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**PERCEIVE**

Perception and Evaluation of Regional and Cohesion Policies  
by Europeans and Identification with the Values of Europe

## **Perception and Evaluation of Regional and Cohesion Policies by Europeans and Identification with the Values of Europe**

# **PERCEIVE**

**GA nr. 693529**

### **D 3.2 'Qualitative report with main findings from the interviews'**

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## 1. Executive summary

Cohesion Policy accounts for the European Union's main investment policy - with a budget of EUR 347 billion in the 2007-2013 programming period - and seeks to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion. While accomplishments in this field are constantly measured and documented, European citizens are not always aware of the impact that regional policy has on their territories or the role the EU plays therein. With a view to identification of the individual citizen with the EU oftentimes perceived as low, effort have been made on the part of the EU to improve communicative actions and communication strategies conveying Cohesion Policy.

This summary report has been created with the objective of supporting the EU in its pursuit of enhancing communication efforts. More specifically, it provides an overview of the results of an online survey conducted between September and October 2017 among key actors in the field of communicating EU regional Cohesion Policy (therefore mainly, but not exclusively among so-called Managing Authorities).

The survey conducted has aimed at consolidating and deepening our understanding of three specific elements concerning the communication of policies, namely: a) perceptions of **successful Cohesion Policy communication**, b) **assistance provided by the European Union** to local communicators, and c) **the communication strategy** chosen by local communicators to convey Cohesion Policy. These elements have been defined on the basis of prior in-depth focus groups and semi-structured interviews with regional Cohesion Policy practitioners (see D3.1 'Qualitative report on the impact and effectiveness of communication strategies from the semi structures interviews with cohesion policy practitioners' of the same Working Package) and are discussed in relation to the respective evidence in the following.

### **Successful communication**

*Evidence from the case studies:* Semi-structured interviews have indicated different understandings of what Managing Authorities perceived to be their main objective. Largest agreement was reached regarding the definition of success 'as prerequisite for the achievement of economic goals'. Successful communication was however somewhat impeded by barriers to communication linked to the technicalities of EU language, confined communication budgets, and limited interest of both the media and the general public.

*Results of the online survey:* Results of the online survey partially confirmed previous findings as respondents mainly associated Managing Authorities as 'helping hand' of project beneficiaries. In this vein, the main task for Managing Authorities was described as providing assistance to beneficiaries in communicating and disseminating the overall accomplishments of the policy to different audiences. Less prominent were indications of Managing Authorities in building citizens' identification with the European Union. As regards barriers to communication the online survey confirmed the existence of barriers as

based on the technical and bureaucratic language used in EU communication materials as well as excessive formal requirements imposed on Managing Authorities.

*Policy indications:* As the self-perceived role of Managing Authorities appears to consist of helping and/or advising (prospective) project beneficiaries rather than fostering a sense of EU identity, the latter becomes the sole responsibility of EU institutions. Perceptions thereof are fully in line with rather technical minimum legal requirements obliging Managing Authorities to instruct and inform prospective project beneficiaries on funding opportunities - but do not exceed the mere provision of information. With a view to this gap, a more active involvement of Managing Authorities (by enquiring about citizens' awareness, appreciation, and identification with the EU) could be sought after. As regards barriers to successful communication, a simplification of administrative requirements (e.g. criteria regarding the size and colour of the EU emblem) as well as a simplification of the language used could be taken into consideration.

### **EU communication guidance**

*Evidence from the case studies:* Prior interviews suggest different perspectives on EU communication guidance provided: while all of the case studies maintained awareness of centralised EU input, compliance therewith ranged from perceptions of technical requirement to well appreciated guidance. The wish for more centralised input was expressed to a varying extent while, at the same time, input was criticised for being too rigid or limiting in actions. Moreover, respondents praised the networking opportunities of various EU platforms. As to what regards the content of EU input, a number of respondents have pointed out a more technical emphasis rather than message-based instructions.

*Results of the online survey:* Perceptions of compliance with EU instructions as bare technical requirement were confirmed by publicity and visibility requirements stipulated as one of the most helpful support tools. Moreover, the EU INFORM network of communication officers was deemed most helpful in drafting communication strategies. With a view to the content of EU guidance provided, survey results were not indicative of whether more value-based (i.e. built on 'key messages') or more method-based (i.e. using storytelling or new media) input was wished for. Interestingly, however, 67 per cent of respondents expressed the wish for an entire EU-made toolkit for specific communication campaigns to be used by Managing Authorities.

*Policy indications:* In view of the results generated, indications regarding the content of guidance (i.e. 'how' or 'what' to communicate) cannot be given, while the wish for centralised, 'prefabricated', and more uniform communication campaigns became apparent. In view of the great reception of platforms enabling the sharing of best practices, enhancing existing networks could further strengthen learning from experience and adapting existing publicity measures to fit local needs.

## **Communication strategy**

*Evidence from the case studies:* Previous findings have suggested similarities within the chosen communication mix (i.e. the use of certain communication channels for certain communication target groups): (prospective) project beneficiaries are most effectively targeted through 'face-to-face' communication while the youngest generation is best approached through new or social media. As to what regards communication methods, storytelling emerged as relevant tool in communicating regional Cohesion Policy, with opinions on its effectiveness being quite mixed. The use of direct testimonies of project beneficiaries emerged as most agreed-on storytelling device.

*Results of the online survey:* Survey results seemingly reaffirm the findings made as new/social media is indeed perceived as most relevant communication channel in targeting young people. Face-to-face communication through events of various sorts emerged as relevant communication channel in the sense that it was evenly distributed between communication target groups of the general public, potential beneficiaries and entrepreneurs. When asked about other crucial target groups, respondents were eager to emphasise local political and media representatives. With a view to communication methods, storytelling was mostly described as somewhat put to use (60%), with respondents reaffirming the use of project beneficiaries as testimonials to be the most relevant narrative device. Of nearly equal importance were visual representations through videos and pictures, confirming a number of respondents' remarks in prior face-to-face interviews.

*Policy indications:* The findings made emphasise the importance of local political representatives and the media within communication (both of which also emerge through the assessment of communication barriers). Local actors should support the implementation of EU Cohesion Policy funding or at the very least not counteract pro-EU communication measures in order to fully ensure effective communication. In this vein, encouraging Managing Authorities to engage with political opinion leaders or the media as multipliers could be considered by EU communication representatives.

## **2. Methods**

The aim of the online survey described in this report was to validate and extend the findings of previously conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with policy practitioners in an explorative way. Accordingly, we started from a revision of the findings reported in PERCEIVE's Deliverable 3.1 and elaborated a questionnaire (see Appendix for a detailed list of questions used in the survey), expanding on both contrasting opinions and unexpected findings gathered. The resulting questionnaire was composed of three main sections exploring: a) perceptions of success in and the existence of potential barriers to communication, b) the use and eventual implementation of current and demand for further support by the European Union in local communication efforts, c) strategic aspects

of communication such as the composition of the communication mix as well as the use of narrative devices (i.e. storytelling techniques). This threefold structure purposefully mirrors that of previously conducted semi-structured interviews and aims at establishing a comparative discussion of results (i.e. see executive summary at the beginning of this report).

Initially, we decided to target all 313 (2007-2013) and 295 (2014-2020) contacts listed as Managing Authorities<sup>1</sup> on the InfoRegio web portal. E-mail addresses and respective contact persons were however not available for all listed authorities. At the same time, the combining of two programming periods created a partial overlap regarding institutional responsibilities and respective contact persons and/or e-mail addresses. In order to account for these issues, separate mailing lists were created for contact persons and organisations whose e-mail addresses have been indicated on the EC InfoRegio platform and checked for redundancy, and organisations whose e-mail addresses were retrieved from internet search.

We decided to distribute our survey through Google forms - a free online service provided by Google. This decision was motivated by two main reasons: a) we had more e-mail contacts than phone numbers for most contacts in our initial distribution list, b) the telephonic contacting of potential respondents would have exceeded our capacities both in terms of costs and effort (i.e. person-months).

After two weeks and two reminders sent out we had received only 22 responses to our invitation to participate in the survey. Therefore, we decided to extend our original contact list and run another round of invitations. We contacted the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy's communication department which helpfully provided 524 contacts of communication officers on various levels (i.e. transnational Joint Secretariats, national or regional actors). Additionally, access to the communication officers' platform on Yammer was provided. In order to account for respondents not representing Managing Authorities (but potentially EU communication representatives or consultants), we created a second survey for the newly acquired target contacts. In the same vein, we generalised a number of questions (e.g. substituted words such as 'Managing authority' with 'organization/agency'). The content of survey questions however was not changed.

After closing the collection of responses on 11 October 2017 we integrated the results gathered through the two datasets. In total we obtained 62 responses with the vast majority of respondents representing Managing Authorities (52). The remainder of respondents was split between consultancies (2), ministries and government agencies (2), intermediate bodies (4), and single beneficiaries (2). Managing Authorities were further classified according to the **acting level**, **funding periods**, as well as - optionally - the **geographic area**.

As regards the **acting level**, Managing Authorities were divided in line with Regional Policy InfoRegio classifications of national, regional, multinational, and multiregional actors. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Contacts were drawn from the search mask on [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/atlas/managing-authorities/](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/atlas/managing-authorities/).

2014-2020 programming period, the vast majority of respondents account for regional (37%) and national actors (31%), followed at some distance by multinational (13%) and multiregional actors (10%).

As regards **funding periods**, a vast majority of 90 per cent of respondents have indicated both having received (2007-2013) and currently receiving (2014-2020) funding under an Operational Programme (co)-financed by one of the structural funds. 8 per cent are only receiving funding in the current programming period, while one respondent indicated the last programming period as sole funding source.

Managing Authorities were further optionally invited to indicate their **identity**: while 30 answers to this question were gathered in the online survey, 18 of those were clearly identifiable on the basis of their national background, 8 out of which could be even further traced down to regional communication practitioners. Figure 1 illustrates the results generated (abstracted based on the national affiliation of respondents): while responses are scattered throughout the European Union, most of the clearly identifiable responses were gathered in Romania, followed by France, Portugal, and Greece. One third of those who indicated their national identity belonged to transnational Cohesion Policy communication practitioners, who - for the sake of clarity - are not indicated in the following Figure (1). Map points indicate the nine regions in which face-to-face interviews were conducted (for more detailed information, see D3.1).

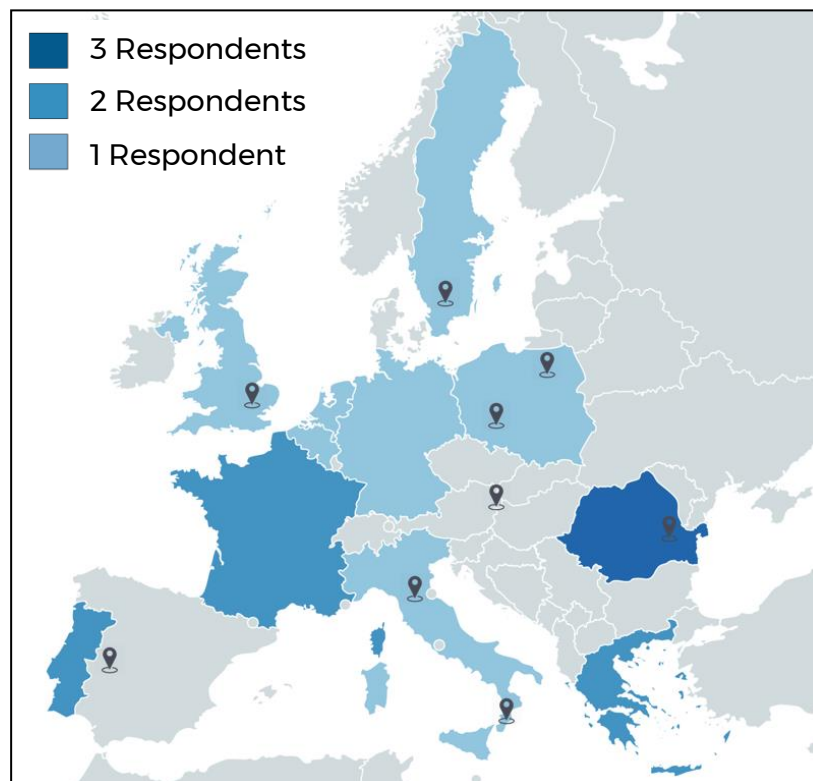


Figure 1 - Respondents according to geographical locations (Source: <https://mapchart.net/>)



The complete list of questions as well as a summary of responses given is provided in the appendix concluding this report. The discussion of the results in a comparative perspective with previously conducted semi-structured interviews as well as policy indications are to be found in the executive summary that opens the current report.

### 3. Summary of results

#### 3.1 Perceptions of successful Cohesion Policy communication

Previous focus groups and semi-structured interviews (see Deliverable 3.1) have pointed to different definitions of what constitutes successful communication among Cohesion Policy practitioners. Two dimensions characterising these different understandings emerged in particular, namely the **perceived role of Managing Authorities** within communicating policy and the perception of possible **communication barriers** hindering success.

As regards the **role envisioned for Managing Authorities in the communication of policy**, prior results have shown that different perceptions of success in communicating policy are built on different perceptions of what Cohesion Policy practitioners perceive to be the main communication objective of Managing Authorities. Understandings thereof have ranged from rather technical perspectives of providing beneficiaries with needed information to a more 'appreciative' depiction of the role played by the European Union within Cohesion Policy funding (see for instance Report on Emilia-Romagna, Italy, linked to D3.1). With a view to PERCEIVE's aims in researching whether Cohesion Policy can be conducive to citizens' identification with the European Union, we were particularly interested whether the identification of citizens with the EU was deemed a communication priority by Managing Authorities. By enquiring about citizens' awareness, appreciation, and identification - representing different and ascending stages of identification with the European Union, 'appreciative' (i.e. in the sense of creating appreciation for and identification with the EU) options were given. In the same vein, more 'technical' options were listed in the form of communication aims linked to guiding prospective beneficiaries through the funding application and assisting current project beneficiaries in communicating their achievements.

With a view to the results, the two most important roles of Managing Authorities in communicating Cohesion Policy were ascribed to assisting project beneficiaries with communication activities and conveying Cohesion Policy achievements to various audiences. This seems crucial in light of the small size and temporary (i.e. projects) nature of most developmental efforts financed through regional Cohesion Policy. In this vein, final beneficiaries tend to not dedicate resources to communication activities and the additional task of communicating the role played by the EU might indeed appear overwhelming. Further noticeable is that less importance was assigned by respondents in Managing Authorities as being directly involved in building citizens' awareness and identification with the European Union. These findings seem to confirm the impression gained during face-to-

face interviews in which Cohesion Policy practitioners did not see the immediate fostering of an EU identity or identification with the European Project as part of their standard social role or institutional mission.

As regards **perceived barriers to effective communication**, 60 per cent of all respondents acknowledged the existence of barriers within the communication chain of the European Union to Managing Authorities to the individual citizen (and, naturally, with a view to communication mediators such as the media). Face-to-face interviews have pointed towards issues of 'political opportunism' (see for instance Report on Burgenland, Austria, linked to D3.1) and national or sub-national actors emphasising their role within EU Cohesion Policy funding, while saying less about the European Union. Along with these came administrative and institutional issues (limited communication budget, Managing Authorities being too small in size) and societal constraints (lack of interest by the public, anti-EU orientation of the media or anti-EU positioning of politics).

Out of these, results of the online survey show that the use of a (too) technical and bureaucratic language in EU material (i.e. documentation and reporting) was the most selected option (17 cases) followed by excessive formal and administrative requirements imposed onto Managing Authorities by the EU (15 cases) - again, showcasing negative shades of bureaucracy. In this sense, respondents chose options linked to involuntary capacity reasons (i.e. communication budget, administrative requirements) rather than deliberate choices of actors within the implementing line of communication activities as barriers to communication. Following these, however, were reasons related to the lack of interest by the public and the media (9 cases), linking in with societal constraints imposed on Managing Authorities. In this sense, communication efforts are inhibited by 'counter'-communication efforts by the media impairing pro-European communication.

### **3.2 Assistance provided by the European Union**

Regarding both **awareness and use** of EU communication guidance, face-to-face interviews indicated highly contrasting viewpoints ranging from full adoption to open opposition. What is common to all Managing Authorities however is compliance with minimum legal obligations regarding publicity and visibility requirements as stipulated in EU Implementing Regulations. By listing both minimum legal requirements and additional guidance provided by the EU (e.g. guidelines for the drawing up of communication plans), the underlying aim was to depict whether Managing Authorities comply with legal obligations solely or make use of additional input. In addition, prior interviews have emphasised EU input as 'networking' and learning opportunity in the sense of learning from other Managing Authorities and successfully implemented communication activities from the past. In this vein, it is not EU input in the sense of guidance coming directly from the EU, but rather the opportunity of a platform providing comparison and learning processes that is made use of. The case study of Burgenland, Austria even went as far as to explore a

'bottom-up-approach', in which best practice tends to emerge on the ground, and then disseminates through the platform, only to be incorporated by EU guidelines in the form of best practices.

These prior findings were further supported by the online survey: when asked about communication guidance provided by the European Union, the INFORM network of communication officers was deemed the most helpful (25 cases)<sup>2</sup>. Functioning as EU-wide network of communication officers, its aim is to improve visibility "*by sharing experiences and good practices*" (European Commission, 2017a), with the European Union acting as coordinator, participant and - in some parts - contributor. By providing a platform for communication officers, the latter can then exchange experiences, learn from best practices, and adapt existing publicity measures to their respective local needs.

Moreover, publicity and visibility requirements as stipulated in EU Implementing Regulations were further pointed out as helpful support tools (23 cases), supporting the idea that minimum requirements will naturally be adhered to, but additional input might not be required. Guidelines for the drawing up of communication plans as provided by the European Union in various forms were however - with a certain distance - viewed as helpful as 16 cases pointed out. Less importance was given to DG Regio Information and Communication plans formulating communication aims and methods for the EU side of communication activities: only 7 indications were made towards the helpfulness in this case.

As to what regards the **content of EU communication guidance**, prior interviews had indicated emphasis from the EU side on the technical compliance with norms imposed rather than the actual message carried out to various audiences (see for instance Report on Emilia-Romagna, Italy linked to D3.1). Communication guidance provided by the EU, too, has largely centred on the methods of communication (i.e. 'how to communicate'), focusing on the use of storytelling, explaining new media, or the proper implementation of video material in communication activities (e.g. INFORM INIO network meeting in Pamhagen, Austria, 31 May 2017). Online survey results however did not seem to confirm a wish for more value-based communication guidance (i.e. 'what to communicate') in the sense of key messages to be distributed. In fact, both 'how' and 'what' to communicate were somewhat (20 and 19 cases respectively) or very much (18 and 14 cases) wished for by respondents. In a clearer way, Managing authorities did however wish for an entire EU toolkit for specific communication campaigns, with 67 per cent of respondents indicating a request for 'prefabricated' input to be distributed within their local context. This implies that a centralised approach to the dissemination of publicity material allowing a more uniform appearance is perceived as helpful and potentially considered more effective in reaching the individual citizen.

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<sup>2</sup> As indicated under '2. Methods' only 52 of the 62 gathered responses were given by Managing Authorities and are hence included in the following elaboration of awareness and use of EU communication guidance.

### 3.3 Communication strategy

Prior interviews with Cohesion Policy practitioners were largely based on the communication strategy employed by policy communicators with a view to the chosen communication mix (i.e. the use of certain communication channels for certain communication target groups) and the use of storytelling within communication activities. A comparison of the **communication mix** chosen by policy implementers indicated similarities with a view to the use of new or social media (as opposed to traditional media) in order to target young people, and 'face-to-face' or 'live' forms of communication as the main way of communicating with project beneficiaries.

Survey results seem to reaffirm these first assessments as 57 mentions indicated social media as most effective communication tool for targeting young people. By contrast, one sole mention maintained traditional media as the most effective way. Traditional media, instead, was described as best communication method in reaching the general public (44 cases). Interestingly, 55 indications of Managing Authority websites as targeting potential beneficiaries emerged, contrasting the impression gained that project beneficiaries are best reached through events enabling face-to-face communication. Instead, events were more evenly distributed, targeting all indicated target groups, with less effectiveness however ascribed to young people.

Other communication channels indicated by respondents were linked to promotional material such as leaflets or publications (4 cases), followed by newsletters, e-mails, the use of direct communication (both through information centres or through personal contacts) and more specific events such as contests (3 cases each). Further important communication target groups were linked to politicians with a view to local representatives especially (9 indications) and the media (8 indications) functioning as multipliers within communication activities and highlighting the perceived significance of both (local) politics and the media weighing in on the matter of EU policies.

As regards **storytelling**, the aim within prior interviews and the current survey was to understand the general acceptance of storytelling as relevant tool in policy communication. Having received particular importance within recent EU publications (see for instance Europe in my Region Blog contest - Storytelling and EU projects, European Commission, 2017b; or EC conferences on 'Telling the story: Communicating European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2010, European Commission, 2017c), prior interviewees have expressed different viewpoints ranging from fully incorporating storytelling within publicity measures to acknowledging its importance albeit not using it (see for instance Report on Extremadura, Spain linked to D3.1). Within the online survey, the aim was to inquire both the use of storytelling within communication practice and an assessment towards the most significant aspects of storytelling. In this sense, respondents were asked to determine communicative devices within storytelling deemed most effective in communicating opportunities and/or accomplishments of EU-(co-)funded projects.

With a view to the results, 82 per cent of respondents maintained using storytelling in communicating regional policies, either somewhat (60%) or to a large extent (22%). Respondents affirming the use of storytelling further agreed on the use of testimonials and examples of Best practices/success stories (42 cases) and the visual representation through the use of videos and pictures (35 cases) as most effective storytelling devices - in line with EU guidance provided largely based on these two fundamentals. 15 indications were made towards comparing the past to the present to demonstrate the added value. One sole response was given affirming the use of symbols as effective storytelling device, impairing the use of the EU flag or logos of the structural funds as the most effective way to reach communication target groups. The findings made seem to confirm prior face-to-face interviews indicating the use of direct testimonies of project beneficiaries to be the most agreed-on way to narrate accomplishments of regional policy. In a similar vein, little attention seems to be paid to materialising the EU through visual symbols - rather, prior interviews have indicated the use of the EU emblem as linked to bureaucratic hurdles.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Prior evidence from face-to-face interviews conducted with Cohesion Policy implementers has been confirmed through the conducted only survey in a number of ways: while the large number of geographically spread Cohesion Policy communicators naturally allows for heterogeneous results, certain consensus was observed with a view to perceived barriers to communication, mostly linked to the complexities of EU language, the wish for an entire toolkit of EU input for specific communication campaigns, the importance of local political and media representatives in communicating Cohesion Policy, and the use of storytelling through project testimonials. In light of these, policy implications have been indicated for the EU to consider, consisting of a simplification of administrative requirements along with a re-consideration of minimum requirements, the provision of 'prefabricated' communication toolkits, and the engagement of local political and media representatives within the communication process.

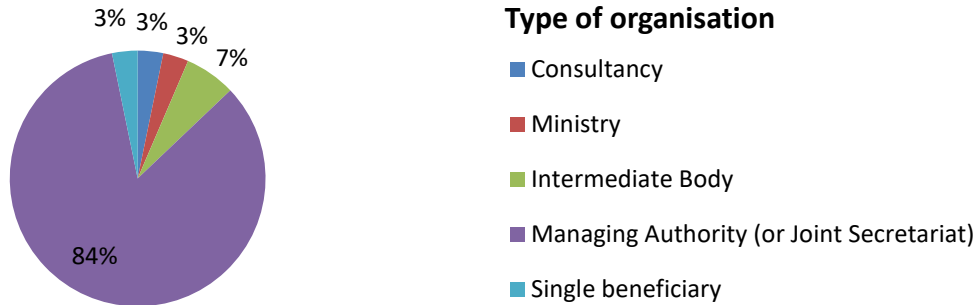
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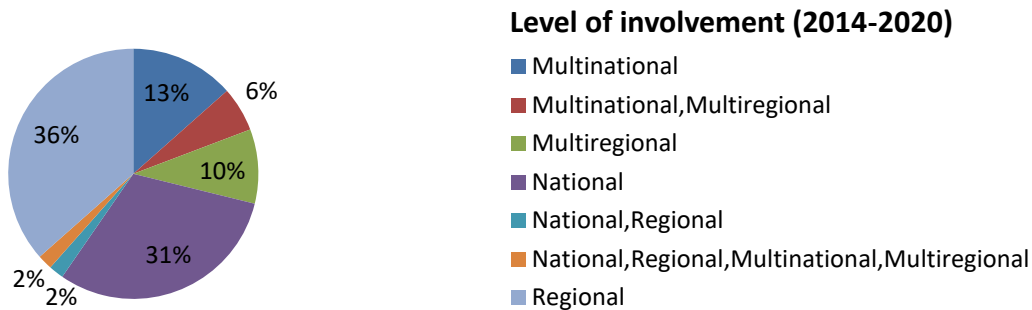
## 6. APPENDIX: Responses in detail

### SECTION 1: Respondent profile

Q.1: Please indicate the type of organisation you represent. [n=62]



Q.2: Please indicate the level your Managing Authority is mainly involved with in the current Cohesion Policy programming period (2014-2020). [This questions was only available to Managing Authority respondents; n=52]



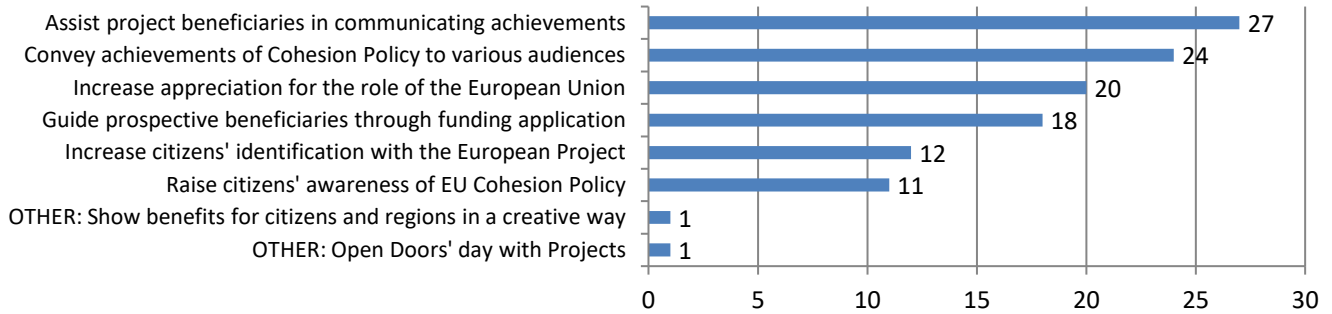
Q.3: Please indicate all programming periods in which you have received or are currently receiving funding under an Operational Programme (co)-financed by one of the Structural Funds. [This questions was only available to Managing Authority respondents; n=52]



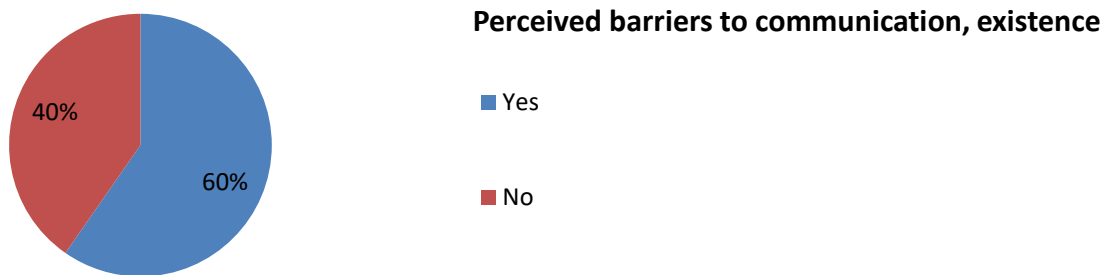
**SECTION 2: Successful communication**

Q.4: In your view, from all the roles your organisation/agency fulfils, which one is currently the most important in communicating Cohesion Policy? Please select a maximum of two alternatives. [n=62]

**Most important role in communicating Cohesion Policy**

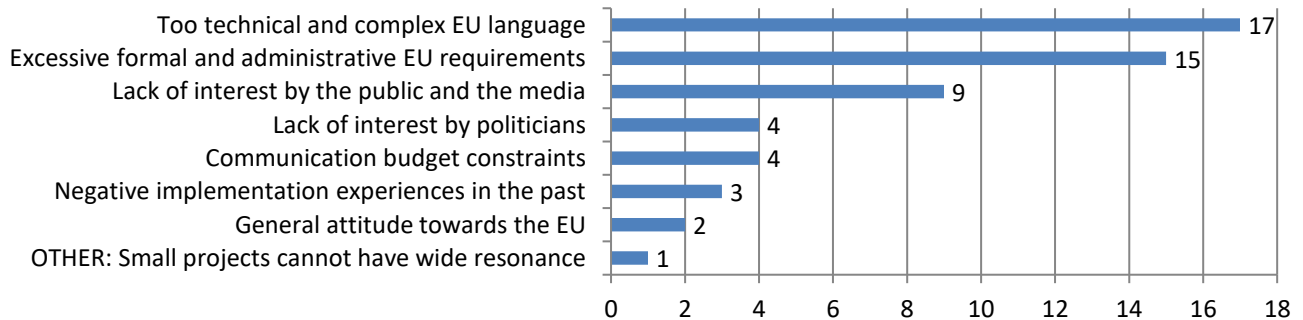


Q.5: Do you think the communication of Cohesion policy is inhibited by communication barriers? [n=62]



Q.6: Which of the following reasons would you state as potentially hindering the communication flow from EU level to the target groups envisioned? Please select a maximum of two alternatives. [This question was only available to those who had answered 'Yes' in the previous question.]

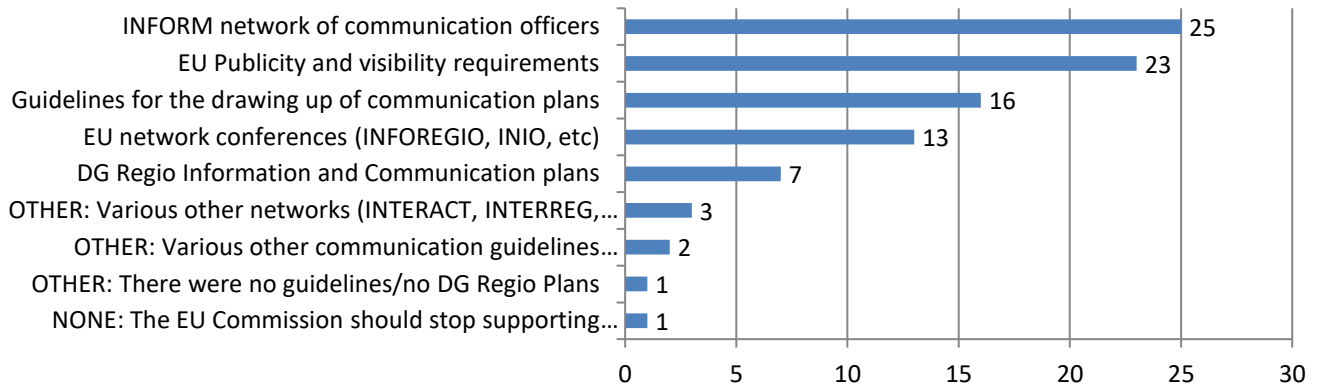
**Perceived barriers to communication, backgrounds**



**SECTION 3: EU communication guidance**

Q.7 The European Union provides communication guidance for Member States and Managing Authorities. Of these, which ones do you find most helpful when drafting your communication strategy? Please select a maximum of two alternatives. *[This questions was only available to Managing Authority respondents; n=52]*

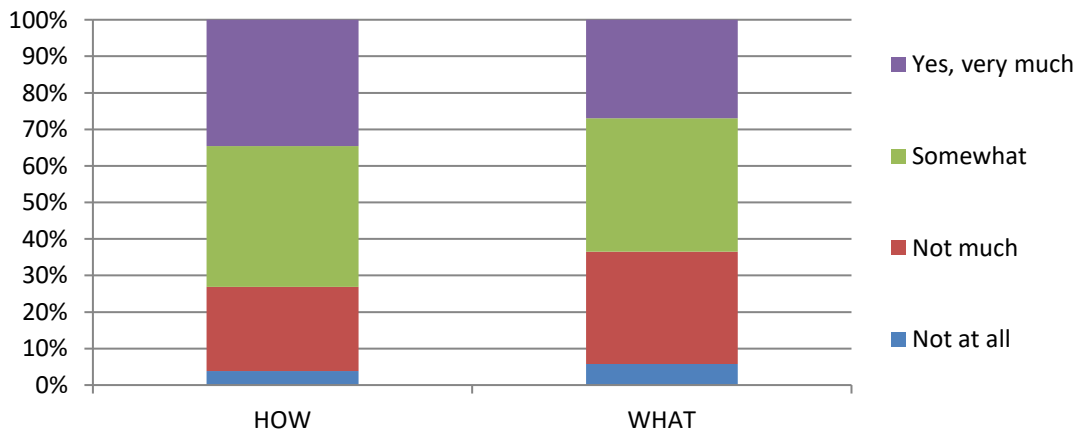
**Most helpful support tools from the EU**



Q.8.a: Would you wish for a higher level of EU input as to what regards communication methods and channels, i.e. 'how to communicate' (such as 'storytelling' or 'using new media')? *[This questions was only available to Managing Authority respondents; n=52]*

Q.8.b: Would you wish for a higher level of EU input as to what regards communication values and key messages, i.e. 'what to communicate' (such as past EC DG Regio key messages like 'Geography matters' or 'Regional policy benefits all of Europe')? *[This questions was only available to Managing Authority respondents; n=52]*

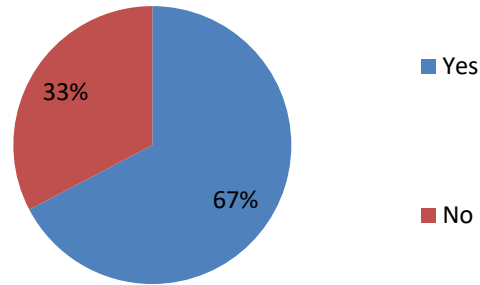
**Wish for more support from the EU on ... to communicate**





Q.8.c: Would you wish for the European Union to provide you with an entire toolkit for specific communication campaigns? [This questions was only available to Managing Authority respondents; n=52]

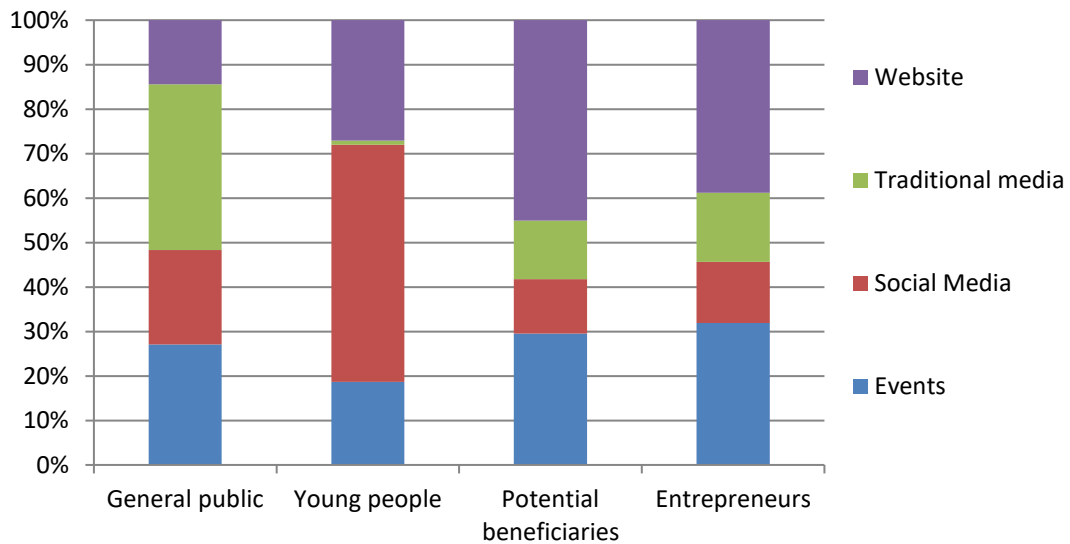
**Wish for the EU to provide an entire toolkit for specific communication campaigns**



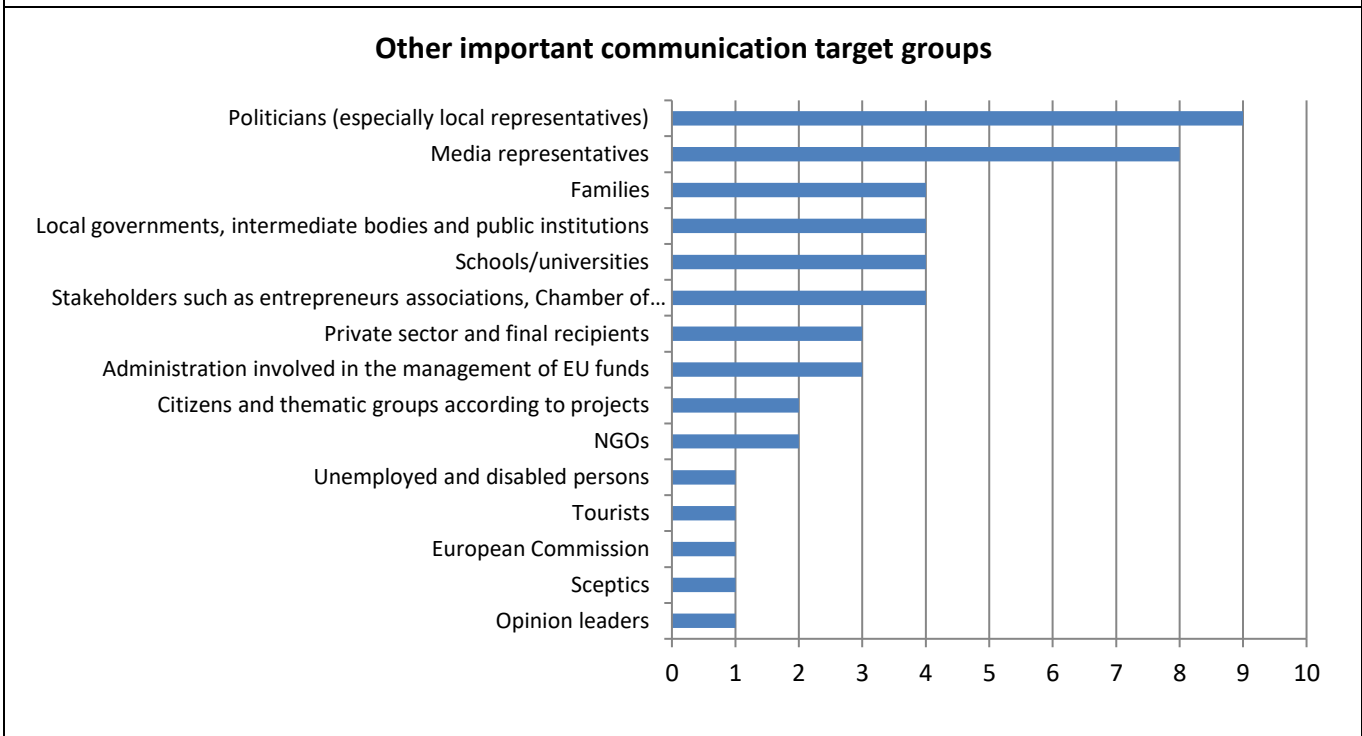
**SECTION 4: Communication strategy**

Q.9: For each of the following target groups ('the general public', 'young people', 'potential beneficiaries', 'entrepreneurs'), please indicate the most relevant communication channels ('websites', 'traditional media', 'social media', 'events'). Please select a maximum of two alternatives per target group. [n=62]

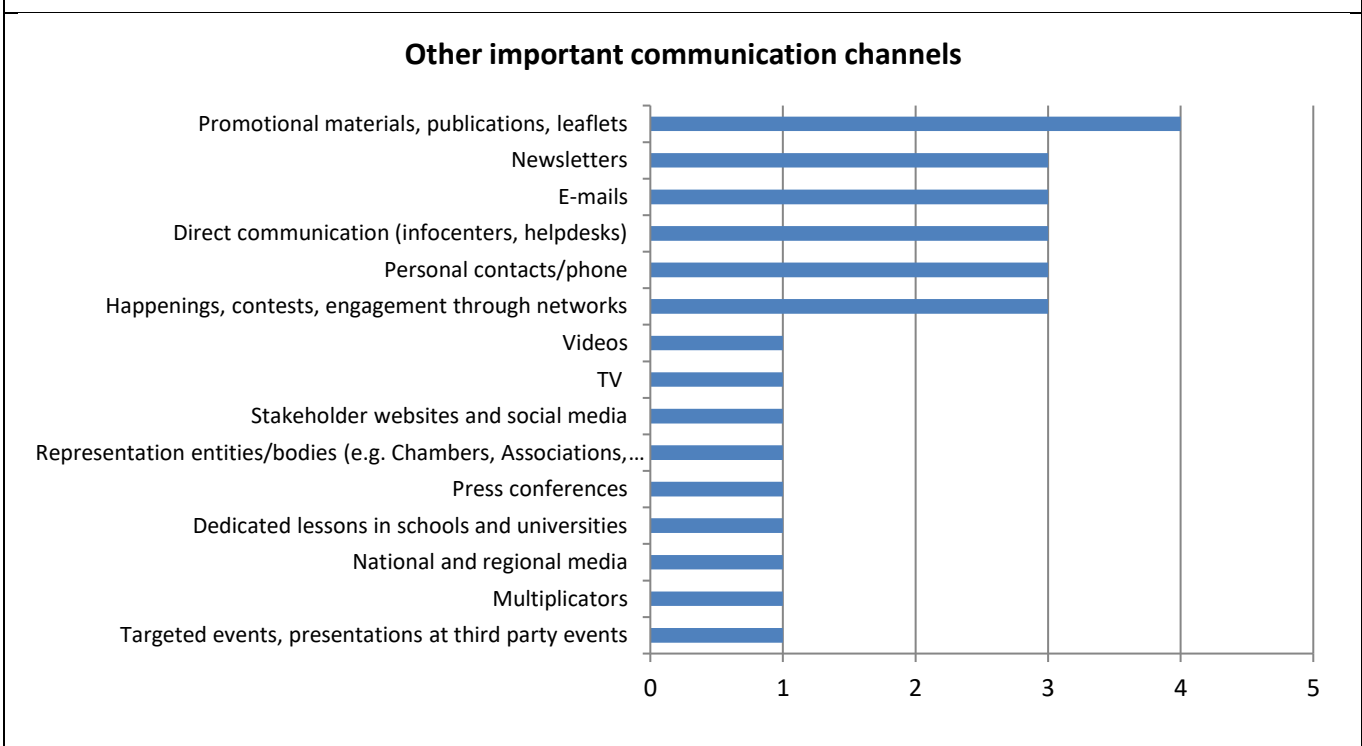
**Most relevant communication channels per target groups**



Q.10: In your opinion, are there other important target groups? If so, please indicate them here. [n=62]

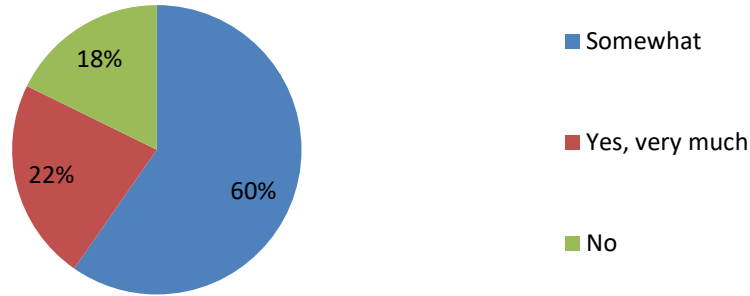


Q.11: In your opinion, are there other important communication channels? If so, please indicate them here. [n=62]



Q.12: Does your organisation/agency use storytelling in communicating regional policies? [n=62]

**Use of storytelling in communication activities**



Q.13: In your opinion, which of the following communicative devices are most effective in communicating opportunities and/or accomplishments of EU-(co-)funded projects? Please select a maximum of two alternatives. [This questions was only available to those who had answered 'Yes, very much' or 'Somewhat' in the previous question.]

**Storytelling devices**

