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# Cohesion Policy and the citizens' perceptions of the EU: the role of communication and implementation

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## ABSTRACT

EU Cohesion Policy has arguably the most tangible impact on the citizens' environment and livelihoods and can potentially boost their attachment to the European project. Beyond the cross-national transactionalist hypothesis, Cohesion Policy spending has a local impact and may affect the lives of citizens who do not benefit directly from cross-national transactions, like education, work, investment and travel in other European countries. One could thus expect that Cohesion Policy has a significant positive impact on the ways in which citizens perceive the EU. But what happens when a country is a net contributor to the EU's budget receiving a relatively small amount of Cohesion Policy funding, the bulk of it being invested in poorer European territories? Building on the cases of two Dutch regions – Flevoland and Limburg – this paper investigates the extent to which the citizens are aware of Cohesion Policy interventions and how the features of communication on and implementation of Cohesion Policy affect this awareness.

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## 1. Introduction

After the global economic crisis broke out in 2008, citizens' views on European integration became more critical, with a growing number of people distrusting the EU in many member states, leading to a surge in votes for parties opposed to European integration. There is a growing recognition, both among European policy-makers and scholars, that in order to understand this phenomenon, one needs to delve into the regional scale and understand better how the citizens in vastly differentiated regional settings relate to the EU and how they perceive its activities (Mendez and Brachtler 2016). While this has become an emerging research topic (e.g. Aiello, Reverberi, and Brasili 2019; Capello and Perucca 2019; Dąbrowski, Stead, and Mashhoodi 2019; Dijkstra, Poelman, and Rodríguez-Pose 2019), with a growing number of studies exploring the patterns and drivers of EU support in regions mainly in 'large-n' quantitative research, there is still a knowledge

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gap concerning the regional dimension of the citizens' perceptions of the EU and the role of Cohesion Policy in shaping them. This paper seeks to address this knowledge gap and innovate by exploring this topic through mixed methods case study research and by looking into regions receiving relatively little Cohesion Policy funding, while most of the literature on Cohesion Policy focuses on regions being major beneficiaries of EU funding. What is also novel in this paper, is the focus on the role of Cohesion Policy communication and implementation as factors which affect the awareness of this policy among citizens, the latter being a precondition for positive impacts of Cohesion Policy on positive perceptions of the EU itself.

Cohesion Policy is the EU's core investment and regional development policy providing European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) for investment in myriad regional and local development projects. The policy plays an important role in this debate, not least because it has the most tangible impacts of the EU's activity for the citizens' daily lives and their living environments. The high visibility of Cohesion Policy's interventions across the European territory is believed to build support for this policy and for European integration (Begg 2008). Thus, while it is not the policy's aim *per se*, it has the potential to enhance the EU's tarnished image. But is Cohesion Policy actually able to build support for the EU?

Previous research indicated that the size of allocation of ESIF matters for the citizens' support for the EU, but this effect was mediated by the extent to which the citizens were aware of EU funding (Osterloh 2011). Later research, though, brings ambiguous conclusions. Chalmers and Dellmuth (2015) found no direct link between the size of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) allocation and support for the EU, while Verhaegen, Hooghe, and Quintelier (2014) found that in countries receiving more EU funding citizens are less likely to support European integration. However, there is a relationship between EU Cohesion Policy investment across the European regions and support for the EU, even if it is strong mainly in less developed regions that have benefited from more substantial amounts of EU funding and where citizens are more likely to have benefited from EU-funded projects (Borz, Brandenburg, and Mendez 2018). Others quantitative studies found that the more funding from Cohesion Policy a region receives the less widespread the negative image of the EU is among its population (Dąbrowski, Stead, and Mashhoodi 2019). By contrast, qualitative research showed that only a minority of citizens considered that Cohesion Policy had an impact on their feelings towards the EU, while in some cases that impact could be negative if the funding was perceived not to address the actual local needs (Pegan, Mendez, and Triga 2018). Therefore, one may ask, what about relatively more developed regions that do not receive substantial amounts of EU funding? Is there still a link between Cohesion Policy and EU identification there?

The relatively prosperous Dutch regions studied here receive comparatively little EU funding. The Netherlands, being a net-contributor to the EU budget, received EUR 510 million as part of European Regional Development Fund in the 2014–20 period. However, some of the Dutch regions had an arguably substantial exposure to Cohesion Policy in the past. Namely, Flevoland Province benefited from large amounts of EU funding being the poorest region in the Netherlands and qualified under Objective 1 in the 2000–06 period, while Limburg Province has been at the heart of several cross-border and territorial cooperation programmes for decades. It is in those two regions that one may expect the greater impacts of Cohesion Policy on the Dutch citizens' lives

and, hence, perceptions of the EU. In order to shed light on this issue, however, one first needs to understand what citizens from these regions actually know about Cohesion Policy. Thus, this paper seeks to answer two research questions. First, are the citizens in the case study regions aware of Cohesion Policy interventions in those regions? Secondly, is their awareness of Cohesion Policy related to how this policy has been communicated and implemented in these regions? By responding to those questions, the paper offers a first in-depth account of the role of Cohesion Policy implementation and communication for awareness of this policy.

The next section outlines the theoretical perspectives on EU identification and how it could be shaped by Cohesion Policy. This is followed by a brief overview of the context of the two Dutch case study regions and an outline of the methodology. The subsequent empirical sections explore and discuss the data, while the final section concludes and outlines the implications for policy.

## 2. Cohesion Policy, European identification and EU support

European identification is considered crucial for the European integration project, as it underpins the legitimacy of and support for European institutions and (re-)distributive policies (Risse 2014), such as Cohesion Policy. It is worth to stress here that European identification and support for the EU are distinctive, yet related issues (for an overview of the vast literature on this topic see European Commission 2012; Loveless and Rohrschneider 2011). The former relates to identification with the European political community, which most often complements a predominant national, regional or local locus of identity. This identification may not necessarily relate to the EU, but the geographically and/or culturally defined 'Europe'. Both EU and 'Europe' as locus of identity are related, though, as Recchi (2017, 1) points out: 'a poor sense of Europeanness means no solidarity with other Europeans. No solidarity translates into little public support to European institutions when they endeavour to impose redistributive policies or to pool member states' resources'.

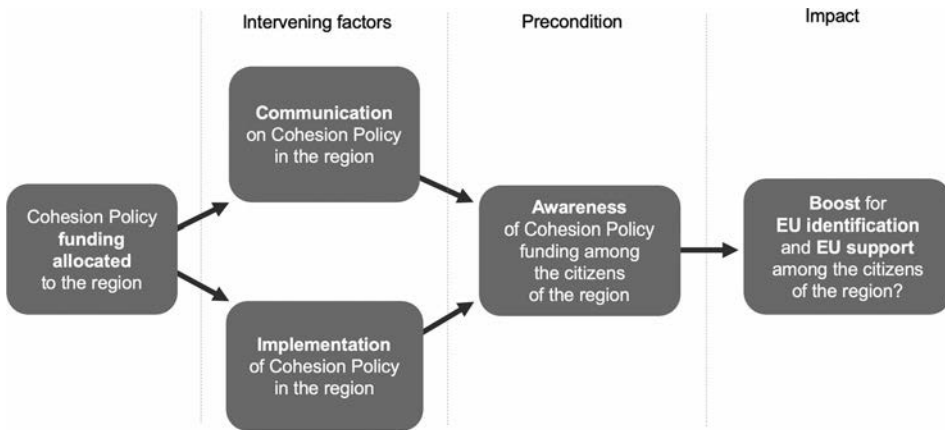
Research on EU identification tends to conceptualize it along three dimensions: (i) cognitive; (ii) affective; (iii) evaluative (Bergbauer 2018; for a review see Mendez and Brachtler 2016). The cognitive dimension is related to self-identification or awareness as European; the affective dimension of EU identification corresponds to the feeling of belonging or attachment to a shared European political community; while the more utilitarian evaluative dimension corresponds to the assignment of value connotation (cost–benefit) to their membership in the EU. Importantly, being deeply rooted in the individual's self-awareness and social constructs, European identification tends to be relatively stable and less prone to fluctuation as a result of the changing political or socio-economic circumstances. By contrast, EU support, refers to the positive attitude towards closer European integration and the institutions put in place to promote. EU support tends to be more volatile and prone to shift in the wake of the changing context, for instance during an economic or political crisis. EU support is related to a more utilitarian cost–benefit assessment of the EU on the basis of the perceived benefits that it brings to individuals at a given time (Gabel and Palmer 1995). In this egocentric perspective citizens act as rational actors and declare support for the EU on the basis of 'what's in it for me' micro-economic evaluation.

Cost–benefit evaluation underpinning support for the EU can, however, also be socio-tropic, that is underpinned by consideration of how the EU actions affect the situation of a nation or a region (Hooghe and Marks 2005).

One can expect that by investing in the development of regions, for instance through infrastructural projects (the sites of which are always marked with panels adorned with EU flags and acknowledgement of EU funding) or supporting businesses that create jobs, Cohesion Policy affects the way in which the citizens perceive the benefits offered by the EU to them or to their city or region. Cohesion Policy may have a positive effect on EU support through the evaluative dimension, since it supports regional economies and infrastructures, which in turn is likely to improve the economic situation of the inhabitants of the recipient regions. This expectation is in line with the earlier findings on drivers of EU support indicating that the individual benefits stemming from EU policies matter (Gabel and Palmer 1995). Living in a country that reaps economic benefits from the EU membership and benefiting from it personally makes one more likely to support the EU (Anderson and Reichert 1995). Hence, Cohesion Policy should thus also boost positive views on the EU, at least in the less developed regions that benefit from substantial funding from this policy.

That said, in regions in countries being net-contributors to the EU budget, transfers from Cohesion Policy are relatively small and citizens may be upset that most of EU money is spent inefficiently in the poorer Eastern and Southern regions with low institutional capacity (Capello and Perucca 2018). These factors are likely to weaken EU support. Moreover, other research found little evidence influence of Cohesion Policy on EU identification, which tends to be ‘influenced by individuals’ perceptions of the situation of their region’s economy and effectiveness of EU institutions in solving the region’s problems’ (Aiello, Reverberi, and Brasili 2019, 687). Coming from the European level, transfers are exogenous to the state and the regions in which they are used. This in turn raises the question of whether the citizens actually are aware of this and can relate investments supported by Cohesion Policy to the EU. Research by Osterloh (2011) showed that Cohesion Policy spending may boost support for the EU but only if they are aware of it (see also Capello and Perucca 2019). Since ‘individuals are influenced by the awareness to be a direct or indirect beneficiary of the policy’, there is a need to assess the level of awareness of Cohesion Policy among citizens and examine how communication on Cohesion Policy affects it (Aiello, Reverberi, and Brasili 2019, 687).

From a different perspective, one can also expect that by supporting investment that improves the citizens’ living and working conditions or their engagement in interactions with peers across the national border, Cohesion Policy can also develop a sense of belonging to a shared community and stimulate feelings of attachment to the EU. There is, in fact, evidence that transnational experiences and social interactions across the borders can positively affect identification with the EU (Bellucci, Sanders, and Serricchio 2012). For Kuhn (2015), European integration created various opportunities for European citizens beyond the nation state in terms of political expression, social experiences and economic gains. These ‘European’ opportunities related to work, study, travel and investment, are expected to increase EU support. In a region engaged in numerous cross-border and transnational cooperation programmes (such as Limburg, one of our case studies) citizens could be more inclined to support the EU and feel attached to the EU, also due to these Cohesion Policy programmes.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework. Source: Authors.

On the basis of the above mentioned literature we build our conceptual framework (see [Figure 1](#)). We expect that Cohesion Policy funding allocated to a given region – being invested in projects that support regional development, create jobs, or improve the quality of the living environment for the citizens of that region – can have a positive impact on EU identification and EU support in that region. The precondition for that impact, however, is that the citizens are aware of the EU funding being invested in their region. The focus of this paper is, thus, not on investigating the dimensions and drivers of EU identification or EU support, which are the subject of an already vast literature. Instead, we posit that both the awareness of Cohesion Policy and its potential impact in terms of a boost to the positive EU identification and EU support are affected by two intervening factors specific to Cohesion Policy ‘architecture’ in a given region. Unlike [Capello and Perucca \(2019\)](#) for whom this awareness was shaped by the level of EU support among the local parties and the degree to which EU-funded investment supports the subjective needs of the regions in the eyes of the citizens, we argue that awareness is also shaped by (1) the ways in which knowledge on Cohesion Policy is communicated to the citizens in that region (means and channels of communication, the content of communication, target audience, etc.); and (2) the ways in which Cohesion Policy is implemented, that is, how the management of operational programmes is organized (both spatially and institutionally).

### 3. Methodology

The methodology adopted for this study combined four complementary research methods, in order to ensure validity of findings, explore multiple aspects of the topic from a diverse set of perspectives, and triangulate the results from each method to avoid biases.

The first method was semi-structured interviews with the key policy stakeholders. Interviewees included officials in the Managing Authorities for the ERDF programmes, including those dealing with communication activities, members of the Monitoring Committees (so-called social and economic partners), provincial and local authorities. Overall,

16 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders of the Flevoland and Limburg cases. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the positions and perceptions of the interviewees involved in the management of EU Cohesion Policy in these two regions and, by doing so, go beyond the polished and selective discourse contained in the official documents. The interviews were conducted in the autumn of 2017.

To gain an insight into the perspectives of the citizens of the case study regions on Cohesion Policy and its influence on EU identification, a series of focus groups (three in each region) was organized in the autumn of 2017. The groups included 4–5 participants each, corresponding to a diverse sample of the local population selected randomly from amongst several age groups and also keeping in mind gender balance. The focus groups were moderated by one of the research team members and lasted for about 2 h. The proceedings of both focus groups and interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded.

A citizen survey among 1058 respondents conducted in early 2018 by telephone in both regions as part of the COHESIFY project (for an overview see Borz, Brandenburg, and Mendez 2018), provided a broader and more representative view of the awareness of EU Cohesion Policy, its impacts in Limburg and Flevoland, as well as the aspects of territorial identification of the citizens. In Limburg the sample was 558 inhabitants and in Flevoland it was 500 inhabitants. In addition, a smaller scale stakeholder survey was done to complement the findings from the interviews. It was conducted online, with a similar thematic focus to that of the interviews.

Finally, document analysis was conducted as part of the initial desk research, gathering background information and preparing the ground for the fieldwork. The analysis focused on the contents of Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs), yearly implementation reports, as well as evaluation reports and further online materials from institutional websites.

## 4. The Dutch regional cases in perspective

In this section, we sketch some aspects of the national and regional context concerning EU identification and introduce the two Dutch case study regions.

### 4.1. *Changing national context in the Netherlands: from Europhile to Eurosceptic?*

The Netherlands is one of the earliest EU members and originally one of its major advocates. Since the early 2000s, however, suspicion about the EU has grown in the country. With the EU enlargement in 2004, the Netherlands has less of a say than some of the newest members; yet it is one of the largest per-capita contributors to the EU budget. A first sign of estrangement was the rejection in a 2005 referendum of the EU's proposed constitutional treaty. Eurosceptic politicians boosted anti-immigrant, anti-EU sentiments. By 2013, the Dutch national government was actively seeking to promote a smaller, more effective Commission. The rejection of the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine in April 2016 underlined the decreased Dutch support to the EU, which today hovers at around 40% (Korteweg 2017).



The results of the Dutch national elections in March 2017 gave the anti-EU Party for Freedom (PVV) enough seats for a second place in the parliament. Although the EU hardly played a role in the debates during the Dutch election campaign, much of the international debate focused on whether an ‘anti-EU’ government would be elected, with two political parties that wished to leave the EU: PVV and FvD. The (extreme) right wing party of Geert Wilders, the Party for Freedom (PVV), calls for a ‘Nexit’. The new political party, Forum for Democracy (FvD) (right wing, conservative) which made substantial electoral gains in the 2019 provincial elections, favours more direct democracy and, eventually, leaving the EU.

## 4.2. Introduction to the Dutch case study regions

To set the cases in context we offer here an overview of EU identification and EU support in Flevoland and Limburg and discuss the potential role of Cohesion Policy in shaping it.

### 4.2.1. What do the citizens of Flevoland and Limburg think about the EU?

A high percentage of citizens from both regions interviewed identified themselves as Dutch rather than European (47.0% in Flevoland, 50.7% in Limburg), while 40.4% in Flevoland and 34.9% in Limburg thought of themselves as equally Dutch and European (cognitive dimension of identification). These are the highest rates of national (as opposed to European) identification across all the regions surveyed in the COHESIFY project (average of 32.2% across the sample). Equal national and European identification is more consistent across all the regions surveyed, but Flevoland and Limburg are still below the European average of 49.1%.

The level of the two regions respondents’ attachment to the EU (affective dimension) is below average: 18.2% (Flevoland) and 21.1% (Limburg) feel ‘very attached’ to the EU (as opposed to 26.9% in the European average). The two regions seem to see themselves as ‘somewhat attached to the EU’ (45.0% in Flevoland and 38.4% in Limburg), which is actually consistent with the average in all European regions surveyed (40.8%). Consistently, only 17.2% in Flevoland and 16.1% in Limburg declared to be ‘not at all attached to the EU’, which is actually slightly above the European average (14.1%). In both regions, primary attachment to the country is much stronger: 85.8% in Flevoland and 89.7% in Limburg declared to be ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ primarily attached to the country, which is consistent with the European average (88.8%). In both regions, primary attachment to the regions themselves is surprisingly slightly lower: 80.0% in Flevoland and 73.7% in Limburg who declared to be ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ primarily attached to their regions, which is below 84.2% in the European average.

These results on attachment to the region are surprising, because, as was stressed in the focus groups, Limburg is a region with a long history and strong identity, while Flevoland has been established on land reclaimed from the sea in the twentieth century. By contrast, because of Limburg’s relatively remote location in the Netherlands, focus groups participants felt more Limburgers than Dutchmen. Their attachment to Europe is not necessarily similar to attachment to the EU. Living so near Germany and Belgium definitively gives residents a feeling of closeness to Europe, but not to the EU as a broad political community.

Considering the evaluative dimension of EU identification and specifically perceptions of impact of Cohesion Policy, asked whether they agreed with the sentence ‘My country has benefited from being a member of the European Union’, only 13.4% of Limburg respondents strongly agreed, and 40.0% agreed, which is consistent with the results from Flevoland (13.0% and 40.0% respectively). This is one of the lowest shares of respondents strongly agreeing with this statement across all of the regions surveyed in COHESIFY. Still, 58.5% of respondents in Flevoland and 61.8% in Limburg thought Cohesion funds had a very positive or positive impact in their regions, which is below average across all regions surveyed (78.0%). By contrast, 2.8% in Flevoland and 8.3% in Limburg thought there was a negative or very negative impact of Cohesion funds in their regions. The latter groups of respondents indicated that the main reasons for these negative impacts were not enough funding (33.3% in Flevoland, 42.3% in Limburg), bad management (41.7% in Flevoland and 61.5% in Limburg), corruption among officials implementing funding programmes (37.5% in Flevoland, 42.3% in Limburg) and failure to allocate funds to the right projects (66.7% in Flevoland, 57.7% in Limburg). These answers scored to the average across all regions studied in COHESIFY, but in Limburg the citizens tend to mention more often bad management and corruption issues than in Flevoland.

#### ***4.2.2. The regional context: Cohesion Policy, territorial and socio-economic characteristics***

Cohesion Policy funding hardly plays a role in total public investment in the Netherlands, as it only represented an estimated share of 0.59% in 2015–17, compared to Portugal for instance with 84.2% (Cohesion Data EU 2019). The Netherlands has a peculiar institutional framework, differing from the institutional arrangements for Cohesion Policy in other EU countries: four ROPs grouping several NUTS2 regions or provinces. Territorial cooperation programmes are relatively important as the country is small and cooperates in a number of cross-border and cross-national programmes.

The two case study regions are at NUTS2 or provincial level and are both part of larger ROPs (Figure 2). Flevoland is a very young province created between 1930 and 60. It was the only Objective 1 region in the history of the Netherlands and therefore an interesting case in our research. It covers six local authorities. Compared to the case study region of Limburg, it is smaller in size (1,419 km<sup>2</sup> vs. 2,209 km<sup>2</sup>) and population (0.4 vs. 1.1 million inhabitants). 50% of the inhabitants of Flevoland live in the municipality of Almere, which is highly dependent on Amsterdam for jobs and high-level services: people live in Flevoland but earn their money outside. PVV, the anti-EU party, won local elections in 2010 and 2014, but decreased its share in 2018.

Limburg has a long border with Germany and Belgium resulting in a number of related cross-border Cohesion policy programmes. Historically, it has been a patchwork of autonomous and dependent territories with a variety of local cultures. It has 33 local authorities (compared to six in Flevoland). Its history is strongly linked to the underground coal mines in the period 1900–70s. After the closure of the mines in the 1970s the province faced a profound economic recession which was addressed by state investments in new economic sectors, complemented with Cohesion Policy funds. Currently, Limburg faces a structural decline in population. The province as a whole has a high voting share for the populist and anti-EU political party PVV.



**Figure 2.** Case study regions as part of the ROP areas: Limburg (dark grey on the right map), Flevoland (dark grey on the left map). Source: Authors.

These two cases were selected because of the relevance of Cohesion Policy for them: for Flevoland, Cohesion Policy matters because of its former Objective 1 status and its substantial inflow of EU funding; whereas for Limburg, Cohesion Policy is highly relevant due to its geographic position and strong engagement in cross-border cooperation programmes supported by this policy. The following section offers an analysis of this rich empirical material, while the concluding section discusses them against the background of existing literature.

## 5. Does EU funding matter? The role of communication and implementation for awareness of Cohesion Policy

In this section we present and discuss the core of the empirical data used to answer the research questions. First, given that awareness of EU funding is a precondition for any sort of impact of Cohesion Policy on EU identification among the citizens, we take stock of the level of awareness of Cohesion Policy in Limburg and Flevoland. Second, we explore whether and how Cohesion Policy's communication and implementation in these regions can explain this low awareness.

### 5.1. Awareness of EU funds

One of the most striking findings of the citizen survey conducted in the frame of COHE-SIFY was the very low awareness of Cohesion Policy among citizens in both regions under scrutiny. While citizens may be positive about the EU, they are generally unaware of whether and how the EU supports the development of their cities and regions. Only 21.2% of Flevoland and 17.4% of Limburg respondents had heard about projects supported by Cohesion Policy in their regions, while 77.6% and 81.7% respectively had not. These results were in stark contrast to the levels of awareness noted in regions

where the allocations of EU funding are greater, like in the lagging Polish, Hungarian or Slovenian regions that enjoy substantial Cohesion Policy allocations, but also to other more developed regions receiving less EU funding, like Baden-Württemberg in Germany (Table 1).<sup>1</sup>

The focus groups corroborated this – in other regions the participants demonstrated a relatively low level of knowledge about Cohesion Policy, especially among the young participants. While most of the focus groups participants had heard about Cohesion Policy before (unsurprisingly, since it was mentioned in the materials used for recruiting them), very few of them understood the purpose of the policy, knew about the actual funding schemes involved or projects supported by them, or knew where the funding was coming from.

A striking result was that 69.4% of the survey respondents in Flevoland and 74.7% in Limburg had not noticed the billboards to acknowledge EU investments which are typically placed in the project sites where Cohesion Policy funds are used (Table 2). This indicates that EU-funded project sites are probably too scarce to be noticed by citizens, which in turn calls for efforts for communicating on those projects using other means. Again, this result is in stark contrast to other COHESIFY case study regions where EU funds allocations are bigger. Despite this low level of awareness of EU-funded projects in both Dutch regions, 58.5% of Flevoland and 61.8% of Limburg respondents were very positive or positive about the impacts of EU funding in their region or city (Table 3). This, in turn, indicates the potential of EU-funded projects to boost positive perceptions of the EU, although this potential remains underused given the low awareness of Cohesion Policy projects reported above.

The COHESIFY citizens survey showed that for those few respondents who did know about Cohesion funds, most declared to have gotten their awareness from local and regional news (Flevoland 67.9%, Limburg 73.2%), which was confirmed in interviews with policymakers, who said this was their preferred mode of communication. Citizens were less likely to have heard about Cohesion funds at the workplace (29.2% Flevoland, 24.7% Limburg). In contradiction with results explained above, billboards seem particularly effective, with a good number of respondents declaring they became aware from them (44.3% in Flevoland, 49.5% in Limburg), even if relatively few respondents were aware of these projects/billboards at all. Meanwhile, the radio seems a particularly ineffective way to communicate Cohesion funds to citizens in the Netherlands, as only around 19.8% in Flevoland and 28.9% in Limburg of those aware declared they heard about Cohesion funds in the regional radio. This is also the case for social media (34.9% in Flevoland

**Table 1.** Awareness of projects supported by Cohesion Policy in regions: Limburg and Flevoland against the background of selected European regions.

*The European Union provides funding for infrastructure, business development and training to regions and cities. Have you heard about any such EU funded projects to improve your own region or city?*

Region	Yes	No	Refused	Don't know
Flevoland (NL)	21.2%	77.6%	0.0%	1.2%
Limburg (NL)	17.4%	81.7%	0.0%	0.9%
Podkarpackie (PL)	87.6%	11.0%	0.0%	1.4%
Zahodna Slovenija (SLO)	67.8%	30.2%	0.0%	2.0%
Nyugat-Dunántúl (HU)	62.4%	36.8%	0.2%	0.6%
Baden-Württemberg (DE)	30.8%	68.0%	0.0%	1.2%

Source: Horizon2020 COHESIFY.

**Table 2.** Visibility of acknowledgement of EU funding for projects.

<i>Have you noticed any public acknowledgement of EU funding in your region/town in the form of banners, placards etc.?</i>				
Region	Yes	No	Refused	Don't know
<i>Flevoland (NL)</i>	29.4%	69.4%	0.0%	1.2%
<i>Limburg (NL)</i>	24.0%	74.7%	0.0%	1.3%
Podkarpackie (PL)	91.8%	8.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Zahodna Slovenija (SLO)	63.2%	36.0%	0.0%	0.8%
Nyugat-Dunántúl (HU)	82.8%	16.6%	0.0%	0.6%
Baden-Württemberg (DE)	27.2%	71.6%	0.2%	1.0%

Source: Horizon2020 COHESIFY.

and 28.9% in Limburg). This is surprising, given the penetration of social media in the Netherlands and the widespread use of Twitter and Facebook by the Dutch local authorities. Personal experience of projects accounted for 50.9% (Flevoland) and 56.7% (Limburg) of all those who were aware of Cohesion funds in Limburg and Flevoland.

Overall, these results indicate that the effectiveness of the communication strategy used for Cohesion Policy in Limburg and Flevoland could be limited in terms of reach of citizens and conveying a positive account of the impacts of Cohesion Policy on the lives of the citizens of those regions. But also, as will be demonstrated below, the low awareness of Cohesion Policy funding in these Dutch regions is related to the peculiar way in which the funding is managed on the regional level.

### 5.2. Cohesion Policy communication

The Netherlands has a singular approach to Cohesion Policy communication, following its administrative tradition of cooperation, coordination, and consensus-seeking. Cooperation among the four operational ERDF programmes in the Netherlands – ROPs West, East, South and North – started in the 2007–13 programming period. Perceiving that they shared the same challenges and goals, the four operational programmes considered it more efficient and practical to work together (interview with communication official). Other European Structural and Investment Funds in the Netherlands joined later.

The cooperation led to the establishment of several activities at national level, from which the most important is an online platform to showcase the ongoing projects in the Netherlands, in order to make Cohesion Policy closer to the public, and especially more concrete to their eyes. The platform, ‘Europe at the corner’ (*Europa om de hoek*),

**Table 3.** Perceptions of the impact of EU funding.

<i>How positive or negative was the impact of the funding of the European Union on your region or city?</i>								
Region	Very positive	Positive	No impact	Negative	Very negative	Not applicable for my region or city	Refused	Don't know
<i>Flevoland (NL)</i>	11.3%	47.2%	19.8%	2.8%	0.0%	7.5%	0.0%	11.3%
<i>Limburg (NL)</i>	11.3%	50.5%	18.6%	5.2%	3.1%	4.1%	0.0%	7.2%
Podkarpackie (PL)	26.0%	64.4%	3.4%	2.1%	0.5%	2.7%	0.0%	0.9%
Zahodna Slovenija (SLO)	28.0%	55.5%	10.6%	1.2%	0.9%	1.5%	0.0%	2.4%
Nyugat-Dunántúl (HU)	20.5%	65.7%	5.8%	1.9%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.1%
Baden-Württemberg (DE)	14.3%	51.9%	16.2%	2.6%	1.9%	4.5%	2.6%	5.8%

Source: Horizon2020 COHESIFY.

lists all EU funded projects in the Netherlands, which can be retrieved according to their location, topic (economy, rural development, social or trans-border), type of funding, and year activities began.

Another important tool to disseminate information about the use of Cohesion Policy funds is a major annual public event initiated in 2010, which showcases European Social Fund (ESF) and ERDF projects. The 'Europe at the corner open days' (*kijkdagen*) is an effort to allow the general public to take a closer look at the projects. Due to its success, it received the first prize in the prestigious European Public Communication Award in 2015. Other broadly used communication tools are the billboards with the EU flag identifying the projects in their locality. However, stakeholders mention that events organized with project visits are the most effective communication tools.

The collaboration and consultation between the four ERDF programmes have also led to the establishment of a joint communication strategy for the 2014–20 programming period. This strategy document is used to prepare the communication plans at ROP level for the respective period, as well as the annual activity plans. According to the interviewed officials, the role of communication within the frame of the ROPs is primarily to raise awareness about the opportunities offered by the programme to potential beneficiaries; and only in the second instance to contribute to the promotion of awareness of the EU's activities in a broader public. The main effort is focused on the funded projects (as opposed to the ROPs), considered the best vehicles for communication, with an emphasis on the actual results of the projects, and their concrete benefits for citizens in their daily life. It is considered that the policy behind the funding is too abstract to attract the broad public. It is considered that communication activities indirectly contribute to a better image for the EU.

The communication priorities and activities related to Cohesion Policy funds in Flevoland and Limburg are decided at the level of ROPs West and South, respectively. Although they share a common communication strategy and goals, there are differences in the way these two ROPs carry out their communication activities. In Limburg, the ROP South Management Authority is ultimately responsible for communication. Stimulus, a government-owned agency, acts as a portal for project applications for the provinces, but does not handle the formal procedures. The communication staff working on ROP South is employed at Stimulus.

In Flevoland, ROP West has decentralized management structure to facilitate communication activities locally. Most of the communication tasks are carried out by the partners (four cities and four provinces), to promote a more direct contact with the beneficiaries and the public. Besides the communication officer at ROP level, the eight partners have their own staff working for communication goals, and the provinces have their own website with information about European subsidies. Stakeholders from Flevoland claim that they go beyond offering information through a simple website and approach potential beneficiaries directly in their localities by means of officers from the province of Flevoland.

The results of the stakeholders survey in Flevoland and Limburg show that most of them consider that Cohesion Policy funds have been well used in their region, giving an average assessment of 4.3 and 4.0 from a maximum of 5.0, respectively. Furthermore, the COHESIFY citizen survey indicated that 28.0% of respondents in Flevoland and 42.0% in Limburg consider that the communication activities are effective or very effective in conveying the achievements of Cohesion Policy programmes and the role of the EU. These results from the stakeholders survey contrast with the results of the COHESIFY

citizens survey. The latter indicated that Flevoland and Limburg were regions with particularly low awareness about Cohesion Policy projects (Table 1). This is most likely linked to the low and decreasing levels of Cohesion Policy funding that the Netherlands has received, but also to communication policy on EU funds.

The assessment of the communication activities for Cohesion Policy in Flevoland and Limburg can be summarized as follows. The communication strategy in both provinces mainly relies on actions focused on (potential) beneficiaries of funding and project stakeholders, and not on the citizens. Few communication actions are directed towards citizens, and they are mostly the billboards at the project sites (of which there are few in both regions). Consequently, the public hardly sees a link between Cohesion Policy and their daily lives.

### 5.3. Cohesion Policy implementation

In general, Cohesion Policy funds are integrated in ROPs in each of the EU Member States. These programmes are detailed plans in which the Member States set out how ESIF will be spent during the programming period. They can be drawn up for a specific region or a country-wide thematic goal (<http://ec.europa.eu>). In most EU countries, these programmes are managed at the level of NUTS2 regions. In the Netherlands, this has been organized in four ROPs each covering the territory of three resp. four provinces (Figure 2). The regions covered in the ROPs are thus very much only a bureaucratic level. The priorities of the programmes have been arranged in a similar way to those of other Dutch multi-provincial ROPs as well, with an emphasis on innovation, and to a lesser extent, on the urban dimension. Importantly, all of the projects supported by the Dutch ROPs combine various funding sources, both European and domestic. A formal Managing Authority has been appointed for each of the ROPs. Monitoring Committees for each ROP are key partnership bodies in line with the EU requirements for the ESIF management, keep track of the implementation of the ROP and give direction on strategic matters. They also include representatives of the business community, social partners, knowledge institution, of nature, environment and landscape organizations, thus setting them in a broader context than only government tiers.

Concerning Flevoland, the municipality of Rotterdam was appointed as the Managing Authority of ROP West covering four provinces. This ROP is governed through a partnership of the four big Dutch cities (Rotterdam, Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) and four provinces (North Holland, South Holland, Flevoland and Utrecht) within the programme area (also dubbed G4P4), each managing sub-parts of the ROP. This G4P4 arrangement is largely informal and based on ‘gentlemen’s agreements’ on the division of the ERDF allocation to ensure a ‘fair’ distribution of EU funding. It reflects the Dutch ‘polder model’ (Kickert 2004), based on consensus-building and collective action, and the ever-shifting and fragmented Dutch governance patchwork, particularly in the West region or the Randstad. Management of ROP West is unusual as compared to usual practice across the EU territories. Importantly, the province of Flevoland is one of the main players, but it receives only a small share of funding, contrary to the period until 2006 when Flevoland was an Objective 1 region. In 2014–2020 period, most funding is shared among the four big cities.

For Limburg, the formal Managing Authority for ROP South is the Province of North Brabant, while the territory covered by that programme is that of the Provinces of North

Brabant, Limburg and Zeeland. The management structure for ROP South also echoes the 'polder model', with a division of roles between the participating provinces and informal provision to ensure a balanced distribution of funds. In practice, however, this results in the majority of funding being absorbed by the economically leading region of Eindhoven in the Province of North Brabant. In the programming period 2007–13, ERDF allocation was informally divided between the provinces (and the regions within the provinces) involved, however, it was not the case in 2014–20. Unlike in the case of ROP West programme management was not fragmented into territorial sub-parts with own management sub-structures. The formal Management Authority was the Province of North Brabant, but programme management was sub-contracted to Stimulus. In 2014–20, balance of powers was further ensured by the Chair of the Monitoring Committee being allocated to the Province of Limburg and the role of representation of the three participating provinces being entrusted to the Province of Zeeland.

The governance structure is bureaucratic and specifically set up for the purpose of Cohesion Policy implementation. This structure is hence somewhat distant from the levels of governments with which the citizens relate and identify. This makes Cohesion Policy more removed from the citizens' daily life and harder to communicate on at the local (project) level. These findings help to explain that the citizens who took part in the COHESIFY survey and the focus groups were hardly aware of any EU funded projects in their region. In fact, the citizens do not naturally identify with the level at which the ROPs are managed in the Netherlands. This is not the province, sub-region or municipality, but the multi-provincial institutional construct, which is hard to grasp for citizens and not conducive to positive EU identification.

Another consequence of this implementation structure is that the funding is fragmented, which is a further driver of the low citizen awareness is that projects receiving EU funding have dispersed funding and EU funding only makes up a minor share in total funding. Impact of EU funding is thus hardly visible. The increasing focus on innovation and SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) in the programmes makes it even more difficult for citizens to identify with, as innovation is hardly visible for them.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper adds to the debate on the potential impacts of Cohesion Policy on positive EU identification by bringing new evidence on this topic from an in-depth study of two Dutch regions. We argue that, in the first place, it is important to understand the level of awareness of Cohesion Policy among the citizens, a precondition for Cohesion funding having an impact on their views. Our results show that the level of awareness of citizens of Cohesion Policy interventions in both of these regions was very low.

Second, we set out to explore how communication and implementation of Cohesion Policy may further affect whether and how it could boost positive EU identification and EU support among the citizens of that region. In both regions studied these two factors made building awareness of Cohesion Policy among the citizens more difficult and hence limited the scope for boosting positive EU identification among the citizens. This confirms the expectation from previous research that awareness of EU Cohesion Policy is crucial for it having any effect on the citizen's views on the EU (Aiello, Reverberi, and Brasili 2019; Capello and Perucca 2019; Osterloh 2011). But also this contributes to



the understanding of the Cohesion Policy – EU identification nexus by highlighting that communication and implementation ‘architecture’ matter. The communication policy in our cases focused not on the citizens, not on conveying how Cohesion Policy funding had positive impacts on their opportunities, communities or living environment, but rather it targeted the potential applicants for funding. This seems to be a missed opportunity to boost positive EU identification and EU support among the citizens. Targeting citizens in communication would entail a certain trade-off because resources spent on this would not be used actual implementation of projects. Supporting more projects could matter for Cohesion Policy’s impact on EU identification, but only if awareness of those interventions would be boosted through citizen-oriented communication.

For the implementation of Cohesion Policy, the Netherlands chose a multi-regional structure of ROPs, which resulted in fragmentation of funding streams, hindered the visibility of the programmes at the scale of the provinces and made the benefits from funding invested less tangible for the specific provinces involved. This further limits the potential effect of Cohesion Policy funding on EU identification and EU support in the Dutch regions. The visibility of the funding for the citizens was further lowered by the focus of intervention. In both cases, funding concentrated on the, arguably, least visible kinds of interventions, such as support for SMEs and for boosting innovation (as opposed to the much more visible investment in infrastructure or the quality of the built environment).

Last but not least, we confirmed that the scale of funding also matters. Even though previous research suggested that the relationship between magnitude of funding and support for the EU is not straightforward (see Aiello, Reverberi, and Brasili 2019; Capello and Perucca 2019; Dąbrowski, Stead, and Mashhoodi 2019; Smętkowski and Dąbrowski 2019), the evidence from stakeholder interviews and focus groups conducted, does suggest that the relatively small allocation of funding to the Dutch regions is hardly noticeable and can only have a limited impact on for positive EU identification. One of its anticipated effects of Cohesion Policy is to foster greater citizen attachment to the EU. The Netherlands, however, is one of countries whose net contributions to the EU budget exceed funds received, and where Cohesion funds are not a significant part of the total investment in infrastructure and development. Therefore, Cohesion Policy does not easily ‘buy love’ for the EU project among Dutch citizens. While others suggested that low amounts of funding may decrease EU support because of negative perceptions of inefficient spending of Cohesion funds in the poorer Southern and Eastern European regions (Capello and Perucca 2018), we found little evidence of that. Instead, we found that small funding amounts, combined with the abovementioned communication and implementation factors, make EU investment in rich regions hardly visible to citizens. More in-depth comparative case study research, focusing on regions where Cohesion Policy transfers are larger is needed to shed more light on this relationship between the scale and focus of Cohesion Policy funding and the citizens perceptions of the EU. Furthermore, future research should explore further the relationships between the citizens’ EU identification, their demographic, socio-economic characteristics and awareness of Cohesion Policy on a large sample of European regions and using econometric methods.

There are several policy lessons to be drawn from our study. In a situation of low awareness of Cohesion Policy, like in the Dutch regions, the policy has to target intervention fields that are of high relevance for the citizens in order to boost positive EU identification. In the Netherlands there is a mismatch between the (perceived) needs of citizens and the strategic

goals of Cohesion Policy, focusing on supporting SMEs and innovation. To have an impact on EU identification, Cohesion Policy spending would need to focus on issues that matter more for the citizens, like removing barriers to mobility, investment in deprived urban areas or boosting cultural integration across borders. One way to achieve that would be to propose more bottom-up and people-focused local interventions identified through participatory processes engaging the citizens. Finally, the focus of communication on Cohesion Policy should shift towards citizens and the range of funding beneficiaries should be broadened.

## Note

1. References to and data from the Polish, Hungarian, Slovenian and German regions are provided here merely to set the Dutch cases against the situation in other parts of Europe with different or comparable Cohesion Policy context.

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