

Transparency in the implementation of European cohesion policies: results of the studies via the online portals for 2014-2020

In order to increase the accessibility and transparency of information on funding opportunities and on project beneficiaries, Regulation (EU) No. 1303/2013, as applicable to the 2014-2020 programming cycle, has reinforced the provisions, some of which were already a part of the previous Regulation 1828/2006, concerning the procedures for publishing information related to the use of European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds. The regulation states that, in each Member State, there is to be a “single website or website portal providing information on all the operational programmes, including the lists of operations [or ‘projects’, as tracked on OpenCoesione] supported under each operational programme”.

The information to be published includes the timing of implementation of the programmes and related process of public consultation, the funding opportunities, and implementation of the cohesion policy and of the funds, by way of efforts to communicate the outcome and impact of the partnership agreements at the national level of the individual operational programmes and of the projects funded.

The transparency of projects co-financed by the funds is ensured by way of publication of a list of the operations (the minimum requirements of which are provided in Annex XII of Regulation 1303/2013), organised by operational programme and by fund and updated at least every six months, in a format that can be readily processed electronically (i.e. CSV or XML) so as to allow for the reuse of the data and publication of the data online in accordance with specific laws and regulations concerning licencing of the data. This is in accordance with the concept of open government data, according to which the availability of data in electronic form concerning the allocation of funding and payments made using public funds enables the citizenry to verify the efficacy of public action, including by developing services based on said data, while also enabling those who assess the investments to provide studies that can be of use to policy makers.

A major driver in this regard has come from Italy’s involvement in negotiating the 2014-2020 regulatory package, which has made it possible for regulations to specify the formats that allow for the publication of lists of operations in a manner consistent with principles of open government data.

Table 1 – Annex XII of Reg. 1303/2013: requirements for lists of operations.

| | |
|---|---|
| List of operations (MS language + other official EU language) to be updated at least every six months | Beneficiary name (only of legal entities) |
| | Operation name and summary |
| | Operation start and end dates (physical completion or full implementation of the operation) |
| | Total eligible expenditure |
| | EU co-financing rate |
| | Postcode or other location indicator and country |
| | Name of category for the operation |
| | Date of last update of the list of operations |

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Study subject and methodology

While Regulation 1303/2013 indicates certain specific information to be published with regard to the lists of operations, Article 115 of the regulation establishes the general requirements for the characteristics of the single website, leaving broad autonomy to the Member States to develop websites containing a diverse range of information. The challenge, then is to move beyond merely complying with the provisions of the regulation and to publish additional, increasingly accessible data.

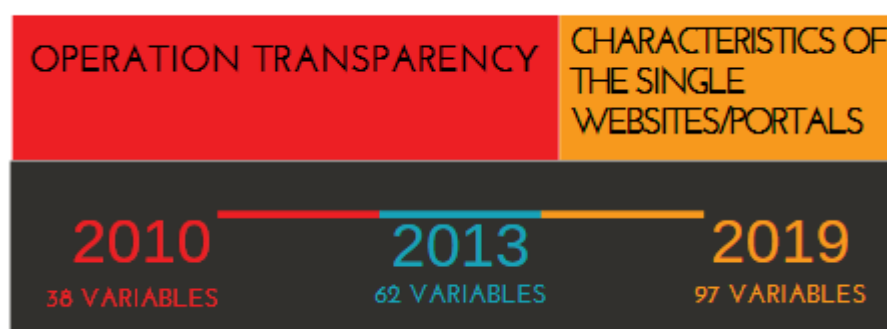


Figure 1 – Macro categories of variables

In light of these considerations, the study on the transparency of European cohesion funds looking at the websites and website portals of the 28 Member States responsible for the 2014-2020 ESI Funds has been enhanced compared to the 2007-2013 programming cycle, going from 62 variable up to 90. The data for 2014-2020, observed for the first time in 2017 and now updated through 2019, describe the characteristics of the single websites developed by the Member States in terms of the quantity, quality and accessibility of the information available.

How do the single websites meet regulatory requirements for 2014-2020?

At present, all Member States, with the exception of Germany, have adopted a single website or portal to inform their citizens of the opportunities and funding made available by ESI Funds. The situation in Germany is somewhat unique in that there is a single national website for the European Social Fund (ESF), but one must visit the sites of the various federal states in order to access information on the ERDF.

Generally speaking, an initial distinction can be made between a website and a website portal, as specified in the regulation. The trend we are seeing is that of adopting a single website (in 22 of the 27 Member States observed), while in the remaining cases a single national website portal collects the various links to other organisations' websites managed by the individual regions or of the operational programmes. Within this context, there are certain differences. In Finland, for example, two websites are available: one dedicated to programming and implementation; another solely concerning the projects. In Sweden, there is one website portal that provides general information on the structural funds and on 2014-2020 programming and another that provides information on funding opportunities broken down by type of beneficiary.

Of the 27 websites/portals analysed, nearly all of them have, at minimum, information on the ERDP and ESF (only Spain does not include information concerning the ESF), and 22 out of 27 also include details on the other investment funds (i.e. EAFRD, EMFF, and cohesion funds, if applicable). Estonia, Denmark, Slovenia and Austria only provide ERDP and ESF information.

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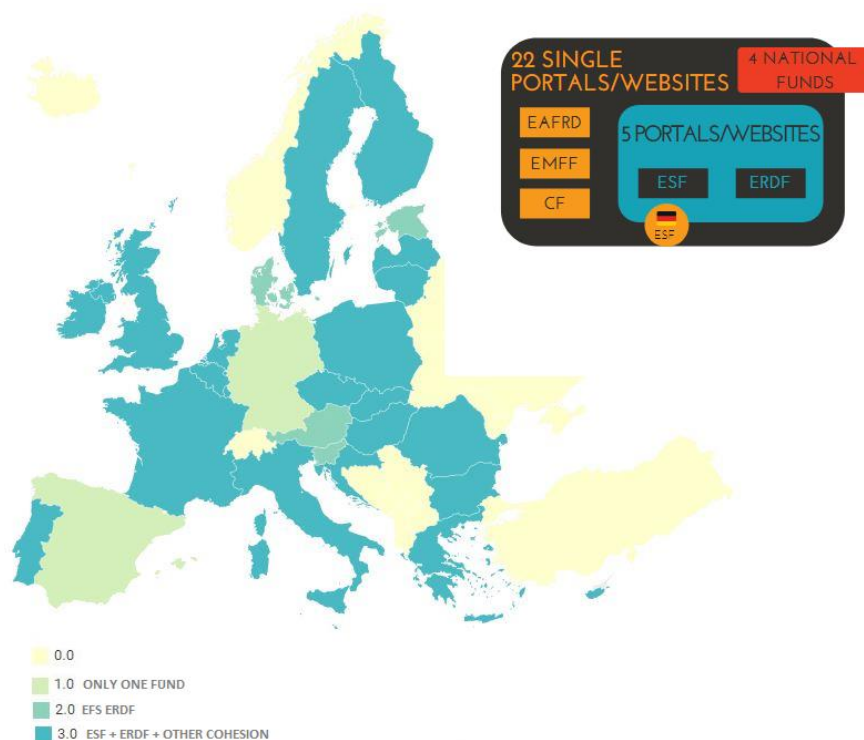


Figure 2 – ESI Funds monitored by the single websites

The other transparency requirements set by EU regulations have generally been met with regard to publication of the lists of operations, accessible either directly or by way of drop-down menus on the home page.

It was been noted that, at the time of the study, there were no active online consultation processes by distinct stages (i.e. programming, implementation, and the publication of notices and calls). Reference to the requirement of publishing funding opportunities has been properly interpreted by 80% of the Member States.

What are the other characteristics of the websites?

With regard to the connection between the 2014-2020 websites and those available for the 2007-2013 programming cycle, the tendency is for Member States to build two distinct websites, but with links connecting them. The information contained on the sites varies, and right from the home page one notes a different approach to the communication and publication of that information.

In terms of the type of single website/portal, the study looked at the manner in which certain information is published on the home page as a proxy for identifying the type of website. With regard to this information, the websites have been broken down into three main categories: programming information; implementation information (on the projects selected); and funding opportunities. Based on the specification of these three categories on the home page, on the availability of information in both text and graphic form, and on the type of language use, the websites were then categorised based on the existence, or otherwise, of the following attributes:

- *technical/functional approach* to the reuse of specific data, characterised by information on programming and implementation described in a technical manner. The use of maps and other geographical information is limited (Italy: <http://www.opencoessione.gov.it/>);

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- *accessible approach*, characterised by information on programming and on implementation described in a manner that is as accessible as possible to the layman. On these websites, there is a greater use of maps and other geographical representations of the data. The look of the website is more attractive and focuses on information about the programming cycle at the expense of a more specialist approach (Bulgaria: <http://2020.eufunds.bg/>);
- *communicative approach*, characterised by information on calls for tender and funding opportunities, often accompanied by detailed information on the methods of assistance with presenting projects (Poland: www.funduszeuropejskie.gov.pl).

What emerged is a tendency to publish websites/portals of an accessible nature better suited to use by the potential beneficiaries, giving them access to information on the functioning of European funding and enabling them to take advantage of the related funding opportunities. The publication of information on calls and notices is rightly the main focus of the websites observed (in 19 out of 27 cases), while functionally deconstructing the logical framework guiding the programming cycle. From the user's point of view, it is important to acquire information in a timely manner on funding opportunities and on the presentation of applications, based on the type of project concerned.

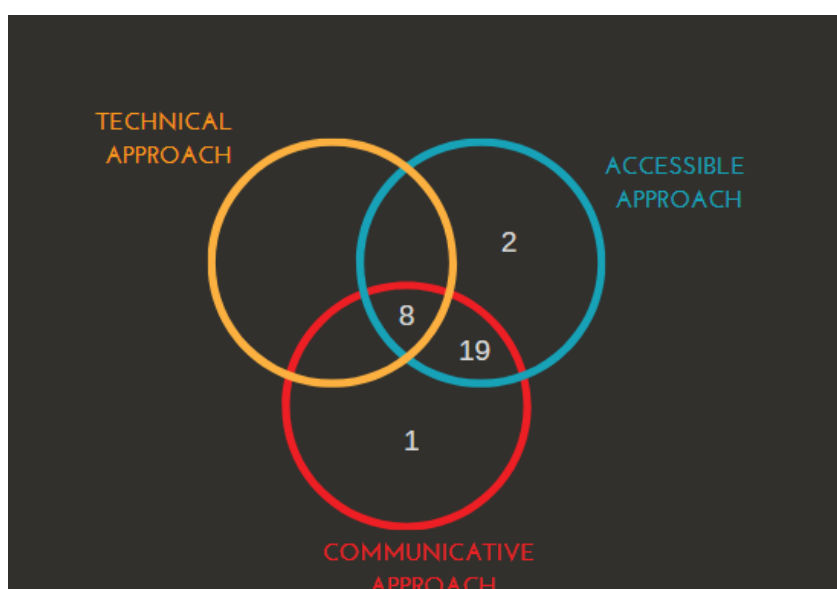


Figure 3 – Main characteristics of the national websites/portals based on the information available on the home page

With regard to the availability of information on implementation of the operational programmes (available in 75% of the cases in dedicated sections concerning programming), in all Member States information is available regarding the projects. Data is also presented by region in 11 Member States, particularly effective examples of which can be seen in France and Poland. Conversely, information on indicators is still lacking (with Bulgaria, Czech Rep., Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Slovakia and Italy publishing performance indicators).

In terms of accessibility, there is almost always a version of the website or website portal in English (in 22 out of 27 cases), although the information available is generally only partial.

For more information of a general nature regarding OpenCoesione, see the frequently asked questions (FAQ) at www.opencoesione.gov.it/FAQ