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## Miscellaneous

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### Submitted

July 4th, 2023

### Approved

April 15th, 2024

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Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

[www.communication-society.com](http://www.communication-society.com)

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2024 – Vol. 37(3)

pp. 141-159

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### How to cite this article:

Vilaplana-Aparicio, M. J., Martín-Llaguno, M. & Bonet-Pizarro, N. (2024). The communication of public aid in the European Union: the case of Next Generation European funds, *Communication & Society*, 37(3), 141-159. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.37.3.141-159>

## The communication of public aid in the European Union: the case of Next Generation European funds

### Abstract

In order to publicize the Next Generation funds (which will provide €806.9 billion in 2020 prices), each EU member state has had to create a portal that brings together all the information related to this instrument in accordance with the reference regulations. This study analyses the quality of the websites of the countries with the most resources: Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Greece, Romania, Portugal, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Based on a validated protocol, the technical aspects, accessibility and search engine, structure and content, as well as the support of the help desks are reviewed. The results reveal that the best performing portals are Spain, France, Germany, and Italy; and that many portals suffer from incomplete, asymmetric and inaccessible information. Moreover, there is no complete correspondence between the countries that receive the most funds and those that are communicating the best.

### Keywords

**Dissemination, information, public funds, grants, EU, Covid.**

### 1. Introduction

Communication emerges as an indispensable aspect for the proper use of European Funds (Vilaplana-Aparicio *et al.*, 2021). In this sense, the European Parliament stresses the importance of guaranteeing the right of citizens to be informed about EU affairs. This premise is reflected in the need for effective and visible communication in all EU programmes, which strengthens the sense of belonging and makes citizens aware of the value of the Union's initiatives to im-

prove various aspects of their lives.

In the different funds, communication is a regulated obligation, with clear provisions for managing bodies and recipients. For Next Generation, created to mitigate the effects of COVID, the European Commission, through guidelines, has urged Member States to develop transparent communication strategies, complying with legal regulations and facilitating accessibility to information through specific websites.

In this paper we analyse the quality of these sites in the countries with the most resources (Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Greece, Romania, Portugal, Hungary, and the Czech Republic). We begin by framing the Next Generation instrument in the context of the EU funds

as a whole, so that the reader can understand its characteristics, and then detail the communication requirements that the regulations require to be fulfilled. We then review the academic literature surrounding this object of study and delimit the concept of web quality and its different dimensions in order to be able to outline our general and specific objectives.

### 1.1. *The European funds: a review of their characteristics and budget*

European funds were created in 1975, with the aim of correcting imbalances in the countries that form the European Union (European Commission, 2015, paragraph 1) and can be divided into a) ordinary funds and b) extraordinary funds (Solís, 2021).

The former are the permanent instruments of the European Union and, among them, there are three different variants (European Commission, n.d.a. paragraphs 1-17):

- Direct management, where the European Commission is fully responsible for the successful implementation of the programme by issuing calls, evaluating proposals, signing grant agreements, evaluating results and making payments.
- Indirect management, where management is delegated to other entities.
- Shared management, in which both the European Commission and the national administrations and managing bodies of the Member States are responsible for the management of a given programme. Around 70% of EU programmes are implemented in this way.

Extraordinary funds are funds intended to alleviate exceptional situations. The most recent case is the European Union Recovery Facility, which was created to support the recovery from the COVID pandemic. This plan, called NextGenerationEU (or Next Generation), is composed of emergency measures for EU recovery to cover the economic and social costs and damage caused by the coronavirus health crisis, in order to preserve the health of EU citizens and the EU economy (European Union, n.d.; European Commission, 2020b).

NextGenerationEU, agreed by heads of state and government at their extraordinary summit on 17-21 July, established a complex governance system to guide the implementation of an exceptional financial package of €723.8 billion (at 2018 prices when the proposal was approved) and, in particular, its most important programme –the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism– endowed with the extraordinary sum of €672.5 billion (Fernández Pazarin, 2020).

This fund was created by the European Council with “three main objectives: to support member states, to relaunch the economy by supporting private investment, and to work on addressing the shortcomings seen during the crisis” (Pelayo, 2021, p. 4).

Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Greece, Romania, Portugal, Hungary, and the Czech Republic are the 10 states with the largest budgets, accounting for 81.3% of resources (see Table 1, Annex).

### 1.2. *Communication of funds*

One of the *sine qua non* conditions for the use of funds is their communication. This is stated by the European Parliament itself:

The need for effective communication has its legal basis in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (hereafter “Charter”), which guarantees the right of all citizens to be informed about the affairs of the Union (European Parliament, n.d., paragraph 1).

Communication and visibility of aid is central to all EU programmes, “which seeks to create a sense of belonging among the European population and to make citizens aware of the EU’s work to improve their quality of life, economic and environmental sustainability, and the future” (Ministry of Transport, Mobility and Urban Agenda, n.d., paragraph 4).

For ordinary funds, this communication, which is mandatory, is regulated by several legal texts (Commission Communication 2014/C 198/01; Regulation No. 1303/2013; Regulation

No. 821/2014) and, among other aspects, establishes the measures to be taken by the managing bodies and grant recipients.

In the case of the extraordinary funds created to address COVID, the need for communication actions is also evident. “The ambitious *NGEU* plan raises the question of how a potential European public opinion is articulated in the face of this transnational recovery programme” (Rivas-de-Roca & García, 2020, p. 3).

The regulatory framework of the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism (Regulation (EU) 2021/241), in its Article 34 entitled “Information, communication and publicity,” identifies three important elements: first, that “The Commission may engage in communication activities to ensure the visibility of Union funding;” second, that “recipients of Union funding shall acknowledge the origin and ensure the visibility of the Union funding;” and, third, that the Commission shall undertake outreach activities related to the Facility and the results achieved and that “financial resources allocated to the Facility shall also contribute to the corporate communication” (p. L 57/51).

The European Commission itself published guidance for Member States to develop their recovery plans (European Commission, 2021a; 2021b). In these documents, countries are invited to include in their plans a summary of the communication strategy they will follow to ensure that the public is aware of the funds. To legitimize proper communication, Member States are also urged to comply with the legal regulations setting out the common provisions governing the regular funds mentioned above. The text also stresses the need for each country to create “a single web space providing information on their RRP and related projects” and “publish on this web space final RRP and communicate the dedicated web link to the Commission” (European Commission, 2021a, p. 52).

However, the creation of a single space does not only seek to improve the communication process of funds, but also to facilitate the task of potential beneficiaries and, consequently, to increase absorption levels. In this respect, the European Commission (2020a) states that:

Businesses need support to gain easier access to data and reduce red tape by relying on digital solutions, e.g. for contracts. The use of one-stop-shops for support and the simplification of online administrative procedures should be promoted. (p. 11)

The European Commission also specifies some key points for generating good communication, including (European Commission, n.d.b., paragraphs 1-11):

- It is expected that, in any type of communication, the recipients of the funding will be expected to disclose the origin and ensure the visibility of the funds received. Similarly, taking into account the type of programme, a description of its characteristics, planned actions and specific details is required.
- In addition to this, they should include links to their policy priorities.
- There is also a need for programme-specific communication activities to be organized using the EU emblem at all times.
- It is mandatory to add a financing statement, referring to the EU aid.
- The use of accurate and truthful information is required.
- Depending on the programme, it may be necessary to involve the EU in the communication (e.g. because of media impact, strategic importance or economic value).
- Finally, if any requirements are not met, funding reductions have to be applied.

In other words, each EU country is obliged to create a website with all the information on the funds in order to guarantee their correct dissemination, although a series of parameters must be met.

### **1.3. Communicating European funds from an academic perspective**

From an academic perspective, several authors have underlined the critical importance of communication as a fundamental element. Although there is an abundant literature that

addresses the communication of public funds, much of it focuses on the recipient, analysing the communication actions that must be carried out by the beneficiaries of public funding. This is done to disseminate the funding achieved and transfer knowledge. This is especially true in projects linked to science and innovation (Gértrudix *et al.*, 2020; Campos & Codina, 2021; Gértrudix Barrio & Rajas Fernández, 2021; Pasqualetto *et al.*, 2022).

The use of various communication channels, such as websites, social media or information events, has also been the subject of detailed analyses (Peters *et al.*, 2014; Mea *et al.*, 2016; Ekblom, 2018; Martín & McDonald, 2020). They highlight the desirability of using online media to engage in a dialogue with the public, to publicize the results of European projects, to overcome the barriers of conventional communication and to clearly measure the impact achieved. Nevertheless, some limitations are also noted, such as the use of platforms like Facebook to publicize research projects (Mea *et al.*, 2016).

In a specific context, Vilaplana-Aparicio *et al.* (2022) examined the perception of companies benefiting from R&D&I grants in the Spanish region of the Valencian Community. They concluded that the websites of the managing bodies do not generate attraction, and companies prefer to obtain information through consultants who support them in the management of grants.

Similarly, the study by Martín-Llaguno *et al.* (2022) on the communication strategies of the European funds Feder and ESF+ in different regions of Spain reveals deficiencies in the accessibility of information on the regional websites, lacking links to official sites, updated contacts and efficient search engines. In addition, it notes that many pages do not explain the benefits of EU funds, in breach of EU guidelines, and lack repositories of essential EU good practice reports. Despite allocating considerable resources to the communication of these funds, the results also indicate budgetary disparity and inequalities in the implementation of communication measures in different communities.

In short, research on the communication of public aid has mainly focused on analysing the strategies and means used by aid recipients to comply with the principles of communication and transparency. However, to the best of our knowledge, there are practically no studies that focus on the communication carried out by public bodies with regard to European funds. This issue is particularly relevant in the current context with the implementation of the Next Generation funds aimed at transforming Europe.

#### **1.4. *The problem of communication of funds and the quality of websites. Determining the quality of web portals can be relevant as it determines the communication, transparency and information of funds and can partly influence their uptake***

However, the concept of *web quality* is complex and can be difficult to define because it is a “multidimensional and abstract concept” (Olsina *et al.*, 2006, p. 109), which can be evaluated from the broadcasting or the receiving side.

Morales-Vargas *et al.* (2020) define it as the “capacity of a website to satisfy the expectations of its users and owners, determined by a set of measurable attributes” (p. 3). Along these lines, Codina and Pedraza-Jiménez (2016) establish several dimensions related to the quality of a website:

- Content, related to the information and services that a website possesses (Huizingh, 2000);
- Usability and accessibility, focusing on users’ perceptions of the quality of functionalities and tools related to the usability and efficiency of websites (Palmer, 2002);
- Performance and effectiveness, concerned with how well a website performs against its objectives (Kaushik, 2010);
- User experience, referring to the user’s perceptions and reactions resulting from the use of a product, system, or service (ISO, 2018);

- Information architecture, which should answer questions such as: Where am I? What is on this website? How do I navigate the site? Specifically defined as the practice of deciding how to organize the parts of something so that they are easy to understand (IA Institute, 2019);
- Graphic design, addressing aspects of visual processing of text and graphic elements that make up a page (UXPA, 2014);
- Technology and security, which guarantee parameters such as the availability and stability of the websites, the functioning of links, the integration of technology, etc. This is a technological performance characteristic (Ecer, 2014);
- Interaction, the exchange of information through an interface between the user and the system, in order to perform a desired task (ISO, 2018);
- Participation and socialization, defined according to Daries-Ramón *et al.* (2019) as the parameter that measures the effectiveness of the interaction between the information provider and the user together with the existence of mechanisms that ensure communication using various Web and Web 2.0 tools;
- Multimedia, which summarizes the integrated presentation of text, video, graphics, sound, and animation, often using computational techniques (ISO, 2018);
- Promotion and marketing. Promotion, according to Abdallah and Jaleel (2015), is the communication-oriented element that includes the application of strategies such as online advertising, direct mail, membership benefits, special offers, social media distribution, etc.;
- Assistance and support, which Palmer (2002) argues are essential dimensions of quality in sites and considers necessary the presence of texts that address the user, as well as the availability of answers from site administrators. It also includes the creation of a comments room and a FAQs section;
- Legal aspects, which are required to comply with the *General Data Protection Regulation* (European Union, 2016). User consent is required, among other things, to collect user data, specify the storage location and inform whether it will be transferred to a third party. Government websites have to comply with each country's laws on transparency, accountability, public procurement and access to agency information to keep citizens informed about the work of the government (Huang & Benyoucef, 2014).

Codina and Pedraza-Jiménez (2016) suggest clarifying these characteristics according to their degree of generality, from the most general dimensions, parameters and indicators to the most specific ones. The dimensions establish the most important general aspects of the website to be evaluated and these, in turn, can be divided into more specific units called parameters.

## **2. Objectives and methodology**

### **2.1. Objectives**

Given that a considerable amount of money is being received within the NextGenerationEU framework, it is crucial to analyse whether the communication obligations established by the EU are being complied with by the different Member States, ensuring the correct dissemination and transparency of all plans and activities linked to these funds.

Therefore, first, it is necessary to check whether the beneficiary countries have created the single web portal required to disseminate information on the funds and, secondly, it seems essential to analyse the quality of these portals.

This study focuses on assessing the one-stop-shops of the ten countries that will receive the most NextGenerationEU funding, based on the following specific objectives:

1. To identify the URL of each country's portal.
2. To analyse the technical aspects of these pages.
3. To determine the accessibility levels of each website.
4. To describe the content disseminated by each country.
5. To check the ease and transparency of the search engine.
6. To describe the references to the content of each grant.
7. To check the level of assistance to recipients.
8. To analyse how dissemination is generated.

Our hypothesis is that, despite the existence of the website in compliance with the European mandate, the lack of specifications means that the quality of these portals is uneven and insufficient.

## 2.2. Methodology

In order to meet our objectives and respond to our hypotheses, the one-stop-shops were identified on the basis of the official website of the European funds ([https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en)), from which the websites of the top 10 countries benefiting most from NextGenerationUE were extracted (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Websites of the ten countries analysed.

COUNTRY	OFFICIAL WEBSITE
Spain	<a href="https://planderecuperacion.gob.es/">https://planderecuperacion.gob.es/</a>
Italy	<a href="https://italiadomani.gov.it/it/home.html">https://italiadomani.gov.it/it/home.html</a>
France	<a href="https://www.economie.gouv.fr/plan-de-relance/documents-utiles">https://www.economie.gouv.fr/plan-de-relance/documents-utiles</a>
Germany	<a href="https://www.bundesfinanzministerium.de/Content/DE/Standardartikel">https://www.bundesfinanzministerium.de/Content/DE/Standardartikel</a>
Poland	<a href="https://www.gov.pl/web/planobudowy/kpo-wyslany-do-komisji-">https://www.gov.pl/web/planobudowy/kpo-wyslany-do-komisji-</a>
Greece	<a href="https://greece20.gov.gr/">https://greece20.gov.gr/</a>
Romania	<a href="https://gov.ro/ro/stiri/unda-verde-de-la-comisia-europeana-pentru-">https://gov.ro/ro/stiri/unda-verde-de-la-comisia-europeana-pentru-</a>
Portugal	<a href="https://recuperarportugal.gov.pt/">https://recuperarportugal.gov.pt/</a>
Hungary	<a href="https://www.palyazat.gov.hu/helyreallitasi-es-ellenallokepesegei-">https://www.palyazat.gov.hu/helyreallitasi-es-ellenallokepesegei-</a>
Czech Republic	<a href="https://www.planobnovy.cz/">https://www.planobnovy.cz/</a>

Source: Own elaboration.

An analysis of these pages was carried out using an evaluation methodology, based on the expert analysis technique (Codina & Pedraza-Jiménez, 2016), in order to provide criteria for measuring the quality of the websites and make the relevant comparisons, as done by Guallar *et al.* (2021). The analysis of the pages was completed between May and June 2022.

A protocol was developed with an analysis system based on the work of Roig and Pedraza-Jiménez (2016) and Morales-Vargas (2021) on certain technical characteristics, with the aim of detecting the strengths and weaknesses of the different platforms (Codina & Pedraza-Jiménez, 2016). Thus, the protocol addresses from the most general to the most specific (see Appendix I).

Once the protocol had been drafted, it was validated using the expert judgement method (Escobar-Pérez & Cuervo-Martínez, 2008). Specifically, four experts, two specialists in communication and two specialists in public aid, were asked to give their opinion on the parameters and indicators.

The final version consists of seven parameters and 59 indicators (table 3). It is worth mentioning that *website structure* refers to “the connections and relationships between pages, the typology of the network of pages, as well as the granularity of the innovation elements contained in the pages” and *navigation* refers to “the possibilities and the way in which each page presents the options for browsing to other pages” (Hassan *et al.*, 2004).

**Table 3.** Parameters used for the analysis.

PARAMETER	INDICATORS
1. Technical aspects. This includes elements relating to indexability, adaptation to mobile devices or optimization of the website, both for mobiles and computers.	5
2. Structure and navigation. This section includes indicators relating to the accessibility, organization, and navigation systems of the websites.	7
3. General site content: this includes indicators on the content of the website.	6
4. Search engine. This refers to the tool that allows searches to be made within the site. It includes indicators that allow the presence and functionality of search engines on the website to be analysed.	10
Grant information: the quantity and quality of the information published for each grant is examined.	9
6.Assistance. Indicators are used to help measure the trustworthiness of the websites evaluated.	7
7.Social networks. The presence and use of social networks to disseminate information about the funds and the different calls for proposals is examined.	15

Source: Own elaboration.

Google was used to measure whether the website appeared among the first results and the level of indexed pages. The optimization of the website was analysed with the tool [www.pagespeed.web.dev](http://www.pagespeed.web.dev) and accessibility with the website [www.accessibilitychecker.org](http://www.accessibilitychecker.org).

The measurement of the indicators was established using a dichotomous scoring system in most cases (zero if the criterion is not met, one if it is met) and to a lesser extent a scoring system of zero to three (zero non-existence, one low level, two medium level and three for the high level). The only exception was the parameters relating to web optimization and accessibility, where the same code was used as that offered by the websites consulted (one low, two medium and three high).

Scores were assigned according to the assessments included in the protocol to measure section-specific and overall performance. To obtain the overall assessment, the items were summed and related to the maximum possible total score (100%).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Technical aspects

After a search in incognito mode on Google (with the terms “Next Generation” OR “recovery plan” and the name of the Member State), in 60% of the cases the website referring to the funds is in the top five search results (Spain, Italy, France, Greece, Portugal, and Hungary). Poland appears in the top ten results, while Germany, Romania, and the Czech Republic do not appear in the top 20 search results. Eight of the Member States analysed have a low level of indexability, with only the websites of Spain and Greece appearing among the top search engine results.

With regard to mobile adaptation, all countries have an adapted website. However, only the websites of Spain, Italy, France, Poland, and the Czech Republic have a medium level of optimization, while Germany, Greece, Romania, and Portugal have a low level of optimization. Hungary's website is not optimized.

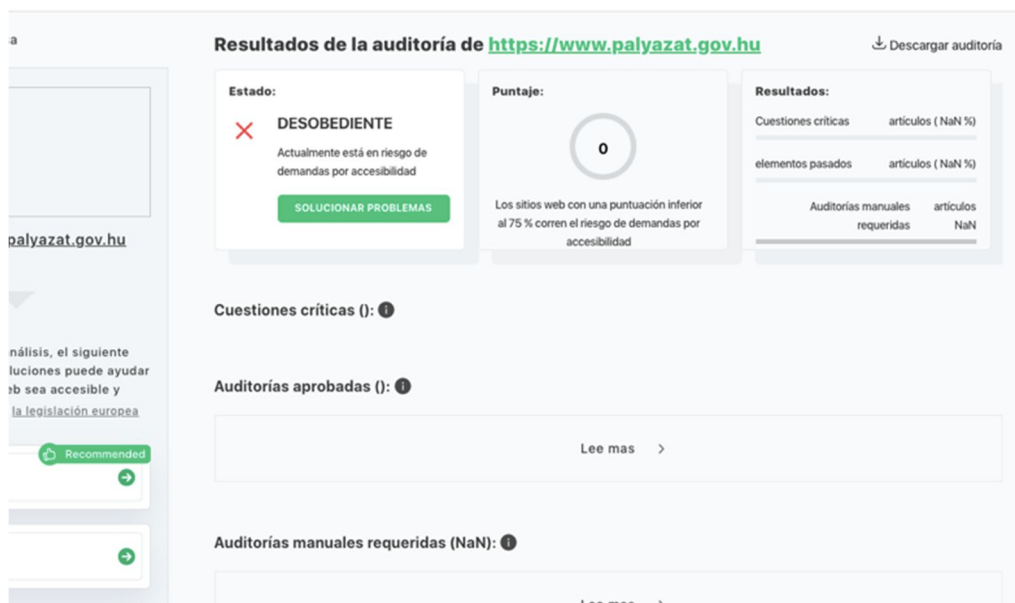
In terms of the adaptation of websites to computers, France, Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic score high, while Spain, Italy, and Romania remain at the medium level. Hungary, like the mobile version, does not have a website optimized for desktops either.

In summary, there is a clear difference in the technical aspects of the different websites. And, according to the system established for the evaluation, which was explained in the methodology section, Spain scores 84.6% in the technical analysis, France, Poland, and the Czech Republic reflect equal levels, with a percentage of around 54%. Italy, Germany, and Greece are in third place with 46.2%, followed by Romania and Portugal. Finally, Hungary has the lowest percentage with 15.4%.

### 3.2. Structure and navigation

The ease or difficulty that people with disabilities may have in accessing different websites is classified in three levels (high, medium, or low) in the tool consulted. Most of the country websites have a medium level of accessibility (60%), except for Italy and Hungary. Italy is the only country with a higher ranking. On the other hand, Hungary, at the bottom of the ranking, is not adapted.

**Image 1.** Level of accessibility of the window developed by Hungary.



Source: <https://www.accessibilitychecker.org>.

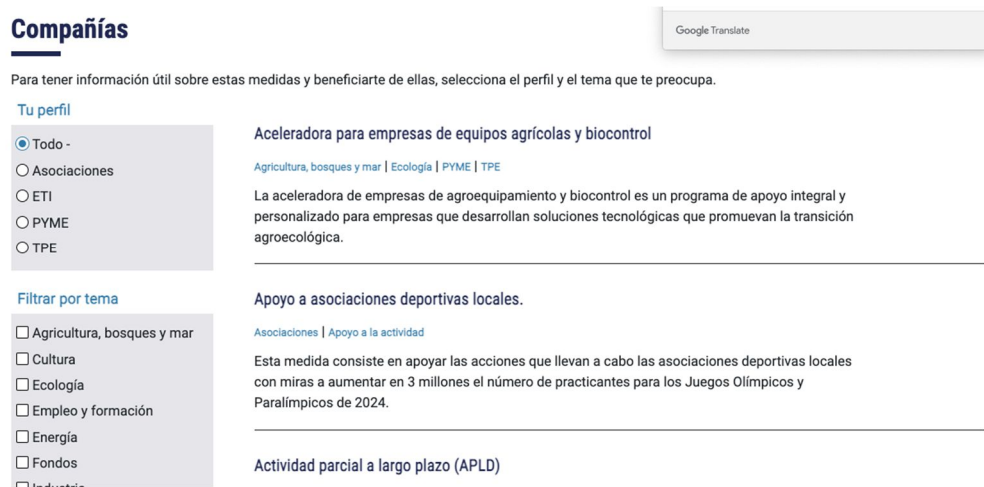
Another aspect analysed was the incorporation of a breadcrumb navigation menu, which allows the user to know the context of where he/she is and also supports the traditional navigation menu. Only Greece and the Czech Republic do not have such a menu.

In addition, given the existence of different categories of support, a good taxonomic organization is necessary so that potential recipients can find the information best suited to their profiles (e.g., energy, innovation, R&D, internationalization). All countries except Poland, Romania, Hungary, and the Czech Republic present a good categorization. Showing the number of grants contained in each category, together with the label of the category, helps

the recipient to know how many there are. Half of the countries fulfil this requirement (Italy, France, Germany, Greece, and the Czech Republic). Furthermore, Greece shows in millions of euros the exact budget allocated to aid per category.

Given that aid varies according to the type of entity (small and medium-sized enterprises, large companies, associations, public entities, etc.), navigation by audience is key when it comes to consulting the corresponding information. After analysing this aspect, it can be seen that only two countries have these options: France and Greece. In the case of Greece, it is possible to navigate by differentiating between the type of body (Ministries, Local Authorities, etc.) or by distinguishing whether it is a business or an individual. On the French website, on the other hand, it is possible to differentiate between association profile, ETI (Ethical Trading Initiative), SME or TPE.

**Image 2.** Audience navigation offered on the French website.



Source: <https://www.accessibilitychecker.org>.

All countries except Poland, Romania, and Hungary have correct labelling of grants, i.e. clear and descriptive grant titles that the average user can understand.

Finally, the use of visual aspects such as buttons or logos to improve navigation was assessed. This aspect needs to be improved, as only Spain, Italy, Germany, Greece, and Portugal make use of these aspects.

When all items are taken into account, the top-ranked country is Italy, with a performance level in this category of 88.9%. This figure is not far behind France and Germany, which also have high standards for their websites, with a total of 77.8%. In third place are Spain and Portugal with 66.7%, followed by Greece and the Czech Republic, which are fairly evenly matched, with the former at 55.6% and the Czech Republic at 44.4%. The last three places are occupied by Poland with 33.3%, followed by Romania (22.2%) and Hungary (11.1%).

### 3.3. Content

All the websites have translations into other languages, except for the Czech Republic's, which makes it difficult for foreign investors to find aid. Likewise, there are countries such as Spain that have their websites translated into the different co-official languages such as Catalan, Galician, or Basque. The same is true of the other countries. In Italy, the content can also be translated into Corsican or Breton; in Poland, into Czech or Slovak; in Romania, into Moldavian; and in Hungary, into the southern dialect.

On the other hand, it is necessary to offer information of complementary value regarding the origin of the funds, as well as the communication measures to be carried out by the

companies or the legislation that regulates each aid in general. This is in order to be fully aware of the different types of aid. For this reason, all the websites of the different countries, except for Romania, have this type of information of complementary value.

However, grant catalogues lack comprehensive information. In organizations with many grants, it may be useful to know the totality of grants by means of a “catalogue” that allows differentiation of ongoing and/or planned grants. This information is only found in 50% of the cases studied, namely in Spain, France, Greece, Portugal, and the Czech Republic.

In the same vein, the same investment can be subsidized at the same level or at different levels (regional, national, European, etc.). Facilitating comparison is of great interest to users. However, none of the pages allow for this.

The inclusion of information on success stories from other companies or institutions has a pull effect for other entities. Nevertheless, it is surprising that none of the websites studied do so.

Finally, few websites also provide a vocabulary and definitions for users to control the terminology associated with aid management. Only Germany offers this important aspect.

In summary, the level of optimization of website content does not exceed 50% in Spain, France, Germany, Greece, and Portugal. In contrast, Italy, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic have 33.3%. Lastly, the country with the lowest level of content is Romania.

### **3.4. Search engine**

An important aspect for the communication of funds is to have a specific search engine for grants. Only two of the ten countries, France and Portugal, have such a tool. Seven of the ten websites surveyed do have a generic search engine, and in all cases, it is located in a visible place and meets users’ expectations. It is located at the top right-hand side of the menu on the websites of Spain, Italy, Poland, Greece, Romania, Portugal, and Hungary.

The existence of help in using the search engine was also checked, and only Spain and Portugal offer it.

Furthermore, it was ascertained whether the different websites offer advanced search with specific search fields. Only Italy and Germany have this function.

In none of the countries does the search suggest predictive text to complete the search when the user starts typing. In addition, filtering the information and allowing search by specific fields or categories can be of great help. Only in four of the ten countries is this function possible: Italy, Germany, Poland, and Hungary. In the case of Italy, it is possible to apply filters such as: news, documents, reforms, cross-cutting priorities, investments, frequently asked questions, etc. The German site can be searched by order of relevance, chronologically or alphabetically. Finally, on the Polish website, filters can be applied by periods or by administrative units, such as the Polish office, individual companies, the civil service or digitalization.

None of the countries analysed offer suggestions for improving failed searches or a link to useful information with a new search.

In addition, after performing a search, it is important that the results page displays sorting options, either alphabetically or chronologically. Only France, Germany, and Hungary offer options to customize the search results list chronologically or alphabetically.

Once the search has been carried out, the option to export the information found in different formats such as Word, Excel, PDF or print directly can be a very useful tool for users. However, this tool is only accessible on the French, German, and Romanian websites.

Finally, in six of the ten countries (Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Romania, and Hungary) the total number of grants or documents retrieved by the search is available.

In summary, none of the countries exceeds 50% performance. Only Germany, Italy, France, and Hungary reach 40% of the overall ranking. Poland, Romania, and Portugal have 30%, followed by Spain and Greece with 20% and 10% respectively. Finally, the Czech Republic obtained 0%, as it has neither a specific nor a generic search engine.

### 3.5. Page of each grant

Each aid must provide sufficient and appropriate information to enable the potential recipient to assess its appropriateness. The key information on aid is: purpose, type of recipient, eligible items, type of aid and aid intensity, minimum and maximum amounts, deadlines for submission, specific requirements for obtaining the grant, allocation system, whether it is subject to the *de minimis* scheme<sup>1</sup>, documentation to be submitted, as well as the origin of the funds and the granting body. Only France includes nine of these items, Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal, and the Czech Republic provide information on between five and eight items, while Germany, Poland, Romania, and Hungary report on four or less.

Attaching the legal texts regulating the grant is crucial for the recipients. These documents are provided by 60% of the countries (Spain, Germany, Greece, Portugal, Hungary, and the Czech Republic). However, the processing of each grant is often initiated on a different platform from the one containing the information: it is particularly important that such a link is included on the web pages. Only two countries, France and Germany, display the link.

Another aspect to consider is whether a list of frequently asked questions and answers to general queries is provided to the user. This section exists in Spain, Italy, Germany, Poland, Portugal, and the Czech Republic. Examples include questions such as: What the Recovery and Resilience Plan is, how to access support, what the Recovery and Resilience Plan reforms are, etc. Nevertheless, none of the six countries listed above has a FAQ section per grant, which would help to clarify questions related to each grant.

An important issue is the inclusion of a handbook providing further information on the grant, in order to present the key aspects of the grant and to facilitate its processing. Half of the countries (Italy, France, Germany, Poland, and Greece) have such a manual. In addition, Portugal includes audiovisual tutorials to support the user.

Finally, France, Germany, Greece, Romania, and Portugal include a news alert system in order to be notified in case the call for aid is published or modified.

It can be seen that the level of performance in this section does not exceed 63.6%. France, Germany, and Portugal are the best positioned countries, while Poland, Hungary, and Romania are the worst, failing to exceed 30% of the parameters.

### 3.6. Assistance

User support is important, as it allows users to search for answers to a specific problem. Eighty per cent of the websites have this parameter, but only in Spain, France, and Romania is it displayed in a visible place. In Spain, the telephone number is provided, and it is reported that it is an information service for citizens on public services and procedures of the General State Administration, including information on the Recovery and Resilience Plan. In France, there is a section called “contact” which provides information of interest such as the telephone number, a contact form, a physical address, how to reach the address by public transport and the accessibility of the buildings. Finally, in Romania, there is a specific “contact” section, which includes two telephone numbers, a physical address, opening hours and a map showing the address. There is also the possibility to email the Prime Minister and contact him or her via the social network Facebook.

In Spain, France, Poland, Greece, and Romania, the pages include a telephone helpline, which can be either toll or toll-free. Spain refers to a website explaining that it is a toll-free number, and in France, Greece, and Romania it is free of charge. The cost of the call could not be validated in Poland.

It was also noted whether a contact form is included to enable organizations interested in grants to contact the managing body directly. The contact form is accessible in half of the

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<sup>1</sup> That is, “small amounts of state aid for companies that EU Member States do not have to notify to the European Commission” (European Commission, 2021).

countries (Spain, France, Germany, Greece, and the Czech Republic). In France, however, it is not accessible.

Once the contact form was located, a query was made to find out the response time. In all cases, no response was received three months after the date of the query.

Finally, we sought to study whether the different websites have an automatic chat or real people to resolve users' queries instantly, but none of the websites had this service.

Overall, the assistance provided by the different websites analysed is incomplete. Only Spain exceeds 50% optimization, followed by France with 45.5%. The websites of Germany, Greece, Romania, and the Czech Republic are equal with 34.4%. Poland and Hungary reach 18.2%, while Italy and Portugal do not reach any of the established parameters.

### **3.7. Social networking**

In 90% of the websites there is a presence on social media: the exception is Hungary.

The first step was to study the presence on Facebook and whether the profiles actively publish content on grants was studied. Half of the countries (Spain, Italy, France, Poland, and Romania) have a profile on this social network. In turn, they all share up-to-date news on the Plan. The Facebook profiles of Spain and Italy are grant-specific, while France, Poland, and Romania use the profiles of their respective ministries.

Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Romania, and Spain have Instagram profiles, but of these, only Spain, Italy, and Germany share news about the Plan on their Instagram profiles. In Spain and Italy, the accounts are exclusively dedicated to information about the Recovery Plan. The accounts in France and Germany predate the start of the pandemic. Poland has a profile, although it is not verified, and is not used exclusively to share content about the funds. Moreover, this account has not posted anything related to the funds since November 2021. Finally, Romania also has a verified profile on Instagram, but there is no content about the grants, nor does it have a dedicated profile.

With regard to LinkedIn, a total of six of the ten countries has a profile on this platform: Spain, Italy, and Portugal have a specific profile aimed at sharing information and publish content on a frequent basis. France and Germany also have profiles, but they are not created solely to disseminate grant content, although they do post content on a regular basis. Romania has a profile, although it is not included on its website, and has not published anything on the subject in the last month.

Twitter-X is the platform with the highest number of profiles in the Member States surveyed: only Hungary and the Czech Republic do not have an account. Spain and Italy, in line with the rest of the social networks, have Twitter-X profiles exclusively for sharing news about their plans. This content is updated and published frequently. In France and Germany, the Twitter-X account is verified, but does not serve exclusively to share aid content. It does, however, share content on a regular basis. Poland also has a presence on this social network and although its account was created in 2011, and is not intended to share aid content, it does share updated content. Greece has had a profile since 2022 to post aid content and does so on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the profile is not verified, which may confuse users as to its veracity. In Romania, the account was created in 2012, the profile is not verified, and no content is published. Finally, Portugal has a Twitter-X account created in 2021, intended only to disseminate content on the Plan. Although the account is not verified, it disseminates content on the funds on a daily basis.

Finally, on YouTube, there are Italy, France, Germany, Greece, Romania, and Portugal. However, only two of the six countries listed above do not publish any aid content on the platform: France and Greece. Italy has a dedicated account and does share content approximately once a month. France's profile is not intended to share only content on the Plan, as it was created in 2016. Germany's account wasn't created to disseminate dedicated content on the grants but has posted content on the grants in the last month. Greece's account

was created in 2021 and is exclusively intended to share content on the funds. However, it is not verified and does not actively disseminate information on the grants. In Romania, the YouTube profile does not appear on the website and the account is not verified, but it does disseminate content about the scheme. Lastly, in Portugal, the account was created solely to share content on aid and does so, but it is not verified.

In the same vein, it was studied whether the website has links to social network profiles. Apart from Romania, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, this is the rule in all cases. Nonetheless, only on the websites of Italy, France, Germany, and Romania is it possible to share content directly on users' social networks, and only in Italy and Romania via email. Finally, all websites except Hungary have a blog to share content and current information, but some countries, such as Italy and France, do not have an updated blog.

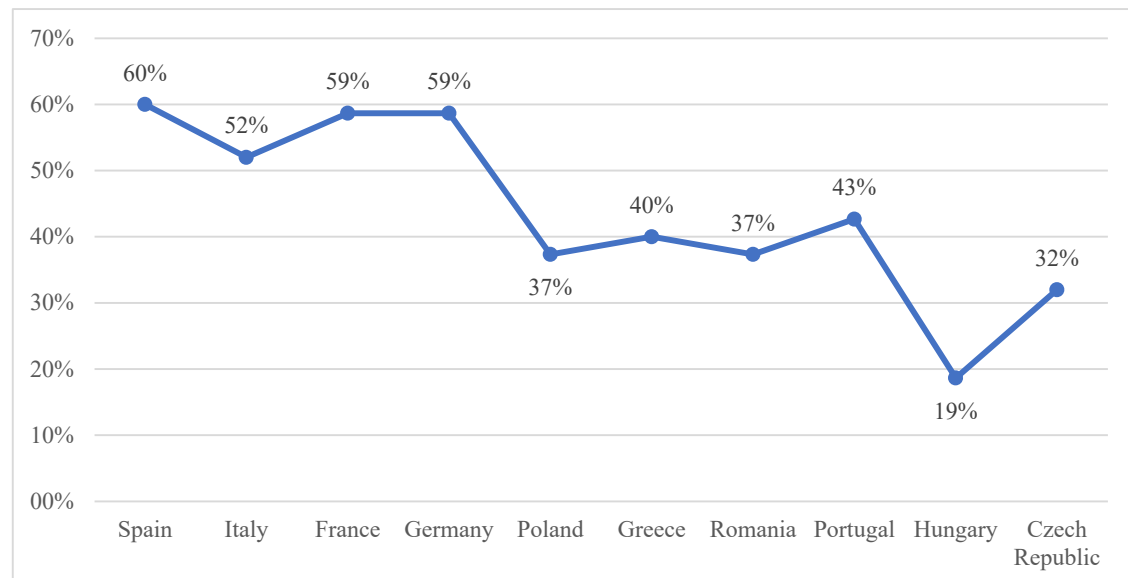
The analysis of social networks shows a great variety between countries in terms of optimization. Italy (93.3%) has the best coverage of the aspects, followed by Germany (80%), Spain, France and Romania (73.3%), Portugal (60%), Poland (53.3%), Greece (33.3%), Czech Republic (13.3%), and Hungary, which did not show any of the analysis parameters on its website.

### 3.8. Summary of performance by country

Figure 1 summarizes the analysed parameters of the different websites of the ten Member States receiving the most money from the European Union through NextGenerationEU grants.

The results show that Spain is the best ranked country in the final assessment, followed by France, Germany, and Italy. Behind is Portugal, closely followed by Greece, Poland, and Romania, the latter two with 37.3%. In penultimate place is the Czech Republic, with 32%. And finally, Hungary, the country with the lowest score on the website.

**Figure 1.** Overview of all parameters analyzed.



Source: Own elaboration.

## 4. Conclusions

The most relevant aspects are summarized below, followed by the limitations of the study and future lines of research:

- In general, European grant portals need to improve their optimization and positioning, so that they automatically appear in search engines, especially Google.

- These portals are not accessible to people with functional diversity, and in terms of their structure and navigation, it is necessary that the categories clearly reflect the existing aids and facilitate the route to access all the information. The use of audiovisual aids would be very useful.
- There is a need for more information on funding, which is incomplete in some countries. The terminology used is unclear, and the heterogeneity of nomenclatures makes it difficult to compare information between countries.
- The search engines function incorrectly, and only in two cases are specific to grants. The generic search engines have major shortcomings, and it is not possible to apply filters to parameterize the search or to establish sorting options, either alphabetically or chronologically.
- Another issue for improvement is the incorporation of a link to the processing of each grant on a page separate from the general information page. The creation of linked pages would facilitate the submission of applications by potential recipients.
- The contact telephone number should be accessible since, due to its location, assistance is in most cases poor. It is also necessary to incorporate forms for direct contact with the managing body, as few countries have this possibility and, in some cases, the response time is long, or there is no response at all.
- Most websites have a FAQ section, but in none of the countries does such a section exist per grant. Establishing an FAQ per grant would facilitate the resolution of specific questions.
- Offering the option to set up an alert system to be informed about possible modifications or publications and an automatic chat to solve doubts would be useful for the user.
- Finally, except for Hungary, all countries have a network presence, but the dissemination of their Recovery and Resilience Plan is limited. Most lack specific accounts and, in many cases, the information disseminated is not up-to-date. It would be advisable to create secondary accounts with activity, dedicated solely to information on the Plan and aid.

Our initial hypothesis, which suggested disparities and inadequacies in the quality of European grant portals, is validated by examining several critical aspects. It highlights notable differences between countries such as Spain, France, or Germany, compared to countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, or Romania.

However, we cannot omit the limitations of this study:

- The diachronic dimension of internet communication. What we have presented is a snapshot of the time at which the audits of the pages were conducted, which may have changed in a short time.
- Our study focuses exclusively on countries' web activity on the funds, leaving aside the analysis of other communication actions and their impact.
- This study is purely descriptive and focused on the disseminator.

All in all, given the speed at which the internet and websites are evolving, it would be necessary to update the protocol in future research. It is also advisable to analyse the reception and consumption of these messages and to carry out an analysis of the effectiveness of the actions. Therefore, it is worth pursuing this line of research on the communication of European funds by analysing the extent to which the shortcomings and successes found have an impact on aid and on the willingness to apply for it, on the capacity to implement it and on the possibility of absorbing it, as suggested by other studies.

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**Annex**

Table 1 is available in the Figshare data repository with the following doi:  
<https://www.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.25745028.v1>

**Appendix**

Appendix I is available in the Figshare data repository with the following doi:  
<https://www.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.25745043.v1>