services to ensure users know why they see specific political content and ads, where they come from and who is behind them.

- **Awareness raising and improving societal resilience to disinformation**, notably through more dissemination of fact-based messaging and renewed efforts to promote media literacy and better communication of EU policies.

- **Supporting Member State efforts** to secure the integrity of elections and strengthen the resilience of the democratic systems. The establishment of election networks at EU and national level, with links to the Rapid Alert System, improved cooperation on potential threats.

The 'better communication on EU policies' strand of the Commission's awareness raising activities is of particular relevance to this study. The review highlights the Commission's proactive and multilingual communication to millions of citizens to increase awareness and understanding of the impact of the EU on citizens' daily lives through

1) **Social media.** Commission communications on the topic of disinformation included 57 posts from January 2018 to April 2019 (across Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn), which generated 54,781 engagements and had an impact of 3,256, 476 impressions (Twitter and Facebook only) and 385,655 reach (Facebook and Instagram only)

---

[17] European Commission (2018) Action Plan on disinformation: Commission contribution to the European Council of 13-14 December 2018, Brussels, 5.12.2018; European Commission (2019) Report on the implementation of the Action Plan Against Disinformation, JOIN(2019) 12 final, 14.6.2019, Brussels: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=comnat:JOIN_2019_0012_FIN

2) **Communication campaigns.** A Europe that delivers (InvestEU, running in 16 Member states and reaching over 240 million potential contacts in 2017-2018 – see Box), a Europe that empowers (EUandME, targeting around 100 million 18-35 year-olds in the EU, and reaching over 60 million potential contacts in 2018-2019) and a Europe that protects (targeting 35-55 year-olds, reaching close to 60 million potential contacts in 2018-2019)

Public policy initiatives to tackle misinformation recommended by the European Commission include:[18]

- enhance transparency of online news, involving an adequate and privacy-compliant sharing of data about the systems that enable their circulation online;
- promote media and information literacy to counter disinformation and help users navigate the digital media environment;
- develop tools for empowering users and journalists to tackle disinformation and foster a positive engagement with fast-evolving information technologies;
- safeguard the diversity and sustainability of the European news media ecosystem, and
- promote continued research on the impact of disinformation in Europe to evaluate the measures taken by different actors and constantly adjust the necessary responses;
- Facilitating cooperation between independent fact checkers;
- Harnessing new technologies such as artificial intelligence to tackle disinformation
- Support to quality journalism via State Aid by Member States to the media sector.

Box 2:   Evaluation of InvestEU campaign

The evaluation of the InvestEU campaign provided a positive assessment of its relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and added value.[19] While the coherence of the campaign was also evaluated as strong, through central management by DG Communication, cooperation with other DGs and cohesion policy Managing Authorities was weaker. The sustainability of the campaign material was evaluated less positively and engagement with journalists was assessed as ineffective.

A number of recommendations were made providing insights that are applicable to cohesion policy communication campaigns at EU level and within Member States.

- Maintain a **semi-decentralised approach** with attention to **pre-campaign research** informing campaign design.
- More attention to **institutional coordination and integration** of strategies and actions across actors involved in delivery, including better collaboration between the Commission Representations, the Europe Direct Information Centre and **cohesion policy Managing Authorities**
- The importance of a **centrally coordinated approach for data collection and analysis**
- **Plan campaign sustainability** from the outset while enforcing campaign efficiency through fine tuning of campaign material, on-going evaluation, planning of microtargeting, and monitoring of social media saturation allowing for reprogramming; and
- Increase the use of **novel techniques to capture campaign effects** on attitudinal change, such as text mining of press coverage (as employed in this study for the EP) and the qualitative analysis of online conversations.

Source: Technopolis Group (2018).

---

[18] European Commission (2018) Final report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, DG CONNECT, European Commission, Brussels.

[19] Technopolis Group (2018) Monitoring/Evaluation of the #InvestEU campaign Final Report of the study 'Monitoring the performance of EC communication activities for the Investment Plan for Europe', November 2018, Brussels.

For its part, DG REGIO is contributing to tackling misinformation in several ways.[20]

1. **Supporting the Spokesperson's Service:** Contributing to the EC Network against Disinformation, which has empowered the Commission DGs and the EEAS to respond to disinformation in their field of expertise - by issuing rebuttals and responding in a clear, up-to-date and factual manner, fast and in many languages, especially the language of the lie
2. **Website:** A webpage on the most common myths in cohesion policy has been published on the DG REGIO website with corresponding facts to challenge the myths as well as guidance on how to identify disinformation and to respond for managing authorities and other stakeholders
3. **Myth-busting social media campaign.** An initiative currently being developed is a campaign to tackle myths on social media.

While this study's findings showed that bias only represents a very small share of the news frames underpinning cohesion policy stories in online media, the phenomenom of fake news is a growing international issue that merits attention by cohesion policymakers and managing authorities.

The future of cohesion policy communication in 2021-27

There has been a significant increase in the political priority by EU institutions on increasing the visibility of cohesion policy in recent years. Responding to requests from the Council and European Parliament reports on the visibility and future of cohesion policy , a joint Action Plan on Communication was presented by Commissioners Corina Crețu (DG REGIO) and Marianne Thyssen (DG EMPL) on 23 May 2017. The plan set out seven joint communication actions for cohesion policy at EU and national levels to be undertaken throughout 2017 emphasising the principle of shared responsibility and a strong reliance on existing tools for implementation, such as the 'EU in My Region' campaign, to minimise administrative cost and burden. More specifically, the seven actions were:

- Launch of the Cohesion Alliance coalition of stakeholders, led by the Committee of the Regions and with a strong social media presence
- A video competition on the achievements of cohesion policy organised at national level.
- Publicity campaigns on iconic projects by national, regional or local authorities
- Photo exhibitions on project achievements followed by public debates, launched by national, regional or local authorities
- National project competitions following the Commission's 'Regiostars' model
- A campaign to celebrate the 60 years anniversary of the EU by national and EU authorities
- Public debates in the regions with support from EU institutions and complementing the EU's separate citizen dialogues.

In parallel, DG REGIO launched additional campaigns involving local public debates, road trip campaigns targeting youngsters, a campaign targeting Member States with lower awareness of the policy, and grants to media organisations for dissemination of cohesion policy achievements.

A Commission review of the implementation of the seven actions suggested an **effective launch of the communication plan**, albeit with varied take-up of measures.[21] The Cohesion Alliance has proved to be very popular with a wide membership developing across Member States, regions and local

---

[20] European Commission (2019) Summary of the Inform and INIO Networks Meeting of EU cohesion policy Communicators, 15 -17 May 2018, Palermo, Italy; Rugina F (2019) INFORM and DG REGIO: Fighting Disinformation Together, European Commission, DG Regional Policy.

[21] European Commission (2018) Implementation of the Seven Joint Communication Actions, Progress report, European Commission, Brussels.

authorities. Actions that have been taken up quickly and effectively are the local and regional debates and the 'Did you know?' campaign. By contrast, the more resource intensive actions have been slower to take off namely the national version of the RegioStars awards and video competition.

Alongside and related to the increased emphasis on upgrading communication, cohesion policy decision-making and reform debates have become more politicised with public opinion and media coverage playing a more important role in the policy process and reform agenda than previously, especially in relation to debates surrounding EU funding conditionality and the rule of law.[22] Despite the generally positive tone of media coverage of cohesion policy, news stories on the topic of conditionality have increased in recent years and are largely negative in tone.[23] Indeed, the Commission's reluctance to suspend funding to Spain and Portugal in 2016, following non-compliance with EU fiscal and ESIF conditionality rules, was partly motivated by concerns about negative political backlashes in a context of deteriorating trust in the EU.[24]

Set against this background, European Commission proposals for cohesion policy in 2021-2027 have upgraded the emphasis on communication, its evaluation and the use of social media outreach to publicise cohesion policy through requirements to:

- **integrate communication in the programming** at the planning stage, include communication approach with objectives, target audiences, channels, budget and indicators;
- **establish a uniform branding** of all EU Funds in which publicity material would be required to acknowledge EU co-funding. without a need to refer to individual Funds or instruments and their acronyms, to increase EU visibility and simplify policy jargon for the public;
- place more emphasis on communicating the results of **projects of 'strategic importance'**;
- mandatory and frequent publication of **list of operations and information on upcoming calls** for proposals; and
- more explicit provision on **financial corrections** in case beneficiaries do not comply with obligation

There are two **explicit references to social media** in the post-2020 regulation:

- Art 17.3 on the content of the programmes specifies that the MA shall provide a description of the **social media outreach** in its communication strategy (as noted, this will be a section of the programme and no longer a separate document); and

- Art 45.1 sets out that the beneficiary shall acknowledge the support of the EU also by providing a description of the operation, including objectives and results, on **beneficiary social media sites**, where they exist.

The European Parliament's amendments to the Commission's proposals include minor changes to the visibility, transparency and communication provisions, including a specification of the type of partners to be involved in communication activities, requiring timetables for project calls on MA websites and the names of contractors in the list of operations.[25] Regarding beneficiaries, the EP proposes that information on EU support is displayed on both beneficiaries websites and social media

---

[22] Bachtler, J. and Mendez C (In Press, 2020) Cohesion and the EU's Budget: Is Conditionality Undermining Solidarity? in Ramona Coman, Amandine Crespy, Vivien Schmidt (eds.) Governance and politics in the post-crisis European Union, Cambridge University Press.

[23] Mendez et al. (2020) op.cit.; Triga (2017) *op.cit.* Carrascosa *et al.* (2017) *op.cit.*

[24] Bachtler and Mendez (2020) *op.cit.*

[25] Widuto, A. (2019) Better communication for cohesion policy, European Parliamentary Research Service Briefing, Members' Research Service PE 635.575, 14 March 2019.

sites simultaneously, and calls for beneficiaries to "publicly and permanently" display Union symbols "clearly visible to the public" including permanent plaques and billboards.

Like the EP, the **European Committee of Regions** (CoR) has also called for regional and local authorities to be specifically designated as partners involved in communication. Additional recommendations include:[26] the possibility that the communication officer be responsible for several programmes; inclusion of CoR representation in the communication networks (INFORM-INIO); reinstating specific provisions on the communication strategy for one or several programmes; and for the monitoring committee approval procedure to be outline din a new article.

The Commission's and the Committee of the Regions' proposals are in line with the recommendations of **academic studies**. A more radical recommendation to boost the visibility of cohesion policy by the COHESIFY study was to **introduce a more open and citizen focused-approach to programming** involving experimentation with democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting and citizen panels/juries/polls. On the media front, the study recommended more proactive and engaging utilisation of social media with human interest stories by policymakers to resonate with citizens and provoke more active debate. It also called for territorially-targeted campaigns promoting positive narratives about the reality of cohesion policy achievements to challenge misinformed media stories. The PERCEIVE project also called for more engaging, creative and interactive social media activity and styles, alongside other channels and actions targeted to different groups and needs, as well as simplified language.[27]

---

[26] Widuto (2019) *Ibid.*

[27] Barberio, V. Kuric, I, Hollerer, M. Mollona, E. and Pareschi, L. (2017a) Descriptive report on the specific role of new media in EU financed projects' communication strategies, Perceive, December 2017; Barberio, V. Kuric, I, Mollona, E. and Pareschi, L. (2017b) Qualitative report on the impact and effectiveness of communication strategies; Perceive, July 2017.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined **the visibility and communication of cohesion policy in online media**. Specifically, it has investigated the coverage of cohesion policy in online media; the representation of cohesion policy (or not) in online media; the perceptions of cohesion policy as experiences by online media users; and the effectiveness of communication activities on cohesion policy by the EU institutions, as well as MEPs and candidates.

The research has covered over 60,000 online news articles in Member States and over 100,000 user-generated comments. It has also analysed social media - over 11,000 Facebook posts and over five million tweets on Twitter – and 13,000 press releases by EU institutions and political parties. This final section draws out the main conclusions to emerge.

a) **The visibility of cohesion policy within online news stories is currently low,** with many references to the policy being little more than an acknowledgement of EU co-financing to projects. Cohesion policy is more visible in national media, but regional and local media are more likely to provide some depth to their coverage.

b) **The tone of media coverage is generally positive** and particularly so in regional/local media. News stories tend to be framed around the socio-economic effects or implications of the funds for countries, regions or localities in terms of economic development, jobs, infrastructure and social inclusion. Institutional bargaining is a very dominant sub-frame, with stories giving prominence to the reform of the Multiannual Financial Framework

c) **There are significant differences across countries in visibility, tone and framing**. Member States with higher levels of cohesion policy funding tend to have greater visibility and more positive tone; they also focus on the implications of cuts to cohesion policy in the MFF negotiations whereas coverage in richer countries concentrates more on increased budgetary contributions.

d) **The proportion of myths in news stories about cohesion policy is relatively low** (7 percent of stories). Most myths are about fraud, mismanagement and lack of added value of the Funds. News stories with myths are most prevalent in some (though not all) of the net payer countries.

e) **There is a duality in the thematic coverage of cohesion policy in news stories**. There is significant coverage of important thematic objectives of the policy – employment, education, growth, research and innovation. However, the politics of the Policy is also a significant focus, especially of actual or proposed conditionalities of the Funds, and the budget negotiations.

f) **The use of social media by EU actors has accelerated in recent years**, with a tripling of Facebook (FB) posts from 2017 to 2019. Among political parties, the Greens dominate in using FB. However, only a relatively small and diminishing proportion of these FB posts (6 per cent) are about cohesion policy. Of these, almost 60 percent of the FB posts are by DG REGIO (Europe in my Region), followed (a long way behind) by the CPMR and Commissioner for Regional Policy. In terms of tone, most FB posts are neutral, providing factual information, although DG REGIO posts are generally positive.

g) **Twitter visibility of cohesion policy is relatively low among EP candidates**. Around 15 percent of EP election candidates with a Twitter account tweeted about cohesion policy during the period January-June 2019, on average 3 times and in generally positive terms. Within the 'Brussels bubble', DG REGIO produced the largest number of tweets (571) followed by EU influencers (typically journalists, EU officials and academics) and interest groups representing

71

regional/local actors (145 tweets). The tone was overwhelmingly positive, significantly more so than for the EP candidates

h) **Cohesion policy appears to be less visible in institutional press activity**. For EU institutions, press releases have been a major channel of communication, with 13,000 issued over the 2013-19 period – some 5,000 from the EU institutions and 8,000 from political parties. The proportion of cohesion policy press releases is, though, very low, averaging just 30 per year.

i) **Cohesion policy is more visible in the press release activity of the European Commission**, constituting 4 percent of press releases. It features not just in press releases about the policy itself, especially with reference to regions, but in releases on the EU budget and EU investment activity. Press releases from the EU institutions tend to focus on socio-economic issues, whereas the political parties are more likely to frame their releases in terms of power issues (institutional bargaining, empowerment, conditionality etc).

The results of this study, reinforce and extend the findings of previous research by the COHESIFY and PERCEIVE projects. **The main conclusion is that the visibility and communication of cohesion policy in online media has been weak in recent years**. News coverage is often shallow, with limited depth of understanding or analysis. While regional and local media in particular frequently discuss the impacts of funding on regions and localities, there is little appreciation of the wider role or impact of the policy. Public discussion about cohesion policy on online media is relatively low key, even though there is significant media activity by some EU actors (notably DG REGIO) and national policy stakeholders.

There has been a significant increase in the political priority given to communicating cohesion policy in the past three years. This has been led by the European Commission and supported by the European Parliament. The post-2020 reform proposal have sought to better integrate communication into programming, ensure more consistent branding, and dissemination of the results of strategic projects. The Commission has also taken steps to tackle misinformation and improve EU-level communication and cooperation with media organisations. There is recognition across all the EU institutions of the need to take a more sophisticated approach to communication, particularly the use of social media.

Research and expert interviews highlight the need for a more strategic approach to communication through digital media that aims for balanced outreach to target groups, cooperation with multipliers and focused on issues that matter to citizens. Effective EU media campaigns also require adequate resources and joined up communication across EU, national and subnational levels in a continuous process of two-way communication and engagement.

The main area where progress is needed is in a more citizen-focused cohesion policy. Effective citizen engagement is a crucial pre-requisite to raise the visibility of cohesion policy in online media. Yet research indicates that citizens do not feel well-informed or engaged in the process of developing and implementing EU-funded regional development strategies affecting their region or locality. Notwithstanding the proposed Policy Objective 5 (Europe closer to citizens), there is a need for a more horizontal approach to programming across all POs to exploit opportunities for direct engagement with citizens (rather than only representative bodies). This would, in turn, provide a foundation – and the feedstock – for much more citizen-focused communication, focusing on issues that matter directly to citizens, engaging in more substantive dialogues with citizens and providing opportunities to exploit multipliers.

Our key recommendation is that part of the budget of 'PO5 - A European Closer to Citizens' and of Technical Assistance at European Commission and Member State level should be earmarked to participatory budgeting. Such democratic innovations should be applied to localised urban and rural development initiatives that are closer to citizens. Implementing democratic innovations is not

easy and requires strong planning, leadership, capacity and resources. Pilot projects on participatory budgeting should be encouraged across EU Member States and the results should be made available to the REGI committee in order to inform its future work agenda and reports. As the direct representatives of European citizens, the European Parliament should be bold and strive to ensure that the public have a say on what is funded in their local area by one of the largest and most visible areas of EU expenditure impacting on their daily lives.

8. REFERENCES

Azrout, R., Spanje, J. V. and Vreese, C. D. (2012) 'When News Matters: Media Effects on Public Support for European Union Enlargement in 21 Countries', JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies 50(5): 691–708.

Bachtler, J., Mendez, C. and Wishlade, F. (2013) EU cohesion policy and European Integration: The Dynamics of EU Budgetary and Policy Reform, Routledge.

Bachtler, J. and Mendez C (In Press, 2020) Cohesion and the EU's Budget: Is Conditionality Undermining Solidarity? in Ramona Coman, Amandine Crespy, Vivien Schmidt (eds.) Governance and politics in the post-crisis European Union, Cambridge University Press.

Barberio, V. Kuric, I, Hollerer, M. Mollona, E. and Pareschi, L. (2017a) Descriptive report on the specific role of new media in EU financed projects' communication strategies, Perceive, December 2017.

Barberio, V. Kuric, I, Mollona, E. and Pareschi, L. (2017b) Qualitative report on the impact and effectiveness of communication strategies; Perceive, July 2017.

Borz, G. Brandenburg, H. and Mendez, C. (2018) The Impact of EU cohesion policy on European identity: Results from the COHESIFY citizen survey, COHESIFY Research Paper 14: http://www.cohesify.eu/research-papers/

Carrascosa, J.M., Mendez, C. and Triga, V. (2018) EU cohesion policy in the media: A computational text analysis of online news, user comments and social media, COHESIFY Research Paper 12: http://www.cohesify.eu/research-papers/

Corchado, L. Fernández, N. Martín, F and Mendez C (2018) Comparative analysis of cohesion policy communication strategies, COHESIFY Research Paper 11: http://www.cohesify.eu/research-papers/

Council of the EU (2017) Council conclusions on "Making cohesion policy more effective, relevant and visible to our citizens", 8463/17, adopted on 25.5.17.

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. Journal of Communication, 43(4), 51–58.

European Commission (2018) Action Plan on disinformation: Commission contribution to the European Council of 13-14 December 2018, Brussels, 5.12.2018.

European Commission (2018) A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation, Report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation, March 2018: https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=50271

European Commission & High Representation of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2019) Report on the implementation of the Action Plan Against Disinformation, JOIN(2019) 12 final, 14.6.2019,Brussels: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=comnat:JOIN_2019_0012_FIN

European Parliament (2017) Resolution of 15 June 2017 on online platforms and the digital single market, 2016/2276(INI)

European Commission (2019) Summary of the Inform and INIO Networks Meeting of EU cohesion policy Communicators, 15 -17 May 2018, Palermo, Italy.

European Committee of the Regions (2019) From local to European: Putting citizens at the centre of the EU agenda: European Committee of the Regions, Brussels: https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/brochures/Documents/From%20local%20to%20European/4082_Citizens%20Consult_brochure_N_FINAL.pdf

European Commission (2016) Structured dialogue of Vice President Katainen & Commissioner Creţu with the European Parliament, Draft Briefing, Structured dialogue with the European Parliament, Brussels, 3 October 2016.

TNS (2017) Citizens' awareness and perceptions of EU regional policy, Flash Eurobarometer 452 - March 2017, Survey conducted by TNS political & social at the request of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy.

European Commission (2017) Bringing Opportunities to Europeans: Communicating together the results of EU cohesion policy, Seven Communication Actions Plan by Commissioners Corina Creţu and Marianne Thyssen, 23.5.2017.

European Commission (2018) Implementation of the Seven Joint Communication Actions, Progress report, European Commission, Brussels.

European Commission (2018) Progress report on the implementation of the Seven Joint Communication Actions, Progress Report to the General affairs Council, 12.8.2018.

European Parliament (2017a) Report on increasing engagement of partners and visibility in the performance of European Structural and Investment Funds, 24.5.2017.

European Parliament (2017b) Report on Building Blocks for a Post-2020 EU cohesion policy, (2016/2326(INI)), 24.5.2017.

Martens, B., Aguiar, L., Gomez-Herrera, E. and Mueller-Langer, F. (2018) The digital transformation of news media and the rise of disinformation and fake news - An economic perspective, Digital Economy Working Paper 2018-02, JRC Technical Reports, European Commission Seville, Spain.

Mendez C, Dozhdeva V and Bachtler J (2016) The implementation of ESIF communication strategies in 2014-20: Are they achieving expectations? IQ-Net Thematic Paper 39(3), EPRC, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.

Mendez C, Mendez F, Triga V and Carrascosa J.M (2020) "EU cohesion policy in the Media Spotlight: Exploring territorial and temporal patterns in news coverage and tone" Journal of Common Market Studies.

Peters, M. (2018) Network Analysis of twitter #cohesionpolicy, Open Budgets blog, 1 September 2017.

Rugina F (2019) INFORM and DG REGIO: Fighting Disinformation Together, European Commission, DG Regional Policy.

Schuck, A. R. T. and de Vreese, C. H. (2006) 'Between Risk and Opportunity: News Framing and its Effects on Public Support for EU Enlargement', European Journal of Communication 21(1): 5–32.

Semetko, H. A. and Valkenburg, P. M. (2000) Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News', Journal of Communication (50(2)): 93–109.

Technopolis Group (2018) Monitoring/Evaluation of the #InvestEU campaign Final Report of the study 'Monitoring the performance of EC communication activities for the Investment Plan for Europe', November 2018, Brussels.

Triga, V. and Vadratsikas K. (2016) The Impact of Media Representations of the EU and its Policies on European Identity, COHESIFY Research Paper 3, http://www.cohesify.eu/research-papers/

Triga, V. and Vadratsikas, K. (2018) Framing of cohesion policy, COHESIFY Research Paper 9, http://www.cohesify.eu/research-papers/

de Vreese, C. H. & Peter J and Semetko H.A (2001) 'Framing Politics at the Launch of the Euro: A Cross-National Comparative Study of Frames in the News', Political Communication 18(2): 107–122.

de Vreese, C. H., Boomgaarden, H. G. and Semetko, H. A. (2011) '(In)direct Framing Effects: The Effects of News Media Framing on Public Support for Turkish Membership in the European Union', Communication Research 38(2): 179–205.

de Vreese Claes H. and Kandyla Anna (2009) 'News Framing and Public Support for a Common Foreign and Security Policy', Journal of Common Market Studies 47(3): 453–481.

9. ANNEXES

Subframes on cohesion policy

NAME OF SUBFRAME	DESCRIPTION OF SUBFRAME CONTENT
1. Job Creation	CP creates jobs and provides training to the unemployed. This is particularly important where there are few employment opportunities are and a low skilled labour force. CP examples: employment subsidies, training programmes, apprenticeship programmes.
2. Social justice	CP promotes equal opportunities, protects vulnerable social groups (immigrants, people with special needs) and reduces the gap between rich and poor groups. CP tackles deficiencies in national policy/legal frameworks through dedicated support promoting equal opportunities. CP examples: Incentives for the adoption of good practices that promote non-discrimination and gender equality in the work environment; training for vulnerable groups to facilitate integration in society and the labour market; infrastructure that promotes accessibility to public spaces/services; and financial support for the most disadvantaged groups.
3. Social awareness & inclusion	CP aims to raise citizens' awareness of social exclusion and civic responsibility to promote a sense of community. This is crucial to tackle xenophobia/racism, individualism, a weak sense of community and awareness of social problems that marginalises vulnerable social groups from society. CP examples: support events and seminars to build trust and a sense of community among citizens, to promote awareness against racism, xenophobia and social exclusion.
4. Economic development	CP promotes economic development activity, creates new business opportunities, promotes entrepreneurship and stimulates investment. This is particularly important to counter the effects of the economic and financial crises on economic activity. CP examples: Financial and non-financial incentives/grants and other instruments for investment projects.
5. Research & innovation	CP funds research and innovation and raise the quality of workforce skills to address outdated production methods and limited use of new technologies, which in turn lead to lower production, skills and funding for research, development and training. CP examples: investments in R&D, new technologies and production methods, promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship, organization of training seminars for workers and funding for universities to promote research.
6. Tackle brain drain	CP provides funding for investments that will help the country retain its scientific personnel. Many young and educated individuals migrate abroad in order to find employment because of the financial/economic crisis and lack of investment. CP examples: incentives for investment to create employment opportunities within the country to stop the brain drain.
7. Public services	CP can modernize public administration, social security, public health, public education and promote e-governance. Due to the low quality and inefficiency of public services (e.g. outdated systems, lack of computerized public services) citizens' transactions with the state are administratively complex and time-consuming. CP examples: creation of e-public administration to provide high quality services for citizens; simplification of transactions between citizens and the state by reducing bureaucracy; quality control for public services; introduction of new technology and expertise to raise the quality of public services/health/ education etc.

8. Infrastructure	CP invests in infrastructure and policies that improve citizens' everyday life. In doing so, CP addresses deficits in basic infrastructure and services (e.g. parks, squares, public transportation, pedestrian streets, cycle lanes, broadband), the lack of local public funding and planning, as well as outdated practices and facilities. CP examples: construction of new parks, squares, streets, bicycle lanes etc.; adoption of new strategies/plans (e.g. transport plans).
9. Environment	CP invests in environmental protection and promotes environment-friendly technologies. This addresses pollution, destruction/waste of natural resources, degradation of the natural landscape. It also raises environmental protection standards, unregulated development and limited investment in sustainable technologies. CP examples: adoption of environmental regulations/standards; promotion of "green" policies (e.g. recycling) and technologies; implementation of "green" projects; establishment of institutions to monitor environmental conditions.
10. Cultural heritage	CP invests in promoting cultural heritage to address the poor condition of archaeological and historical monuments, lack of civic awareness/interest, funding and planning in cultural heritage. CP examples: schemes to develop archaeological and historical sites, restoration of monuments, promotion of policies to raise awareness.
11. Cultural development	CP aims to provide motivation and support for local artists, athletes and more cultural production due to limited availability of financial support, spaces for cultural expression, stadiums and training centres for athletes. CP examples: financial support and motivation for artistic creation, construction of new or renovation of old theatres music halls, sports centres, stadiums and training facilities, funding and promotion of artistic events.
12. Civic participation/ collaboration	CP promotes collaboration between authorities and citizens in order to support vulnerable social groups. Citizens are not sufficiently engaged in collaborative action for supporting their communities owing to the absence of participatory projects. CP examples: funding projects that promote citizens' involvement in collaborative action to support their communities.
13. Territorial cooperation	CP funds promote territorial cooperation, improving relations with neighbouring countries/regions and protecting territorial rights and security from third countries' aggression. CP examples: promotion of cross-border cooperation among member states, members and non-members, promotion of EU investment in disputed borderline areas to establish territorial rights.
14. Ineffective goal achievement (economic development etc.)	CP goals and aspirations are not achieved in practice and many CP projects do not bring the desired results. Ineffective implementation might occur for various reasons, but the bottom line is that CP cannot be considered an effective mechanism for economic, social or territorial development (e.g. RTDI development, cultural development, better infrastructure, environmental protection, combatting unemployment, bringing social justice, territorial cooperation, and positive contribution to increasing civic participation)
15. Solidarity towards poor countries or regions	CP is an expression of solidarity and aims to raise citizens' trust in the EU by reducing disparities between EU countries and regions. CP contributes to solidarity by providing funding to less-developed regions in particular, in order to reduce development gaps between European regions and Member states.
16. Financial burden	The EU and CP drains national resources in order to provide funds for EU projects. The EU takes money from developed and hard-working countries to subsidise weak economies. The EU wastes money on unnecessary projects with the rich paying for the poor. EU officials do not care for national interests. One solution could be to leave the EU.

17. Improve governance of public funding	CP provides funding and rules that promote good governance at all levels (national/regional/local) can enforce legal order. National authorities have been reluctant or indifferent to resolving domestic governance problems, to enforce legal order and to comply with EU rules and standards. National authorities must meet specific governance requirements in order to receive funding from CP.
18. Bureaucracy & delays	CP provides funding for the implementation of projects yet the procedures for applying for funding are very complicated for beneficiary organisations. Bureaucratic rules delay payments as well as the absorption of funds. There is a need to simplify application procedures and reduce bureaucracy.
19. Mismanagement of funds	CP is mismanaged by domestic authorities that fail to comply with EU rules, to meeting planned objectives and to deliver results within specified time-frames. The implementation of projects creates new problems for local authorities, due to weaknesses in design, audit and control, and delays. Domestic authorities' inefficiency slows spending or leads to financial suspensions or corrections by the EU.
20. Fraud and Corruption	EU funding is misused fraudulently and undermined by corruption among national/local public officials who try to exploit EU funds for their own personal gains. These problems are aggravated by the lack or inefficiency of control mechanisms. Member states that do not comply with EU regulations or were caught for fraud need to be punished or have their funds suspended.
21. Poor communication of funding opportunities and rules	Beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries are not well-informed about opportunities or EU rules. This can lead to slow and non-compliant spending. To make CP effective, national/subnational authorities should launch publicity campaigns to inform potential beneficiaries of opportunities. Institutions need to be created to better promote and manage funding applications.
22. Empowerment of subnational institutions	CP empowers subnational institutions since national authorities manage budgets and funding and subnational authorities are often excluded from decision-making. Solutions include the direct transfer of CP funds to subnational authorities and providing them with greater autonomy to decide on how to invest in development.
23. Lose sovereignty	CP funding obligations imply a loss national sovereignty to EU institutions. CP is an tool for the EU to interfere with national matters and competences. To avoid this trap requires leaving the EU or ending the EU commitment to a political union.
24. Political leverage	CP is used by European authorities to put pressure on national governments who do not comply with EU rules. Through conditionality, EU institutions try to enforce reforms in member states e.g. complying with economic governance rules, rule of law or migration quotas. Potential alternatives could be to separate cohesion policy funding from the implementation of other EU policies; or in the case of economic governance rules, to exempt member states' contributions to cohesion policy from budget deficit calculations.
25. Institutional bargaining over funding	The size and distribution of CP funding is politicized and contested. At EU level, funding allocations are disputed between net payers and recipients, and between EU institutions (Parliament, Council, Commission, Committee of the Regions) during MFF negotiations. Similar politicization and bargaining over funding redistribution takes place at national and subnational levels.
26. Political capital/interests	CP projects are exploited by national/subnational actors for political purposes by claiming credit or attributing blame and/or to increase their political influence. Citizens are misled to believe that EU funded projects are initiated by local/national political actors downplaying or ignoring the EU role.

This study evaluates the visibility and communication of cohesion policy in online media. It employs a mixed methods approach to investigate media coverage, representation and user perceptions of cohesion policy in online media. The research draws on an original dataset of over 60,000 news articles and 100,000 user-generated comments. It also analyses social media – over 11,000 Facebook posts and over five million tweets on Twitter – and 13,000 EU press releases. The key conclusion is that cohesion policy visibility is relatively low in online media. Policy recommendations are provided to improve cohesion policy visibility particularly through citizen engagement.