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## Linkages and channels between Cohesion Policy and European Identity

*Jordi Suriñach\**, *Edoardo Mollona\*\**

While a Euro-sceptic attitude challenges the European integration project with increasing disbelief, the EU allocates a large portion of its budget to Cohesion and regional policy (CRP) for counterbalancing economic pressures and equilibrating the economic disparities among European regions. In this context, PERCEIVE project (Perception and Evaluation of Regional and Cohesion Policies by Europeans and Identification with the Values of Europe)<sup>1</sup>, a three-year EU-funded research project, investigated how European Union communicates CRP and how European citizens perceive the role of CRP and of the EU.

Specifically, the aim of PERCEIVE project was to both mapping and explaining inter- and intra-regional variations in: a) the experiences and results of cohesion policy implementation, b) citizens' awareness and appreciation of EU efforts for delivering cohesion and c) European identities and citizens' identification with the EU.

The ambition of PERCEIVE was to attain a better understanding of the channels through which European policies contribute to create both different local understandings of the EU and different levels of European identification across profoundly different European regions.

This special issue collects and organizes a number of papers that report key findings of the PERCEIVE project. In designing the special issue, the Editors made an effort to describe the fundamental themes that motivated and inspired this important research endeavor.

Readers will appreciate that the panoply of papers presented in this special issue mobilizes two theoretical perspectives. A rational choice perspective that puts forward an idea of institutions as “rules of the game” and that emphasizes the calculative rationality of actors as determinants of European identities and identification. A social constructivist perspective that stresses the idea that European identities and identification emerge from a process of “social learning” associated with different institutional discourses.

In this light, the papers presented display the multidisciplinary portfolio of competences and the connected variety of qualitative and quantitative analytical methods applied in the PERCEIVE project that includes surveys, focus groups, case studies, econometric modelling and innovative methods such as quantitative discourse analysis, which has been used to elicit the meaning structures in public discourse about the EU.

The special issue that we are presenting collates six papers that, together, we propose, offer a sufficiently comprehensive picture of the insights that PERCEIVE produced. In addition, the paper written by Giovanni Perucca, adds to the picture the results produced within another EU-funded project – Cohesify—that, as well, in parallel, investigated the mechanisms underpinning the formation of European identity and perceptions of the EU.

To open the special issue, two papers report empirical research to describe the general features of the phenomena under investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details of the objectives, partners and project deliverables, see <https://www.perceiveproject.eu/>

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Specifically, in the paper *Do Citizens Support Cohesion Policy? Measuring European support for redistribution within the EU and its correlates*, Nicholas Charron presents the results of a survey that investigates how citizens feel about economic integration within the Union and what attitudes they have towards cohesion policy. Grounding on 17,200 interviews to European citizens, the survey shows the variation in citizens' support for EU Cohesion policy between countries and describes how support varies between demographic groups. To speculate on the relative exploratory power of rational versus cultural approaches, the survey studies as well as the extent to which utilitarian and ideational factors underpin support.

On the other hand, the paper written by Rosina Moreno, *EU Cohesion Policy Performance: Regional Variation in the Effectiveness of the management of the Structural Funds*, investigates the dynamics of absorption of EU cohesion funds at NUTS2 level. The effectiveness in the absorption of funds is a crucial challenge for EU member states and this article takes an original perspective by focusing on the regional variation in the absorption of the structural funds. A dimension, this latter, that has been overlooked in previous literature. The paper suggests that full absorption is more the exception than the rule and high regional heterogeneity in the absorption of the Structural Funds is not only observed across countries but also within the regions in a country.

After the description of the general phenomenon, the special issue tackles the process of EU identity formation. In particular, the impact of Cohesion Policy on citizens' perceptions of the policy and identification with the EU is at the core of both PERCEIVE and COHESIFY projects and is the topic that inspires the work presented in following three papers presented in this special issue.

A thoughtful review of the theoretical arguments that explain the process of creation of a European identity is provided in the article written by Vicente Royuela and Enrique López-Bazo, *Understanding the process of creation of European identity – the role of Cohesion Policy*. In the article, the authors discuss the grounds of mechanisms and determinants driving citizens' identification with Europe, stressing the role of the territorial dimension on European identity formation. The authors analyse the main theoretical arguments on the construction of European identity. They also analyse the role of Cohesion Policy by confronting the concepts of spatial identities with a historical perspective of the European project. Finally, they inspect the role of European institutions by providing some basic figures on the regional expenditure on Structural Funds and its association with the awareness, support and identification with the EU project

In their paper, *Profiling identification with Europe and the EU project in the European regions* Cristina Brasili, Pinuccia Calia and Irene Monasterolo investigate to what extent do EU citizens identify with Europe and the EU project, whether European regions have different patterns and level of identification and what, if any, is the role of socio-economic variables. The authors develop a novel probabilistic classification model, IdentEU, and use micro-level data from a survey implemented within the PERCEIVE project. The reported empirical research reveals that trust in the EU institutions, the effectiveness of EU Cohesion Policy and spending, and the level of corruption are three relevant drivers of citizens' identification with the European project.

To conclude the group of papers addressing the formation of EU identity, the paper by Giovanni Perucca, *When Country Matters More than Europe: What Implications for the Future of the EU?* studies the determinants of the imbalance between the identification of a citizen's with her/his country, on the one hand, and with Europe on the other. The work reported in the paper moves off from noting how recent empirical evidence shows an increasing imbalance in favor of the identification with individuals' country of residence. This phenomenon, the author suggests, may be connected with the increasing support to nationalisms and eurosceptic parties almost everywhere in the EU. The results presented, based on a panel data model using data from five Eurobarometer survey studies conducted between 2014 and 2017, suggest that individuals with lower education and income, and those living in the lagging-behind regions of the EU, are more likely to identify more with their own country than with Europe. Thus, the paper supports the hypothesis that unequal distribution (among individuals and regions) of the benefits

from EU integration is a determinant worth considering of the emerging antagonism between European and national identity.

A second thread of investigation reported in this special issue addresses whether and how the communication strategies of Cohesion Policy affect the perception of the policy and the identification with the EU.

In their paper, Luca Pareschi, Edoardo Mollona, Vitaliano Barberio and Ines Kuric (*The use of social media in EU policy communication and implications for the emergence of a European public sphere*) analyze cohesion policy communication on social media of ten Local Managing Authorities (LMAs) that manage structural funds at the local level and communicate to stakeholders information concerning Cohesion Policy. The authors use semi-automatic text analysis techniques to elicit shared meaning structures as they emerge in the discussion on social media. The aim is to understand whether an European public-sphere exists in which a shared EU identity can emerge. The reported results show the emergence of an internationally articulated cluster of topics that showcases a negative attitude towards the EU funding scheme and a generally skeptic attitude towards the Europe Union. This fact suggests that, counter-intuitively, Euroscepticism seems to facilitate, the emergence of a European public sphere.

To complete the special issue, to offer a general understanding of cohesion policy, we propose a paper that presents a map of the many interconnected processes that are involved in the implementation and communication of Cohesion Policy. The paper by Giovanni Cunico, Eirini Aivazidou and Edoardo Mollona (*European Cohesion Policy performance and citizens' awareness: A holistic System Dynamics framework*) integrates the analysis of implementation and communication. Namely, based on the interviews to policy-makers, stakeholders and beneficiaries of cohesion policy, the paper develops a holistic qualitative framework that elicits the causal structure underpinning the distribution of the Cohesion Policy funds, the impact on projects' quality of the management capability at local managing authority level, and the related, communication processes. The authors developed the qualitative causal model with the aim at stimulating a focused discussion on Cohesion Policy. The motivation behind this modelling effort is to provide policy-makers, stakeholders and scholars interested in Cohesion Policy analysis with a conceptual tool able to elicit the interconnections among the key processes at work and, more specifically, between the dynamics of funds absorption, policy communication and the mechanisms that produce awareness about the policy.

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