

**European Funds' Public Value and  
Communicational Boost**

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## **PROJECT TEAM**

Sérgio Caramelo (coord.)

Gustavo Cardoso

Nelson Ramalho

Teresa Almeida

Beatriz Saavedra

Ana Castilho

Dina Margato

Catarina Mateus

Simão Nunes

DINÂMIA'CET - IUL, Centro de Estudos sobre a Mudança  
Socioeconómica e o Território  
Iscte- do Instituto Universitário de Lisboa  
1649-026 Lisboa, PORTUGAL  
Tel. (+351) 210 464 031 / 210 464 197 | E-mail:  
dinamia@iscte-iul.pt <https://www.iscte-iul.pt>  
<https://www.dinamiacet.iscte-iul.pt>

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## **SUMÁRIO EXECUTIVO**

O presente projeto parte da constatação de que os cidadãos europeus, em geral, e os portugueses, em particular, têm um conhecimento limitado sobre os fundos europeus e uma opinião moderadamente positiva sobre o impacto dos mesmos. Apesar de existirem instrumentos de política em curso por toda a Europa há muitas décadas, designadamente os da política de coesão, e dos enormes volumes de investimento aplicados, trata-se de uma matéria que parece relativamente longínqua e difusa para o cidadão comum. Alguns estudos mais recentes vêm alertar para o facto de isto não ser positivo para o robustecimento do processo de integração europeia nem para o reforço da perceção do valor público destas mesmas políticas, existindo nesta matéria uma boa margem de evolução. A promoção de um melhor conhecimento dos fundos europeus é um caminho a nosso ver exequível e recomendável, que nos conduzirá não só na direção do reforço da democracia como um todo, mas também na do fortalecimento dos nossos valores fundamentais e do bem-estar coletivo. Para além destes fundamentos, só por si bastantes para o imperativo da mudança, é necessário por a ênfase igualmente nos ganhos de eficácia, eficiência, equidade e sustentabilidade que podem ser obtidos através de um maior conhecimento e envolvimento por parte dos cidadãos nos processos de formulação, implementação e avaliação das políticas públicas. A partir do desafio lançado pelo Aviso PAT2030-2023-01, o presente projeto procura contribuir para a resolução do problema da falta de conhecimento dos fundos europeus por parte dos cidadãos através da melhoria qualitativa dos esforços de comunicação do PT2030 enquanto política pública agregadora dos fundos europeus em Portugal. Para tal, propõe-se o desenvolvimento de um projeto de investigação aplicada destinado à identificação das estratégias de comunicação mais adequadas para o reforço e afirmação do valor público destes instrumentos financeiros, estratégias estas orientadas especificamente para os profissionais de comunicação social, assim como à sinalização de lacunas de conhecimentos e competências nesta matéria e consequente identificação de propostas de ação no domínio da capacitação de públicos diretamente relacionados com o ecossistema da comunicação social.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This project starts from the observation that European citizens, in general, and the Portuguese, in particular, have limited knowledge about European funds and a moderately positive opinion about their impact. Despite the huge volumes of investment and the fact that there have been policy instruments in place across Europe for many decades (notably those from cohesion policy), it is a subject that seems relatively distant and diffuse to the ordinary citizen. Some studies warn that this is not positive for the strengthening of the European integration process, nor for the strengthening of the perception of the public value of these same policies, and in this matter it is possible to evolve considerably. It is a path, in our view feasible and recommendable, that will lead us to the strengthening of democracy as a whole, but also to the promotion of our fundamental values and collective well-being. In addition to these fundamentals, which alone are sufficient to justify change, it is necessary to also emphasize the gains in effectiveness, efficiency, equity and sustainability that can be obtained through greater knowledge and citizens involvement in public policies formulation, implementation and evaluation processes. From the challenge launched by the Aviso PAT2030-2023-01, the project seeks to diminish the lack of knowledge about European funds by citizens through the qualitative improvement of the PT2030 communication efforts. To this end, it is proposed to develop an applied research project aimed at identifying the most appropriate communication strategies for strengthening and affirming the public value of these financial instruments. These strategies are specifically pointed to the media professionals and to the knowledge and skills gaps in this field, as well to the detection of action proposals in the field of empowering audiences directly related to the media ecosystem.

# 1. Conceptual framework

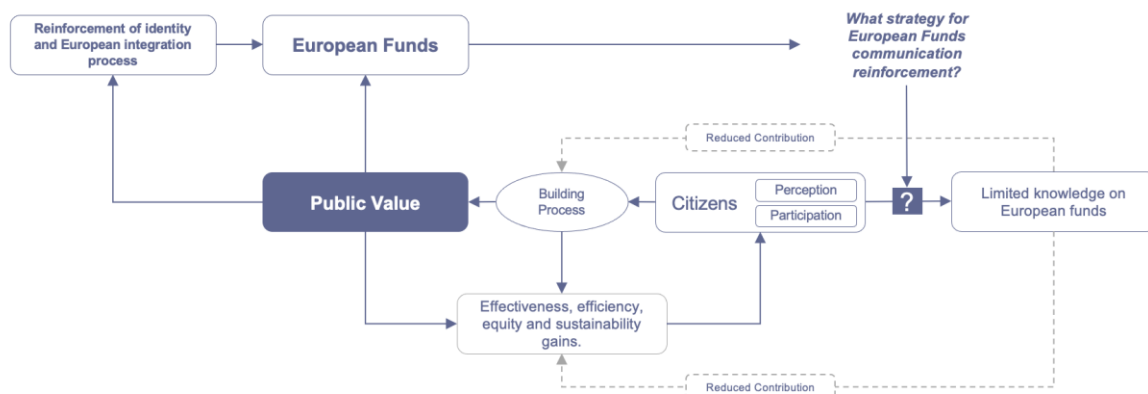
The conceptual frame of reference for this project starts from the concept of public value, which is used here as an analytical framework to identify citizens' perspectives on normative questions of public policies (Mendez et al,2022), it is also assumed the principle that using this concept can be useful for improving frameworks for interventions, in general, and European funds, in particular. In terms of conceptualizing what public value is, we adopted the interpretative approach (Meynhardt & Bartholomes, 2011; Nabatchi, 2012; Bozeman, 2019; Bracci et al., 2019; Meynhardt & Jasinenko, 2020; Li, 2022; Murschetz, et al., 2023), that follows the work of Barry Bozeman (2007). This emphasizes the relationship between the creation of public value and the subjective perceptions of citizens and how individual action and participation are per se an element of the creation of public value itself. It is also assumed that the interpretative approach implies accepting that public values in a democracy are typically contested and that consensus on them is hardly complete and definitive.

In this context, the citizen plays a central role in the construction of what is the public value of State action, firstly through their personal perceptions of public policies, but also as an actor (i.e. as an active element in the process of constructing public policy), given the critical importance of the citizen perspective has on the "authorizing environment" that provides support and political legitimacy to the decisions (Mendez et al., 2022) that enables the creation and implementation of public policies. The question of perception and participation of individuals is therefore fundamental to the process of building public value and in an operational perspective they should be seen as an effective tool to: i) help decision-makers understand what constitutes public value from the point of view of citizens; ii) identify what needs to happen to create public value and avoid the failure of public interventions; iii) select which decisions need to be taken to achieve the desired ends (Nabatchi, 2012).

Efforts to explore the substantive content and the multidimensionality of public value creation or, from the perspective of Jørgensen & Bozeman (2007), public values in their plural form, have placed the emphasis on their taxonomy and on different options in terms of systematization and classification (e.g. (p.e., Moore, 1995, 2013; Bozeman, 2007;

Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Van der Wal et al., 2008; Benington, 2011). This project will use the proposal of Mendez et al. (2022) which was structured based on scientific literature about European and global policies, but specifically against the backdrop of the case of European regional policy and the developments arising from a major project (COHESIFY) aimed at understanding what European citizens think about European funds to support the cohesion policy. This project led to the identification of four fundamental dimensions of the construction of public value in the case of European funds-achievement of objectives, institutional performance, democratic performance, and socio-political performance. These four dimensions provide a conceptual framework already tested in broad comparative approaches at European level, where they confronted public values of cohesion policy funds in different regional jurisdictions, that we consider transferable and appropriate for the present project.

**Figure 1 - Project's Starting Point**

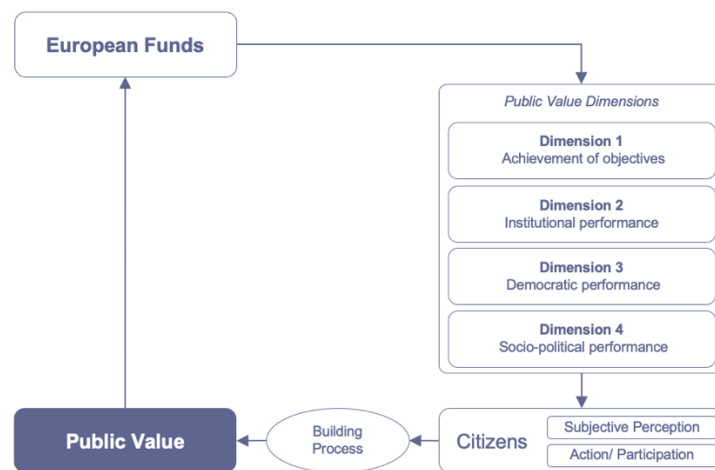


Source: Elaborated by the authors.

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**Figure 2** - Main Dimensions of the process of building public value of the European Funds



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Keeping the focus on European funds, the assumption is also that the construction of the public value of European policies isn't unrelated to the European identity factors and the reinforcement of European integration process. In this field, several studies have already identified the relationship between European funds and citizens' perceptions of the European integration process (Aiello et al, 2019; Brasili e tal, 2019; Capello & Perucca 2019; Dąbrowski et al, 2021; Lopez-Bazo & Royuela, 2017, 2020; Osterloh, 2011), but not always with convergent results, both in terms of the effects inducted by European investments and the drivers behind these effects. In this project we will closely

<sup>1</sup><https://www.cohesify.eu/>

follow the proposal by Dąbrowski et al. (2021), assuming that investments from European funds - materialized in projects that support regional development, create jobs, improve the quality of citizens' living environment, etc. - can have a positive impact in European identification and in the support of European integration process, however, is necessary for this impact to happen, that citizens have adequate knowledge of the action of European funds in their regions, as well as how these policies are implemented.

Access to individuals' knowledge on European policies inevitably leads us to the question of how they are communicated. We know that the literature on public policy communication emphasizes that the level of appropriateness of the message has an influence on citizens and can increase the trust and loyalty towards government institutions, as well as promoting a collective identity (Karens et al., 2016; Teodoro & Na, 2018; Alon-Barkat, 2020; Borz et al., 2022). In particular, a wide-ranging European study, entitled PERCEIVE<sup>2</sup>, shows that for the European case one of the main drivers of citizens' identification with the European integration process isn't only "how" and "if" European policies are implemented, but also, and more importantly, how citizens are aware of them and "how" and "if" they feel the benefits and the costs of being part of the European project (Lopez-Bazo & Royuela, 2017; Bergbauer 2018). But in this subject Borz et al. (2022) identified an obvious conundrum: Why is a policy that proclaims a deep commitment with the democratic values not recognized by citizens as embodying like those same values? The data provided by citizens in the aforementioned study (Borz et al. 2022) suggests that the main explanations are the cohesion policy's lack of responsiveness to citizens' needs, the citizen's limited direct involvement in it and the absence of adequate communication. In this sense and assuming that ineffective communication can reduce citizens' awareness and trust, the effort to communicate interventions in the domain of European funds must be seen as a collective effort to promote public values considered important by citizens (Mendez et al., 2022) and for the European integration process itself.

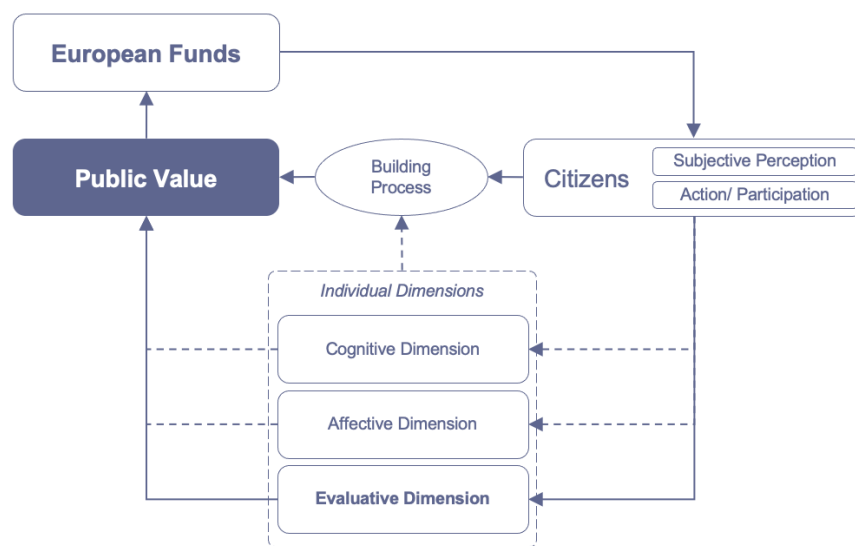
In the process of building and strengthening the public value of European funds, the dimension of individual identification with the European integration process as a whole is also

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<sup>2</sup>PERCEIVE - Perception and Evaluation of Regional and Cohesion policies by Europeans and Identification with the Values of Europe (2016-2019).  
<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/693529>

important, since it incorporates the development of a collective identification by citizens, which can be conceptualized in three distinct dimensions (Mendez & Brachtler, 2016; Bergbauer, 2018; Dąbrowski et al, 2021): i) cognitive- related to the individual's self-identification or awareness of being European; ii) affective- associated with the feeling of belonging or attachment to a shared European political community; iii) evaluative- more utilitarian and connected to the attribution of a connotation or sense of value (cost-benefit) to their membership of the EU. The public value of European funds derives essentially from the latter and from a more utilitarian cost-benefit evaluation of the European integration process, this is, from the perception of the benefits that these policies bring to individuals at a given time (Gabel & Palmer, 1995). As Dąbrowski et al (2021) point out, this is a more egocentric perspective, in which citizens act as rational actors and based on a microeconomics evaluation of the "what's in it for me" type.

**Figure 3** - Individuals Dimensions of public value reinforcement



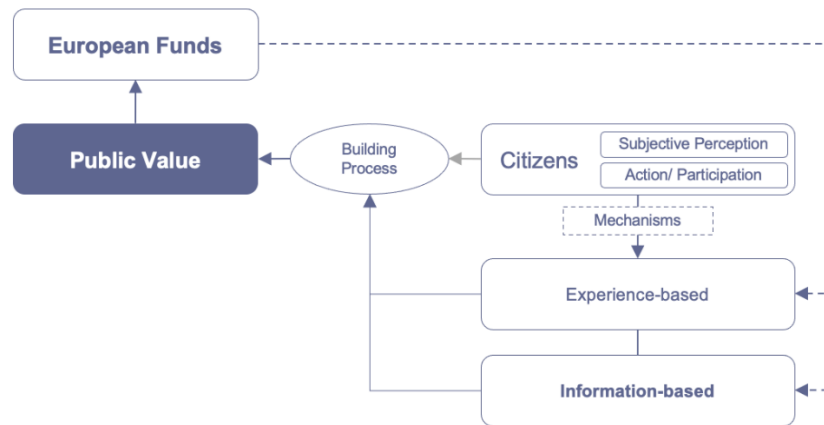
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Also, in the process of reinforcing public value through individual identification with the European project, it is also possible to identify two main mechanisms (Lopez-Bazo & Royuela, 2017; Bergbauer 2018). The first is "experience-based" and settles in the assumption that individuals' personal contacts and direct experiences are a source of collective identification. The second is "information-based" and settles



in the assumption that the existence of convincing messages is a source of group identification, but always depending on “if” and “how” the individuals are exposed to these same messages.

**Figure 4** – European funds’ Public value building mechanisms

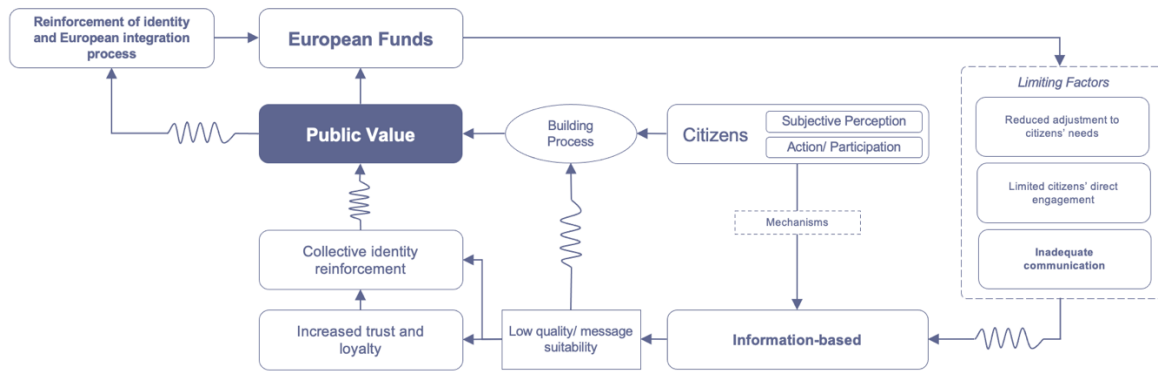


Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The results of efforts to communicate European funds have raised some doubts in terms of effectiveness, given that citizen involvement has been low and uneven across the EU (Van Der Zwet et al., 2017) and regional policy communication itself is considered weak by citizens (Mendez et al., 2022). According to the results of COHESIFY project, there is a widespread perception that European regional policy isn’t sufficiently or effectively publicized, with responsibility for this being attributed, for example, to the European and national managing authorities and the media themselves, which are often perceived as excessively focused in sensationalist stories about political conflicts, ignoring success stories and failing to adequately inform the public (Mendez et al., 2022). In fact, some data from a 2021 Eurobarometer<sup>3</sup> show that a significant proportion (in certain regions, the clear majority) of European citizens, even if they consider that these policies have a positive impact on the development of their territories, have never heard of the most relevant and persistent European funds (e.g. ERDF, ESF, Cohesion Fund), cannot identify projects supported in their region or city and consider that in everyday life they don’t benefit from the investments.

<sup>3</sup> <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2286>

**Figure 5** – Limiting factors in recognizing European Funds' public value



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Even in the Portuguese case, a net contributor member-state that for four decades has applied these funds in significant percentages of GDP, the public opinion on European funds isn't very different. A national study on this subject (Silva & Flores, 2021), also highlights that the large majority of respondents can't remember any project financed by European funds in their region, in addition to another negative perceptions of cohesion policy in general, such as poor utilization, low impact, and a low level of transparency and control.

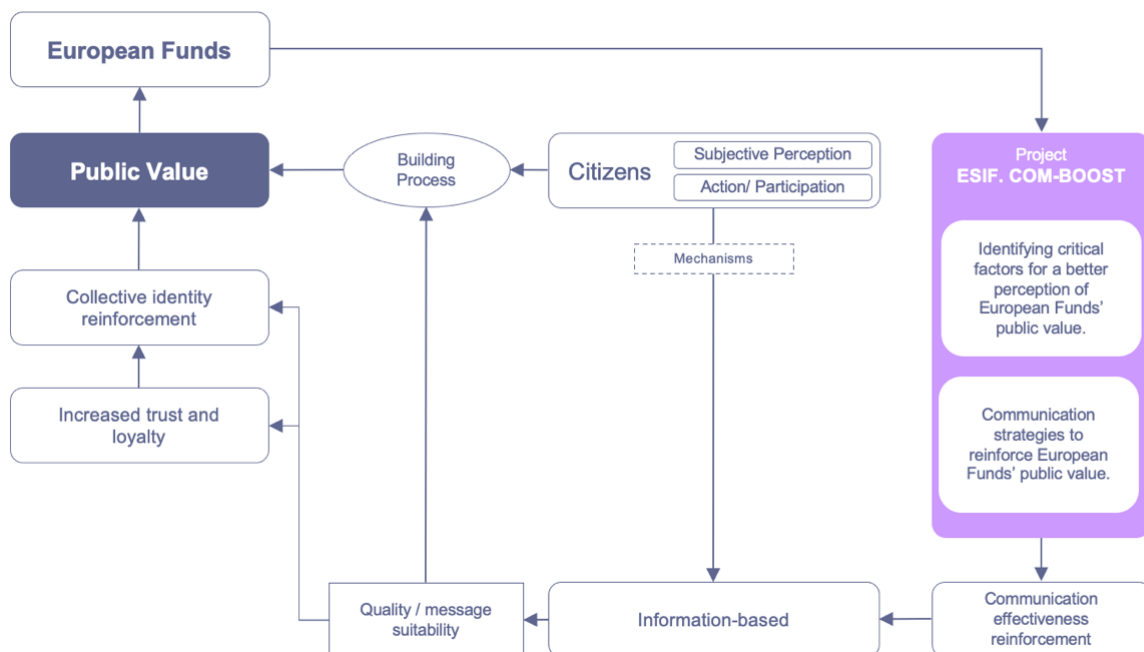
Despite the communication efforts of European funds, there are many studies indicating that there is margin for improvement and that there are still potentials to be explored, as well as indications that the reinforcing this domain will bring important individual and collective benefits for European citizens. Communications is therefore a crucial element not only in increasing the awareness of European policies, but also of European identity, and both are deeply interconnected.

## 2. Objectives

The project's main objective is to enhance the public value of the application of European funds in Portugal, especially the instruments included in PT2030, by building a reference framework and an innovative approach to informing and training for professional audiences in the social media field. The aim is to:

1. Identify the critical factors that difficult citizen's better perception of the public value of European funds and the best alternatives for overcoming them;
2. Identify communication strategies to enhance the essential components in the process of reinforcing and affirming the public value of European funds in Portugal, directly aimed at media professionals and the "PT2030 Communication Network";
3. Identify concrete proposals of action in the field of training target audiences, directly related to the social media that are important for enhancing the public value of European funds.

**Figure 6** - Framing the project's objectives in the process of building the public value of the European funds



Source: Elaborated by the authors

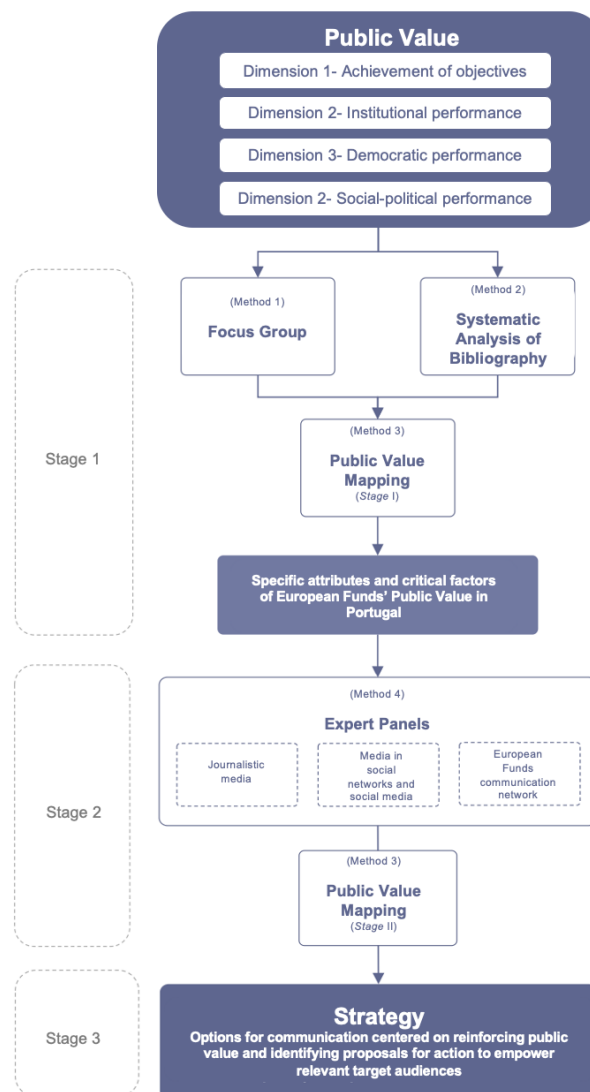
### 3. Methodological approach

In methodological terms, the Project will start from the four fundamental dimensions of public value in European funds, this is, the achievement of objectives, institutional performance, democratic performance, and socio-political performance. This will be the conceptual framework that will serve as the basic referential for the design of the methodology and for the construction of the different tools for analyzing and collecting

information, with the research path divided into three main stages and four methods.

The first stage is aimed at identifying the specific attributes and critical factors of the public value of European funds in Portugal and starts with two simultaneous methods. One of them is a series of Focus Groups designed essentially to identify critical factors that difficult a better perception of the public value of European funds in the Portuguese case. The other is the Systematic Analysis of Bibliography, which aims to understand the state of art in this field and identify the potential virtues, successes, constrains and good practices in terms of promoting the public value of the European funds, with special focus on the field of public policy communication.

**Figure 7** – Methodological Design



Source: Elaborated by the authors

The results of these two methods will support the construction of the third method, this is, Public Value Mapping, which will be applied at two different moments (Stage I and Stage II). With this tool we will seek to obtain comprehensive picture of the functioning of the ecosystem that characterizes the process of reinforcing the public value of European funds in Portugal, which includes identifying the various factors that influence this process and the activities that can direct it (positively or negatively). Its materialization will be translated into a set of causal diagrams and logic models for mapping public value, as well as an explanatory referential for the functioning of this ecosystem, particularly regarding the specific attributes of the process of enhancing the public value of European funds in Portugal and the respective critical factors.

The second stage is centered on the realization of the fourth method and corresponds to the realization of three Expert Panels. These will be constituted by a mix of professionals working directly in the field of media in general or specifically in the communication of European funds, as well as researchers or specialists in the fields covered. There will be three panels of experts organized according to three areas of activity in the production, sharing and classification of information: i) journalistic media; ii) media in social networks and social media; iii) and the European funds communication network. The expert panels will be used to triangulate the more conceptual and investigative component of the project with the final component, which is more propositional. In this sense, the expert panels are intended, firstly, to assess the validity of the propositions arising from the previous stages (Mapping Public Value - Stage I) and to validate / deepen the critical factors present in the process of strengthening the public value of European funds in Portugal and, secondly, to incorporate a large amount of previous experience from experts and organizations. It is also hoped to identify value judgements and generalized conclusions on strategies to strengthen the communication of European funds and potential proposals for action in the field of empowering relevant target audiences in this area. Stage 2 will be finalized with the production of a new version of the Public Value Mapping (Stage II), which will serve as the basis for the design of the strategy regarding the options for communication centered on strengthening public value and the identification of proposals for action to empower relevant target audiences envisaged in the final part of the project (Stage 3).

## 4. Expected results and innovation challenges

The main expected results derive from its objectives and will be embodied essentially in two specific domains:

- **Specific attributes and critical factors:** identifying the specific attributes of the process of creating public value of European funds in Portugal and the way in which their communication is boosting (or not) citizens' knowledge of these policies in general (and inherently of the European integration process) and identifying the critical factors that may be hindering a process of greater awareness and identification of communitarian policies among citizens.
- **Operationalization:** construction of a strategy to achieve a communication boost for European funds based on two essential components, the first focused on the most appropriate options for communicating the funds to maximize their public value from the citizens' perspective, and the second aimed at identifying proposals for action to empower target audiences who could play a relevant role in this process (and who should be mobilized to do so).

The innovative nature of the project can also be understood from two distinct but deeply interconnected perspectives, the first being the scientific perspective. Its design takes as its main reference the work resulting from the COHESIFY project, particularly regarding the conceptual framework of the dimensions of public value, adding some differentiating elements that we believe have a potential for innovation in terms of methodological design and expected results. For example, i) it will make it possible (or obligatory) to refocus the conceptual framework of the public value of European funds on the issue of the communication effort of European policies, in order to try to understand the framework of "communication" not only within the process of perceiving public value, but also to conceptualize the role of "communication" as a producer (or destroyer) of it; ii) it appeal to the use of an analytical tool specific to this type of analysis (public value mapping), which will be built with its own methodological approach and specifically geared towards the design of action strategies; iii) it makes it possible to build analytical models of the

functioning of the causal chains that result from policy communication actions, thus obtaining a comprehensive picture of the functioning of the ecosystem that characterizes the process of strengthening the public value of European funds in Portugal, as well as identifying the various factors that influence this process and the activities that can direct it (positively or negatively).

Secondly, we have the operational perspective. In this case, we believe that the results of this project make it possible to develop innovative aspects in relation to what has already been implemented in terms of communicating the funds, not so much through direct action - the materialization of the more direct and objective dimension of the strategy will always involve the concrete implementation of training actions with target audiences - but above all through the potential for knowledge and learning that it can provide for a better design, implementation and evaluation of PT2030 communication efforts. Access by the "PT2030 Communication Network" to an explanatory and reasoned framework on the best options for communication centered on reinforcing public value and identifying the most appropriate target audiences to embody it, will certainly be a useful tool for more effective and focused communication of European funds.

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