Citizen Attitudes toward EU Regional Policy

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Final report
August 2023

Contract No. 2022CE16BAT142

Group of high-level specialists on the future of Cohesion Policy

The European Commission, the Directorate-General Regional and Urban Policy (lead) and the Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (associated) have set up a Reflection Group on the future of Cohesion Policy. The group includes high-level members from academia and practice and in 2023 will meet nine times to reflect on current and future needs and the functioning of Cohesion Policy.

The group will offer conclusions and recommendations that will feed the reflection process on Cohesion Policy post-2027 including through the 9th Cohesion Report in 2024 and the mid-term review of Cohesion Policy programmes in 2025.

About the author

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Key words

Cohesion Policy, cohesion, awareness, public support, solidarity, redistribution

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Acronyms

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CP	Corruption Perceptions
EB	Eurobarometer
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
gal	Green-Alternative-Libertarian
HU	Hungary
IO	International Organisation
LDR	Less Developed Region
MS	Member State
NextGenEU	NextGenerationEU
NL	Netherlands
PL	Poland
SES	Socioeconomic status
tan	Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist

Abstract

This paper serves as a part of the reflection on how to reinforce the linkages between Cohesion Policy investments and reforms and enhance complementarities with other instruments and policies. Specifically, I address three broad research questions individually in the subsequent sections of this document. Overall, the paper attempts to synthesize the findings from the recent academic literature and to provide complementary data analyses from relevant survey data where available. Some key findings are: a) Citizen awareness of EU regional policy is overall low, yet varies considerably across polities. b) While studies on support for Cohesion Policy are limited, findings show that there is majority support for European economic solidarity in general and in times of crisis, although many citizens are ambivalent. c) Citizen attitudes and preferences about inter-EU redistribution and cross-border solidarity are polarized mainly on the cosmopolitan-nationalist dimension (and less so by left-right or geography), institutional trust and education levels, although this varies somewhat depending on the topic, policy or crisis. d) Communicating the policy to a broader audience carries several opportunities for the EU, yet improving communication of Cohesion requires a careful consideration of the purpose of the communication and the target audience and to better provide more transparency that the use of Funds benefits all and not only a corrupt few.

1   What are the determinants of and effects of public support for cohesion policy?

Overall, empirical research has been limited in assessing awareness and support for EU regional policy specifically. Fortunately, some data does exist to shed light on these questions. First, from 2008 to 2021, the Eurobarometer (EB) has conducted seven special Flash Barometer surveys (Eurobarometer 480, FL480) to gauge awareness, attitudes, and support for EU regional/Cohesion policy. As awareness of a policy is a necessary condition of its support, Figure 1 presents point estimates of the awareness of regional policy based on these questions over time by EU28 and EU27 samples[1].

Figure 1   Citizen Awareness of EU Projects over Time in EU 207 and EU28
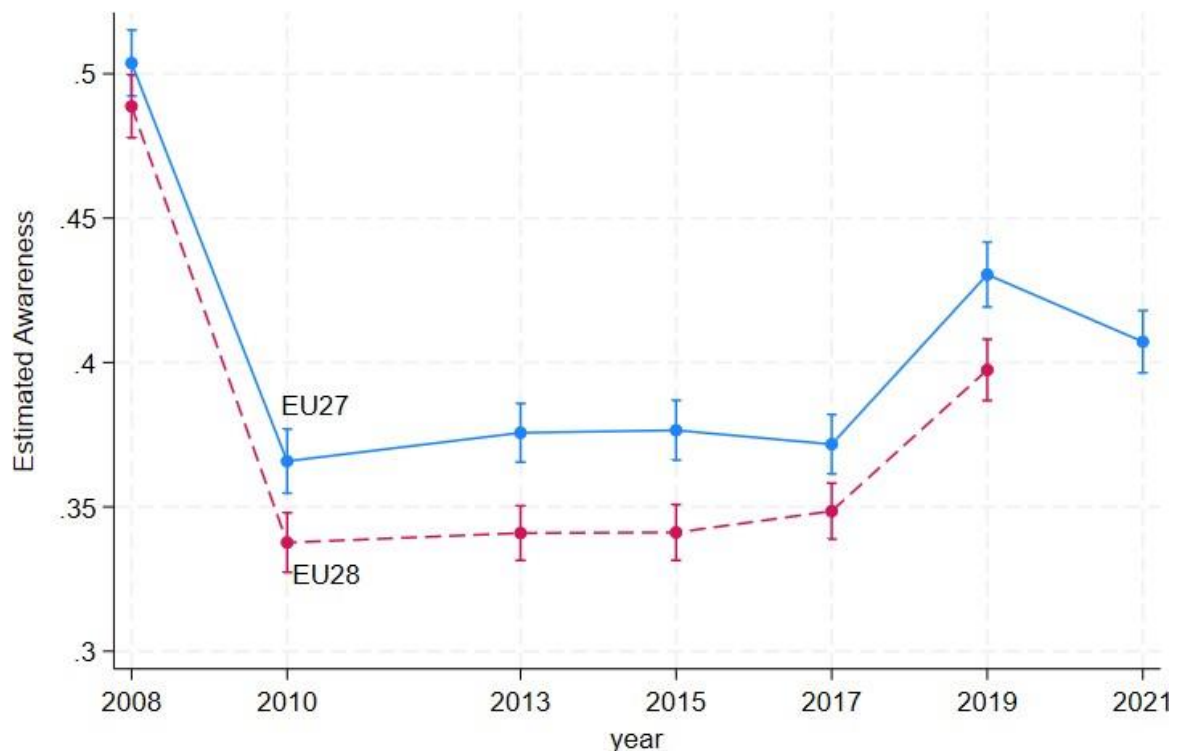
Note: y-axis represents proportion of 'yes' responses. 95% confidence intervals around each point estimate. Number of total observations = 190,347. Blue line=EU27, red dashed=EU28. Estimates incorporate post-stratification and country population and weights. Question formulation changed after 2008.

The data show that in each year, only a minority of EU citizens claim to have heard of regional policy in general. In 2008, awareness is highest, yet this likely indicates the importance of a different question formulation more than an actual change in policy awareness. It is likely that the more technical phrasing of 'co-financed projects' may have confused some respondents leading to lower 'yes' responses from 2010 onward. In any case, from 2010-2017, we observe no significant change in policy awareness over time; whereby awareness

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[1] In 2008, the following question was posed to respondents: *Europe supports its regions and cities through EU Regional Policy. Are you aware that your city or region receives support from the EU Regional Policy?* In all subsequent years (2010, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2021), the following question has been posed: *Europe provides financial support to regions and cities. Have you heard about any EU co-financed projects to improve the area where you live?* UK not included in 2021.

is roughly 34% across the EU28. Yet there is a statistically significant increase in 2019 and 2021 whereby citizen awareness ticks up to 40% and 41% respectively (EU27). One possible explanation for this uptick in that the nearly ubiquitous debates and news coverage about the relationship of Brexit and the EU could have led to a small increase in awareness on the topic of EU investments by 2019.

While the EB Flash survey presents the most comprehensive over time picture of citizen awareness, there have been other scholarly effects to measure awareness and support for Regional policy, namely the original surveys within PERCEIVE and COHESIFY Horizon 2020 projects[2]. With respect to the former, the PERCEIVE project asks: *In general, have you ever heard about the following EU policies? (yes, no) a. EU Cohesion Policy, b. EU Regional Policy, c. Structural Funds, d. any EU funded project in your region or area?*

Remarkably similar to the first formulation and findings in 2008 by the EB, the researchers found that the weighted average of awareness of 'any EU funded project in your region or area' was 48% of the respondents from the 15 countries surveyed[3]. The COHESIFY project asks a yes/no question about awareness of the specific funds[4]: *Have you heard about the following funds? A) the European Regional Development Fund, B) the Cohesion Fund C) the European Social Fund (ESF)*. While the COHESIFY project's research design does not permit valid EU/country comparisons to the previous data due to the sampling of specific regions rather than countries, they do find that the average awareness is less than 50% across the three funds. They also found that citizens were most aware of the ERDF, and least aware of the Cohesion Fund on average.

In terms of covariate characteristics of awareness of the policy, Figure 2 reports the results of several regression analyses with the different datasets using 'having heard' of the policy in question as the outcome variable regressed on available explanatory factors from the given surveys. Models 1-2 (circles) use the EB data, whereby we compare the results using the two different question formulations. The EB flash survey unfortunately provides only a limited number of covariates (age, gender and education in all rounds), yet we observe that male respondents, older respondents (in particular those aged 50-64) and those with higher levels of education are most likely to have heard of EU regional policy on average throughout the seven survey rounds. Models 3-4 (triangles) show the results from the PERCEIVE data, with model 3 replicating the findings from the EB models and model 4 ('full') adding a number of other variables. The 5th model (diamond) shows correlates from the COHESIFY data. Overall, we observe a strong and consistent relationship with higher education and awareness, along with age effects (younger people on average less aware in all cases). Females are also systematically less aware of regional policy in both EB and PERCEIVE models (gender not shown in COHESIFY analyses). Other positive factors of awareness are mainly those that are more civically engaged with the EU; including positive views of one's country's EU membership ('EU good thing'), participating in EU elections, interest in EU politics, and knowledge of EU institutions. Opinions of institutions in the form of corruption perceptions ('CP') do not explain awareness nor does left-right positioning, yet those with a more positive

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[2] See: https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/693427 https://www.perceivepro

[3] Survey was fielded in 2017, the 15 countries included represent 85% of the EU28. Number of respondents was 17,141. See Charron and Bauhr (2020) for more details. Roughly 45%, 46% and 48% had heard of the Cohesion Policy, EU Regional Policy and Structural Funds respectively.

[4] Survey was sampled at the regional level in 17 EU NUTS 2 regions in 12 EU countries in 2016/2017. Number of respondents was 8,500. See Borz et al. (2018) for more details.

view of im- migration (possibly a proxy of cosmopolitanism) in general tend to be more aware of EU regional policy investments in both Perceive and Cohesify surveys.

Figure 2   Covariates of Awareness of EU Regional Policy from Three Data Sources
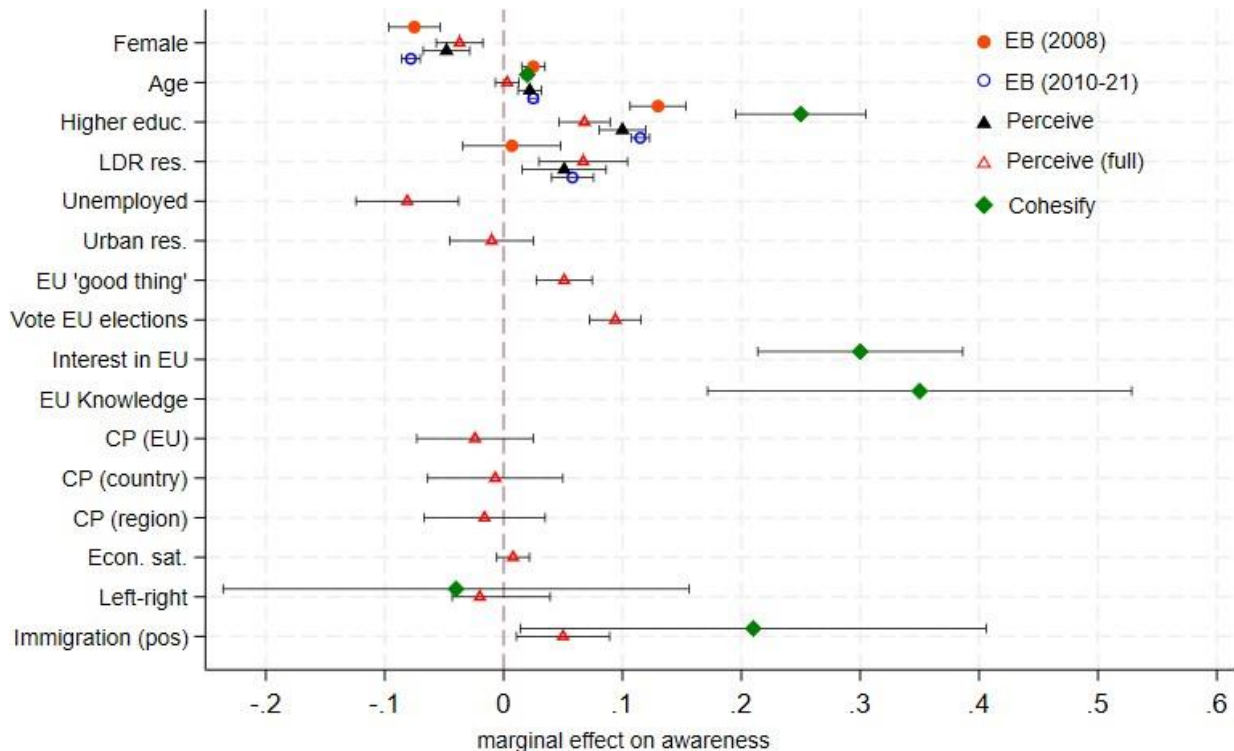
Note: marginal effects represent a % increase in the probability of 'awareness' (0/1) reported from linear probability models with 95% confidence intervals. Models include country fixed effects, and model EB 2010-21 includes year effects. Author conducted models with EB and Perceive data; Cohesify estimates taken from Borz et al (2018). N= 27,147 and 163,200 for the EB models, 17,147 and 15,654 for the two Perceive models and 7354 for the Cohesify model. Dep. Variable is awareness of EU regional policy, operationalized differently based on different question formation. 'LDR res.' = 'Less Developed Region resident, 'CP' = corruption perceptions. Survey weights employed.

Despite an overall, relatively low level of EU-wide awareness of regional policy, we observe stark country-level variation. Figure 3 shows the average level of awareness within each member country in 2021. While fewer than 25% in Germany, Belgium, Netherlands and Denmark had heard of the policy, over 60% report to have heard of it in eight countries (Poland, Slovakia, Czechia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary). Moreover, the PERCEIVE survey showed that only around a fifth of the respondents in countries such as the Netherlands, UK and Germany have heard about EU funded projects in their area, over a two-thirds majority of the population have heard about EU funded projects in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. The COHESIFY researchers also report noteworthy variation in awareness across regions explained in large part by the level of EU structural funds allocated to each region. For example, fewer than 15% of citizens in Limburg (NL) and Flevoland (NL) had heard of Cohesion Policy, while over 70% in Pomorskie (PL) and Nyugat-Dunántúl (HU) had heard of at least one of the policies. Moreover, Figure 2 shows that in member countries where there is regional variation of 'less developed' status (e.g. 'LDR res.', former 'objective 1'), that awareness is roughly 5% higher among citizens on average all things being equal. This pattern at the country and regional level indicates quite clearly that where investments are greater and the presence of the EU in daily projects is more frequent, there is a higher level of awareness among citizens.

In terms of **public support** for EU regional policy broadly speaking, the EB survey does not provide a proper question to assess this topic[5]. However, the PERCEIVE survey does inquire about support and 'intensity' of support (e.g. preference for home country to spend 'less', 'more' or 'the same' on Cohesion) for EU Cohesion policy.

Figure 3   Average Country-Level Awareness (2021) and Level of Structural Funds (2014-20)
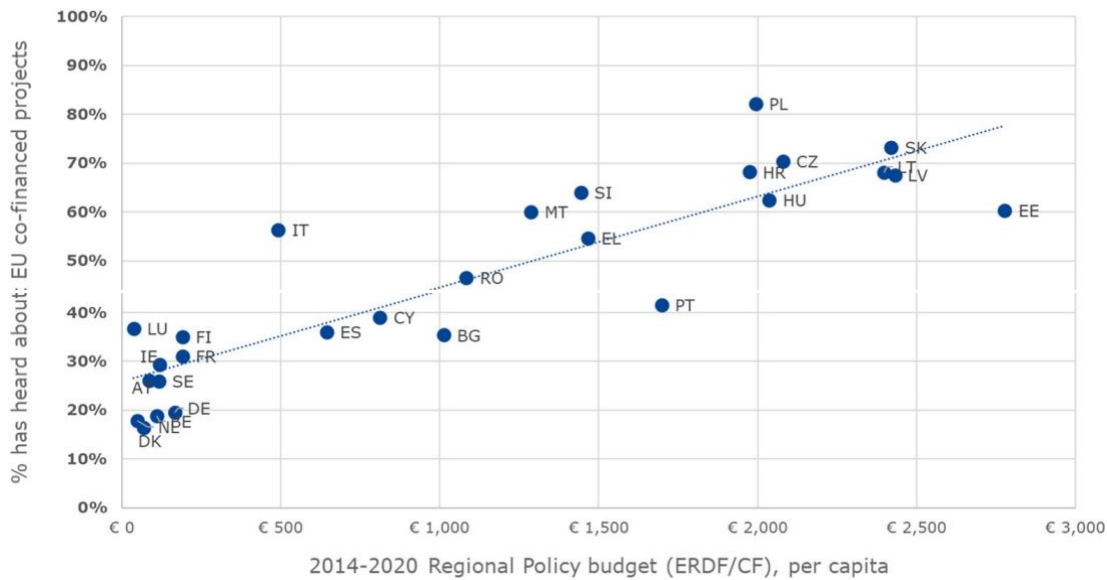
Source: Eurobarometer 2021

Using this data, Bauhr and Charron (2020) provide a comprehensive analysis of the predictors of these two questions. In sum, they find that having a university education or above is consistently associated with higher levels of support for Cohesion Policy but is negligible in terms of intensity (e.g. the willingness for one's own country to invest more in the policy). Respondents who identify the strongest with their home country (vis-a-vis Europe or their region) are significantly less likely to support Cohesion Policy. Unsurprisingly, those who perceive personal benefits from EU projects are more likely to be supportive of the overall policy. Respondents who support domestic redistribution (more left on economic left-right spectrum) are also more likely to support the idea of inter-EU redistribution via Structural Funds, yet consistent with the findings of Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson (2002), the 'gal-tan'[6] dimension has a far greater marginal effect on the outcome variables, with 'tan' leaning respondents strongly opposed. Support for Eurosceptic parties equates with less support for Cohesion Policy, as found in previous studies of similar outcomes (Stoeckel and Kuhn, 2018). Finally, similar to Bechtel et al. (2014), they show that those who are more optimistic about the economic situation in their area are more prone to support inter-EU redistribution. Age is negligible on both questions and, while females are less supportive on average, there is no gender distinction in intensity. At the

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[5] The closest proxy question asks respondents if they support the EU investing in 'all regions' or 'only the poorest regions', yet does not provide an option for 'none of the above'.

[6] stands for 'Green-Alternative-Libertarian' and 'Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist'

regional level, they show that citizens living in regions that have received more structural funds are slightly more supportive.

Furthermore, Bauhr and Charron (2020) argue that support for Regional policy is highly contingent on perceptions of domestic corruption. More specifically, they show that perceptions of domestic corruption increase support for within-EU redistribution but only in contexts where the quality of government is low and public service delivery deficient. Perceptions of corruption have no such effect in contexts where the quality of government is high, meaning that Cohesion policy is seen as a 'lifeline' for people who believe their national institutions are not performing well relative to the EU mean.

In terms of **consequences of greater awareness** and support for Cohesion policy at the individual level, a limited amount of research has mainly looked at its relationship with European identity along with some form of Euroscepticism. As anticipated by the researchers, those with higher awareness and support of regional policy have stronger identification with Europe (Brasili et al., 2020; Borz et al., 2018; López-Bazo and Royuela, 2019) and where Cohesion policy is more prevalent, some studies show that citizens express more positive attitudes about the EU and lower EU scepticism (Dąbrowski, Stead, et al., 2019; Osterloh, 2011). Additionally, the EB and PERCEIVE survey data also shows that awareness of EU projects correlates with citizens claiming that they benefit from the EU in some way, along with a considerably greater level of 'feeling European', yet these relationships are correlational and thus do not necessarily imply directional causation.

Finally, regarding the *'level of recognition of regional and social convergence among the political priorities of Europe and each Member State'*, this is admittedly a much broader question and more difficult to address with such limited space and citizen-survey data. However, the PERCEIVE survey does provide some insights. When asked if one's own country should spend 'more', 'about the same' or 'less' on Cohesion policy ('intensity of support'), citizens responded 18%, 58% and 24% respectively, implying fewer than 1 in 5 Europeans want to expand the policy. Together with low policy awareness, the nearly 6 in 10 saying 'the same' also indicates a high level of ambivalence. The survey also asked motivating follow-up questions to those that responded 'more' or 'less', with the strongest reason that people claimed the former was that 'it benefits everyone in the EU to invest in less developed areas', whereas most of those claiming 'less' either believed the 'money would be better spent in our country' or that 'other countries are not paying their fair share'.

2   Citizen Attitudes about Redistribution, Solidarity and Cohesion within the EU

Compared with the previous section, a larger, more vibrant academic literature has recently emerged addressing these topics. Broadly speaking, the literature distinguishes patterns of economic solidarity among European citizens with respect to general redistribution/solidarity within Europe, along with such attitudes in response to specific crises (e.g. economic/refugee/Covid-19). Moreover, at times, scholars make distinctions regarding types of solidarity. While space does not permit a nuanced look at each type in this paper, *in breve*, scholars distinguish EU solidarity for people in need (welfare/transnational solidarity), for poorer countries to reduce inequalities (territorial/MS solidarity) and supporting member states in need due to crisis (fiscal solidarity), *inter alia* (Gerhards et al., 2019; Sangiovanni, 2013).

Overall, studies in most cases find that a majority of citizens are at least somewhat supportive of the redistributive principle of Cohesion Policy as well as solidarity to member states (MS) in need in times of crisis, yet there is much ambivalence/indifference implied in the survey responses among many respondents. Yet it often depends on question framing and the topic in question. For example, several studies show that a majority of EU citizens support their country providing to others in times of crisis or further economic integration (Kuhn and Stoeckel, 2014; Bauhr and Charron, 2018; Bechtel et al., 2017; Daniele and Geys, 2015). Conversely, solidarity post financial crisis drew some opposition, in particular from German citizens toward Southern member states such as Greece (Bechtel et al., 2014; Stoeckel and Kuhn, 2018). Regarding the most recent crisis, studies show only a minority of EU citizens opposed the EU's Covid-19 aid packages (Bauhr and Charron, 2023; Kyriazi et al., 2023; Heermann et al., 2023), with authors noting that this crisis was not perceived to be caused by irresponsible governance or corruption, but was an exogenous event which could result in more solidarity. Asking specifically about Cohesion Policy, Charron and Bauhr (2020) ask respondents in 15 EU countries whether they support the principle behind Cohesion policy, and 79% either 'agree' (53%) or 'strongly agree' (26%) with the idea whereas only 19% opposed (2% 'don't know')[7].

In terms of explaining variation at the individual level in support/opposition to policies that reflect EU economic solidarity and redistribution, the most common theoretical frameworks are:

Enduring factors:

1. **Utilitarian** – perceived/actual self-interest of the individual or one's country with respect to the given policy
2. **Ideological** – the degree to which a citizen supports redistributive policies (left/right) or views on cosmopolitan/national issues ('gal/tan') in general
3. **Geographic Identity** – whether citizens identify as 'European' vis-a-vis one's own country (or region) determines the degree to which one views the EU as a demos (Risse, 2015)
4. **Institutional assessments/Benchmarking** – the perceived performance of domestic institutions, and/or their perceived relative performance vis-a-vis the EU or other EU countries.

Short-term/tractable factors:

5. **Elite cues** – when endorsement or opposition, elite cues guide citizens' opinions regarding complex policies in particular when prior information or understanding on such policy is limited.
6. **Policy details** – providing specific information on the policy itself, intended targets, costs, benefits, etc. can influence support/opposition for inter-EU redistribution.

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[7] Respondents were given some background information and then asked: *In your opinion, the EU should continue this policy, where wealthier countries contribute more, and poorer EU regions receive more funding." 1. Strongly agree, 2. Agree, 3. Disagree, 4. Strongly disagree, 5. Don't know*

Figure 4   Summary of Findings from Recent Empirical Studies

study	focus	sample	utilitarian (individual)	utilitarian (country)	Identity	Political ideology	instit. benchmark	endorsement cues	Policy details
Bauhr & Charron 2020	Cohesion Policy	15 MS	insig.	struc. Funds received (+)	exlus. nat. Id (-)	left id (+), tan (-)	nat. Corr in low QoG reg. (+), EU corr (-)	n/a	n/a
Bauhr & Charron 2020	Cohesion Policy	15 MS	higher inc. (-)	insig.	civic Euro id (+), relig. euro id (-), euro. attach (+)	left id (+), tan (-)	perceived reg. Wealth (+)	n/a	n/a
Bauhr & Charron 2018	general EU fiscal integ. & generic crisis	EU-28	higher inc. (+)	Insig.	European id (+)	tan (-), cen-left (+), populist partisan (-)	High. Reg. QoG (+), trust EU+Nat.(+)	n/a	n/a
Bauhr & Charron 2022†	Covid-19 crisis	EU-27	higher inc. (+)	poorer MS (+)	European attach (+), nat attach (-)	left id (+), green partisan (+), far right partisan (-)	n/a	pos. Gov cue (+), Frug. 4 cue (-), FR/DE cue (-),	aid details insig., recip. specified (-)
Baute et al 2021	general EU fiscal integ. & generic crisis	BE citizens	econ. Insec. (-)	n/a	European id. (+)	right id (-)	EU trust (+)	n/a	n/a
Bechtel et al 2014	EU debt crisis	DE citizens	insig.	n/a	cosmopolitiansim (+), altruism (+)	populist partisan* (-)	n/a	n/a	n/a
Bechtel et al 2017†	EU debt crisis	DE citizens	insig.	n/a	n/a	right id (-)	n/a	IO's (-), EU actors (-)	costs (-), % burden share (-), cuts in recip. (+)
Ciornei & Recchi 2017	gen. EU econ. Solidarity	EU-28	low skilled (+)	insig.	European id. (+), egalitarian (+)	insig.	trust EU (+)	n/a	n/a
Daniele & Geys 2015	general EU fiscal integ.	EU-28	higher inc. (+)	wealthier MS (-)	altruism (+)	n/a	nat. vs. EU corruption (+)	n/a	n/a
Haverland et al 2022	Covid-19 crisis	NL citizens	higher inc. (+), COVID job loss (+)	n/a	n/a	left id (+), far right partisan (-)	covid consipiricy (-)	n/a	n/a
Heermann et al 2023†	Covid-19 crisis	DE citizens	n/a	n/a	European id. (+), altruism (+)	n/a	recip. MS capacity (+), recip. MS EU norms (+)	n/a	recip. MS wealthy (-), tax increases (-)
Kleider & Stoeckel 2019	EU debt crisis	EU-28	high soc. class (+)	Wealthier MS (+)	exlus. nat. Id (-)	left id * wealthy ind. (+), left id X poor ind. (-)	n/a	n/a	n/a
Kuhn & Elsas 2018†	general EU fiscal integ.	UK & DE citizens	higher SES (-)	n/a	cosmopolitiansim (+), Euro. Id. (+)	insig.	n/a		local vs. Other MS recipient (+)
Kuhn & Stoekel 2014	EU debt crisis	EU-28	insig.	wealthier MS (-)	exlus. nat. Id (-)	right partisan (-)	trust EU (+)	n/a	n/a
Kuhn et al 2021	unemployment risk share	13 MS	higher inc. (-)	n/a	n/a	right id (-)	n/a	n/a	conditionalities (+), generosity (+), tax on all (-), nat. Governance (+)
Lengfeld et al 2020	EU debt crisis, EU tax	DE & PT citizens	insig.	n/a	cosmopolitiansim (+),	center left/right (+)	n/a	n/a	higher tax (-)
Stoekel & Kuhn 2018†	EU debt crisis	DE citizens	lower inc. (-)		European attach (+)	populist partisan (-)	n/a	party cues for partisans (+), opposition cues insig.	
Vasilopoulou & Talving 2020	EU debt crisis	EU-28	low skilled (-)	poorer MS (-)	European attach (+)	left id (+)	n/a	n/a	n/a
Verhagen 2018	EU debt crisis	EU-28	lower inc. (-)	insig.	Europe id (+), exlus. nat. Id (-)	left id (+)	trust EU (+), trust nat. (+)	n/a	n/a
Vössing 2019†	general EU econ. integ., EU-tax	DE citizens	n/a	n/a	n/a	cen. Left (+)	n/a	co-partisan cues (+)	policy-justification = respondents' prior policy support(+)

Note: † notes an experimental study. *Indicates die Linke and AfD supporters.

In terms of the first four theoretical lenses, these are generally thought to be latent factors, enduring characteristics. Yet even if they carry a high degree of weight in statistical models, they may be less salient to policy-makers interested in increasing public support for redistributive policies, due to the fact that they are difficult to change in the short-run. Scholars are thus also interested in factors such as elite cues[8], policy details or messaging heuristics that citizens might rely on when considering a given EU policy idea. This is particularly relevant when policy details are complex and apply to other areas of the EU than where the respondent themselves resides.

While not an exhaustive list, Figure 4 summarizes key findings from the literature with respect to the focus and results from peer review analyses on citizen support for inter-EU redistributive policies that reflect economic solidarity, broadly speaking. Signs (+/-) are shown to indicate significant results, 'insig' implies the factor was included yet statistically insignificant, while 'n/a' indicates that a proxy variable of this model was not included. First, we observe that the literature has focused on a number of types of fiscal integration; from general attitudes to crises response, to Cohesion Policy specifically. Studies also range from single MS samples (e.g. Germany most often) to including all MS. Additionally, various studies rely on observational and experimental data. Thus, theoretical models that explain significant patterns in public solidarity preferences across different topics/research designs demonstrate strong predictive power.

Second, most studies either focus on, or control for, some individual-level utilitarian factor, partisan ideology and/or some proxy of geographic identity. The studies show overwhelmingly that the relationship between **identity** and economic solidarity is rather straight-forward and statistically relevant in all cases where included: those with more cosmopolitan or European self-identification (vis-a-vis exclusively national one) are consistently more likely to support economic integration in Europe like Cohesion and helping other MS in times of crises. Unsurprisingly, several studies note that egalitarian and altruistic people are also more supportive. In terms of **political ideology**, we observe that most studies find this factor statistically relevant (only two find this proxy insignificant). The general pattern is that left/centre-left citizens are the most supportive of European fiscal integration and economic solidarity in crisis or otherwise. Yet proxies of the cultural/'gal-tan' dimension are more meaningful, and with supporters of populist parties – in particular those on the far right – being the least solidaristic. Yet some nuance is presented at times, demonstrating the country context may condition political ideology (Kleider and Stoeckel, 2019).

Third, the relationship between EU economic solidarity and **utilitarian** proxies of 'self-interest' is far less straight-forward. In all but two papers in Figure 3 there is some proxy at either the individual or country level of 'cost/benefit' calculations. While the 'rational' presumption is that those who should carry a higher economic burden will show less solidarity all things being equal (higher income/SES citizens and those living in higher income MS), the evidence does not support this. At the micro-level, we find that the relationship is the reverse in 8 of these studies, even when accounting for education, ideology and identity. Only in three studies do we observe that those with higher income/SES show systematically lower preferences for economic solidarity in Europe. Further, such proxies are insignificant in five of these papers. Thus the 'rational' model is not supported overall in the literature. At the

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[8] A cue has been defined as "a message that people may use to infer other information and, by extension, to make decisions" (see i.e.Bullock, 2011, 49).

country/macro level, the relationship is also quite mixed, and likely dependent on the topic at hand. For a general redistributive policy such as Cohesion policy, support is greatest among recipient countries and least among donor ones (Charron and Bauhr, 2020). Relatedly, the EB data shows that citizens in recipient (LDR) regions are more likely to say EU funds should go 'only to poorer areas' (43% vs. 38% in all other areas). Moreover, when asked about one's own country contributing to other MS in times of crisis[9], citizens in MS entering the EU from 2004 onward are 10% less likely to support solidarity than citizens in older MS (47% vs. 57%) (Bauhr and Charron, 2018; Kleider and Stoeckel, 2019). Although EU aid for Covid-19 does not follow this pattern (Bauhr and Charron, 2023) and in four studies in Figure 3, proxies of national wealth are statistically unrelated to fiscal solidarity.

Next, we observe that roughly half of the studies include some type of measure of **institutional assessment** and/or **benchmarking**. In this case, trust in institutions is a consistent predictor of support for economic integration, as citizens presumably need to have confidence that institutions will spend their money in a non-corrupt and efficient way. All studies that include a measure of trust in the EU for instance find it a significant predictor. Others find that trust in both national and EU institutions are positive predictors, with Bauhr and Charron (2020) showing that higher national level corruption perceptions actually lead to stronger preferences for Cohesion policy in regions with lower institutional quality in Europe (e.g. EU seen as a 'lifeboat'). The recent study by Heermann et al. (2023) also shows that citizens benchmark the recipient countries in that they want to see that those MS receiving funds are living up to norms of democracy, rule of law and are relatively efficient in spending such funds.

Next, several experimental studies have looked at whether **endorsement cues** and/or **policy details** can alter attitudes of solidarity among Europeans. In this case, we see that positive partisan cues made a consistently significant difference – where citizens see that sitting governments or their preferred party supports a given EU policy, they are in turn more supportive on average. Opposition cues are less consistent and usually yield smaller effects. However, 'who is cueing' also matters for these types of policies. Namely, these studies show that citizens prefer domestic actors over those more international all things being equal. For example, Bechtel et al., 2017 find that German citizens were more negative to bailouts in the wake of the financial crisis to other MS if it was endorsed by the EU or another IO compared with domestic actors, such as the government. Bauhr and Charron, 2023 find that when NextGenEU was endorsed by dually German and French governments that citizens in other countries (mostly central/eastern MS) were significantly less supportive, yet positive domestic endorsements garnered greater support across the board. Finally, **policy details** yield some significant results. For example, citizens prefer some conditionalities to recipient countries and want them to display good governance. However, the studies demonstrate some inconsistencies among citizens – in general, respondents are more supportive when the policies proposed are more generous, yet less supportive when higher tax burden is indicated, while overly-technical details lead to less clear results. It should also be noted that the size of the effect is generally on the margins (e.g. cues/details increase support between 2%-10%).

Finally, in terms of **other demographic factors**, higher education is uniformly positively correlated with higher levels of solidarity when included. Studies report mixed findings with

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[9] European Social Survey (ESS, 2014) posed the question: *In times of crisis, it is desirable for (OUR COUNTRY) to give financial help to another EU Member State facing severe economic and financial difficulties.*

respect to age. Regarding gender, roughly half of the studies show an insignificant finding, while the other half show that women in general are less supportive of inter-EU redistribution.

Taken together, we can gleam from the evidence testing these first three models that regardless of the topic/crisis in question, polarization regarding attitudes of redistribution is mainly centered around the cultural/political and identity dimensions (gal-tan/ cosmopolitan-nationalist) rather than left-right/ utilitarian political dimensions. Moreover, consistent contestation regarding issues of solidarity is found between institutional 'trusters' vs. 'non-trusters', and between those with lower and higher education. Yet the experimental evidence suggests that greater support for economic solidarity across borders can be achieved via the proper (domestic) endorsements along with some simple policy detail framing. In terms of macro-geographic dimensions of polarization of support, it depends much more on the topic/crisis in question, yet in most cases, support is higher (lower) in areas where EU investments are highest (lowest).

3   How to better communicate EU Regional Policy?

Similar to studying awareness/support for Cohesion Policy, the empirical evidence on better communicating EU regional policy to citizens is rather limited. As noted in section 1, overall, over 50% of EU citizens are not even aware of Regional Policy in general. Thus, the analysis of 'awareness' of EU regional policy demonstrates that there is a problem with communication overall, in particular in areas where EU investments are low. More problematically, several surveys show that even when citizens are aware of EU projects in their area, they tend not to perceive a personal benefit. For example, data from the Perceive project show that among the 48% of the sample that 'have heard' of any EU funded project where they live, fewer than 4 in 10 claim to have personally benefited in any way from it. Further, the latest 2021 EB survey (Figure 5) shows that among those who 'have heard' of EU-funded projects where they live, in only two countries (Poland and Czechia) a majority of 'aware' citizens claim to benefit from them personally. Alarmingly, in Spain, Romania and Portugal, where a high level of Structural Funds have been allocated over the last several decades, fewer than 25% claim to benefit, whereas in Italy fewer than 15% claim to benefit. For example, looking specifically at citizens' opinions in LDR/Objective 1 regions, just under 12% of respondents from Extremadura over the EB waves claim to benefit from EU projects (compared to national average of 16%), while only 10% of citizens in the Mezzogiorno regions in Italy claim to benefit from EU funds over the past decade-plus. Thus, while investment levels are highly correlated with awareness, they are less related to perceived benefits, demonstrating much room for improvement on the 'communication of benefits' front. One key reason for this discrepancy is the perception in how the Funds are used once transferred to local actors; where narratives of EU funds among citizens living in LDR regions are intertwined with discussions of waste and grand corruption and that the EU does little to stop or punish the graft (Batory, 2021). Other narratives are that red-tape associated with the Funds is overly burdensome or harmful (Hartnett and Gard-Murray, 2018), or the Funds are allocated to 'buy love' rather than actual investments (Fidrmuc et al., 2019).

Communication goals thus imply both increasing awareness and perceived policy benefits. In terms of how to better message the Cohesion Policy to citizens to generate greater awareness (a necessary condition for the policy to have an impact on citizen views), there are several key findings from the PERCEIVE and COHESIFY projects. First, Borz et al. (2018) find that among a set of diverse channels through which the policy could be communicated, that *direct communication* via on the ground, billboards at construction sites etc. is the strongest correlate of awareness. National media coverage in TV and newspapers is the second most

important factor, yet the magnitude is half that of direct communication in their study. Thus greater investments in direct communication, via visuals can be an effective channel to boost awareness.

Figure 5   Perceived Benefits from EU Projects Among Those who 'have heard' of EU-funded projects, by country

benefit from EU funds? (proportion 'YES' among those who 'have heard' of EU projects)
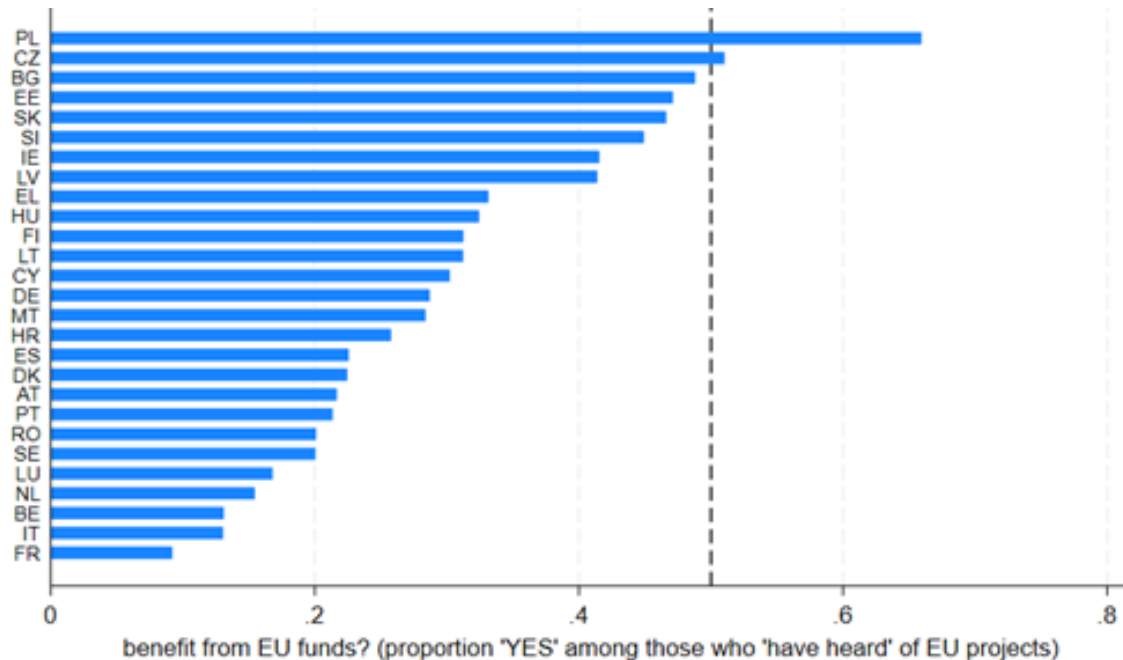
Source: Eurobarometer 2021

In terms of communication source through which people hear about regional policy currently, there are a number of common responses. Among those that 'have heard', TV has been the most consistent source, yet is in decline over time - the source for over 40% in 2008 to now under 25% in 2021. More people have gotten information from personal/work source or billboards over time, while the internet/social media has been a source of information for just 12% of those aware of the policy in 2021. Given the correlates of awareness from Figure 2, we see that age (younger) is strongly predictive of (lack of) awareness, and thus internet/social media communication is a clear forum through which regional policy should increase communication in the coming years.

As regards the impact of regional policy and Structural Funds on generating a more positive view of the EU by recipient citizens, Aiello et al. (2019) do not find any direct relationship, while Verhaegen et al. (2014) reports a negative association between greater funds and support for more EU integration. Thus greater expenditures per se, do not always associate with more positive views of the EU, yet studies do show notable effects on the relationship between Funds and lower rates of Eurosceptic voting across regions (Rodriguez-Pose and Dijkstra, 2021; Schraff, 2019). In terms of generating support for European institutions and redistributive policies, such as Cohesion Policy, researchers stress that identification with Europe is considered essential for the EU integration project, garnering legitimacy and creating a sense of common 'demos' (Risse, 2015). For example, Chalmers and Dellmuth, 2015 find that EU Funds only lead to higher trust in EU institutions among citizens with an a priori European identity. Relatedly, Borz et al. (2018) find an empirical link that structural funds lead to greater identification with Europe, thus communicating Structural Funds should incorporate messages of common EU identity to increase positive perceptions of EU institutions. Experimental research highlighted in section 2 of this paper also suggests the

importance of channelling information through domestic elite cues when possible, where targeting specifically via one's preferred political party is the ideal case.

There is also a clear 'two-track' issue in that awareness is already quite high particularly in the areas of the EU where Structural Funds allocation is lower (e.g. North/West Europe), thus 'one size fits all' messaging is likely less effective. Moreover, this means that awareness is lowest in countries that are the highest net contributors to Cohesion policy. In interviews with local EU employees and stakeholders in countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden, Perceive researchers found that communication budgets for EU Cohesion were very limited, and thus was targeted almost exclusively toward potential funding beneficiaries rather than citizens at large (Dąbrowski, Spaans, et al., 2021; Barberio et al., 2017). Moreover, this type of communication geared toward local firms, chambers of commerce, universities, etc. capable of completing projects and absorbing funds are more technical in nature and likely alienating to more ordinary citizens (Barberio et al., 2017). The PERCEIVE project suggests a more mixed communication strategy in EU areas where fund allocation is lower – that of 'storytelling', e.g. highlighting the direct testimonies of previous beneficiaries and using them as 'ambassadors' to raise awareness among other citizens. Moreover, similar to the findings of the Cohesify study, testimonies from Perceive case studies in net-donor countries, Austria, Sweden, UK and Netherlands stressed the importance of a greater investment in visuals (signs, flags, billboards, etc.) and to be more assertive in 'taking credit' for success stories, even if limited. To raise further legitimacy and trust among citizens and mitigate concerns about malfeasance of Funds in LDR regions more specifically (Fazekas and Tóth, 2016), the Commission should consider implementing randomized audits, checking on use/compliance with Funds and make the reports transparent to the public (Dellmuth, 2021). Given high mistrust among citizens in recipient areas about corruption, this measure could increase trust.

In the end, with limited resources for communication providing insights on this question very much depends on 'who is the target audience' - e.g. the general public, elites, or potential funding beneficiaries for example. Moreover, 'what the purpose is' that the communication aims to serve will also dictate the type of messaging - e.g. to garner trust/good will for the EU, to better create a common European identity, to better reach out to penitential project applicants to increase absorption rates. Relatedly, Borzel (2016) argues that *"the lesson of the Euro crisis is that trying to depoliticize EU redistributive policies and limiting public debates by isolating EU decisions from public discourse is futile and counter-productive"* (p. 25). As the public is unaware of most specific EU policies, debates about Europe thus tend to be about the legitimacy of the polity in general rather than about its policies (De Wilde et al., 2016). While not its stated purpose, *"Cohesion Policy has been for the best of three decades trying to address the very problems at the heart of the rise in voter discontent in Europe"* (Rodriguez-Pose and Dijkstra, 2021: 357). Given the size and scope of EU Regional Policy, and with primary threats to EU integration coming mainly from illiberal, populist-right forces (Borzel, 2016; Hooghe and Marks, 2009), greater citizen awareness and discourse regarding Cohesion policy provides a key opportunity for debates on EU economic integration to be pushed back toward left-right discussions rather than more existential 'cosmopolitan-nationalist'/gal-tan types of framing that currently dominates and threatens to undermine economic solidarity in the wake of several crises. More inclusive messaging that focuses on benefits and legitimate, non-corrupt use of the Funds would help to reach this aim.

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