

CONCLUDING REMARKSby **Mario Kölling**

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The EU regional policy not only financed during the past decades the construction of kilometres of roads and rails, the EU funds contributed to economic and investment growth, internal and external economic stability, as well as improved the labour market situation in the EU. In the current programming period 2014-2020, EU regional policy will invest again around a third of the EU budget in order to reduce the economic, social and territorial disparities among the EU member states and its regions. In 2014-2020 key areas will be in line with the Europe 2020 strategy of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Although the academic literature has not yet reached a consensus on whether the policy promoted economic opportunities and cohesion among European regions, there are tangible and concrete benefits that the cohesion policy has produced. Nevertheless assessing the impact of the EU regional policy is not an easy task, especially if we try to establish a link between this policy and the identification of citizens with Europe. In this context besides the traditional questions of – who gets what and why, as well as, whether the money is well spent – there is a new question emerging regarding the contribution of this policy to a positive identification with the European project or to the emergence of a European identity among the beneficiary population.

At a time of widespread fiscal austerity, the EU cohesion policy provided one of the few sources of funds that did not suffer cutbacks. Moreover EU funds accelerated the GDP growth in some member states and, therefore, alleviated the effects of the global economic crisis. Nevertheless these benefits of cohesion policy did not translate into an improvement in the opinion of the European Union and its institutions. During the past few years data on opinions of citizens related to the benefits of EU membership reflected primarily the impact of the crisis on people's opinion on the EU.

The EU cohesion policy follows the same set of rules and regulations in all member states. But there is a variety of European regions with regard to the level of implication in the EU cohesion policy. Some regions have been receiving structural aid for decades, although in other regions these resources have been reduced progressively, in addition to regions which have only received structural aid at a low or very low level. In this sense EU regional policies have also affected EU citizens in different ways. In fact there is a significant variation of public opinion and of concepts of the EU (variety of perception within the EU member states, but also within societies, as well as to a variation over time), on top of there seeming to be a positive relation between the identification with Europe and the benefits from the EU and its policies (e.g. regional policies).

In our publication we tried to analyse more in detail this interrelation of the EU regional policy with the identification for the EU integration. For this purpose we studied five EU member states (United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, Poland and the Czech Republic) with different territorial organisation, institutional history, distinct cultural identities, as well as, administrative and governance functions.

Spain and Italy are two countries which benefited for a long time from the EU cohesion policy. Both countries have had a population characterised by a traditionally very positive attitude towards the EU integration project and where the public awareness of EU regional policy seem to have increased recently. However Spaniards and Italians are exceptionally sceptical regarding the general impact of these projects and their personal benefits. A negative public opinion, particularly throughout the last five years or so, seems to prevail concerning EU membership and its benefits. Notwithstanding, these

trends may only give some idea of possible tendencies regarding the identification with Europe and the figures may also turn into a more positive perception once the crisis has been overcome.

Poland and the Czech Republic only recently started to benefit from the EU re-distributive policies. Especially in Poland citizens consider EU membership increasingly as a positive and beneficial phenomenon. Thanks to the cohesion policy, the divergence between both countries, in comparison to “old” EU member states, has been reduced, even though there is still a substantial difference overall. The pressure from the EU to adopt the ‘*acquis communautaire*’ in the pre-accession phase induced the decentralisation and regionalisation process of governmental systems in Poland and the Czech Republic. Since 2004 regional governments have been systematically gaining more competence in management of regional policy and funds. Moreover, the range of actors involved in the implementation of regional policy significantly widened. However, in the Czech Republic administrative decentralization seemed to have increased corruption at the regional level, which led the government to return to centralize the allocation of European funding. While the corruption in regional policy may play a negative role in the question of the identification of Czechs with the EU, Polish citizens consider that Poland profits more as a state than they do as individuals. Despite their acknowledgment of positive effects of EU membership, Polish citizens define themselves above all through nationality and a European identity is less pronounced.

The EU regional policy also played an important role in the UK, nevertheless the country is one of the least positive states about the benefits of EU membership. There are differences of perceptions of the European Union across the nations and regions of the UK but these are differences of degree of Euroscepticism rather than between sceptical and strongly positive sentiment. Moreover, from the late 1990s EU regional policy has become part of a complex set of political battles between central and devolved governments added to within devolved territories.

In order to conclude we can confirm the heterogeneity across member states, both with regard to the impact of EU regional policy and also with regard to the identification with the EU. All authors underlined the interrelation of the EU regional policy with endogenous and exogenous conflicts, e.g. the consequences of the economic crisis (Spain), the strong identification with national policies (Italy); the decentralisation in Poland, the corruption in the Czech Republic or political battles between central and devolved governments as well as the general Euroscepticism in the UK. These conflicts played a very important role in determining the interrelation between public opinion and EU regional policy.

In our publication we tried to offer an attempt towards a better understanding of the relationship between European regional policies, local and regional identities and the perception of the added value of the EU by its citizens. According to Prof. Bradbury, it remains open whether variables relating to EU cohesion policy have ever had any independent effect on perceptions of EU membership. In other words, there is a long standing analytical debate between positions which isolate on the one hand the importance of the dynamics of European integration to domestic attitudes toward the EU, and on the other the continued dominance of domestic politics in understanding attitudes regarding the EU.

However, because of the characteristics of the EU regional policy, the effect of the policy on a positive identification with the European project has only been analysed with regard to its output dimension. Nevertheless, direct participation mechanisms and a stronger implication in the design of the programmes could increase the identification of citizens with this policy. ■