



Triggering policy learning via formal EU evaluation requirements in the case of Cohesion Policy

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Funding information

National Science Centre, Poland, Grant/Award Number: 2019/33/B/HS5/01336

Abstract

The European Union (EU), especially in the context of Cohesion Policy (CP), has played a crucial role in developing and promoting policy evaluation practices across its Member States. Evaluation systems across the Member States have been established to assess CP investments. Remarkably, the use of evaluation research and its contribution to stimulating policy learning has remained a “black box.” To address this issue, this article aims to develop a novel framework centered around four conditions for evaluation-based policy learning, namely: (1) policy relevance, (2) resources and organizational settings, (3) quality of evaluation, and (4) evaluation culture. These conditions are retrieved from the existing literature on policy evaluation and applied to the six-country cases across the EU. The findings suggest how loosening the formal EU evaluation requirements could affect policy learning in the Member States.

KEYWORDS

Cohesion Policy, evaluation, evaluation culture, formal requirements, policy learning, policy relevance, quality of evaluation, resources and organizational settings

The views expressed are purely those of the authors and may not in any circumstances be regarded as stating an official position of their organizations. The article builds on a previous research for the European Parliament (contract no. IP/B/REGI/IC/2019-033).

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) has played a crucial role in developing and promoting evaluation practices across Europe. Although large amounts of policy evaluations have been produced, the question of their usefulness remains open (Bachtler & Wren, 2006; Dotti, 2016b). This issue notably applies to Cohesion Policy (CP), as it is one of the largest areas of the EU's budgetary expenditure and one of the most extensively evaluated policies (Hoerner & Stephenson, 2012; Højlund, 2015). Evaluation requirements detailed in CP regulations are largely responsible for the number and characteristics of the evaluations carried out across Member States at the national and sub-national levels (Bachtler, 2012; Kupiec et al., 2020; Potluka, 2024).

The external pressure caused by these formal evaluation requirements (e.g., legal rules mandating evaluations) is expected to have positive effects in terms of policy learning (Stame, 2008). However, significant concerns exist about how the evaluation findings are used in practice and contribute to improved policymaking (Batterbury, 2006). Opposing views, with evidence in both directions, lead to the theoretical question of the relationship between evaluation and policy learning (cf. Dunlop & Radaelli, 2023).

Our research question is as follows: Does the application of EU formal requirements trigger evaluation-based policy learning? As policy learning does not happen automatically, with this paper, we aim to argue that formal EU evaluation requirements can trigger evaluation-based policy learning under the condition that four factors are in place: (1) policy relevance, (2) resources and organizational settings, (3) quality of evaluation, and (4) evaluation culture. Thus, the EU's formal requirements contribute to evaluation-based policy learning if these conditions are in place. These conditions are associated with the broader notion of administrative capacity (Bachtler, 2012; Dotti, 2016a). Accordingly, the EU should promote integrative actions to develop these conditions to maximize the benefits of the formal requirements (Pellegrin & Colnot, 2020).

The proposed framework is discussed in the case of six relevant Member States. The sample was selected following the standard EU criteria of size and geographical representativity; administrative traditions and level of de/centralization (Bianculli et al., 2013; Peters, 2021; Zaki & Wayenberg, 2023); level of institutionalization of evaluation (Stockmann et al., 2020); and importance of CP (Dotti, 2016a; Santos et al., n.d.). This analysis wants to contribute to the scholar and policy debate proposing that the formal requirements should be combined with these conditions; otherwise, Member States with weak administrative capacities risk being unable to learn from evaluation, even if this is formally required.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on the notions of evaluation and policy learning. Section 3 presents our four factors framework based on the existing scholarly work on policy learning and evaluation. Section 4 introduces the formal settings of CP's evaluation system and its evolution. Section 5 describes the methodological approach for the empirical analysis. Section 6 provides empirical findings. Section 7 draws key messages for policymakers by discussing how loosening the EU formal evaluation requirements might affect policy learning in EU Member States, and Section 8 concludes.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW: THE NOTIONS OF EVALUATION AND POLICY LEARNING

Originally, policy learning has been considered an integral part of the policymaking process (Freeman, 2006; C. M. Hall, 2011), whereas other scholars conceive policymaking itself as a form of social learning, which is a collective process where multiple actors improve their

understanding of an issue at stake (Klein, 1997; Rose, 1993; Zaki et al., 2022). Policy learning is conceptualized as a change or upgrade of policy preferences or core beliefs (Dunlop, 2009; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013, 2018; Dunlop et al. 2024b, 2024a) and is generally seen as a desirable objective for improving the policymaking process. Any form of learning includes a crucial component, namely experiences or observations, constituting bases from which lessons can be drawn (Rose, 1991) or ideas can be pitched (Schneider & Ingram, 1988).

This article looks at evaluation-based policy learning among many potential means of policy learning (cf. Dunlop & Radaelli, 2023). Policy evaluation is an applied process of inquiry for collecting and synthesizing evidence that results in conclusions about a policy's value and merit (Mathison, 2004). Remarkably, evaluation is "but one source of evidence" (Weiss et al., 2005) and does not often imply a reliable judgment (Olejniczak et al., 2017). This limitation must be recognized.

Elaborating on the mechanism through which evaluation may impact policy learning should start by delineating our understanding of the latter concept in light of the several different explanations that have emerged in the policy literature (e.g., Bennett & Howlett, 1992). From the perspective of Moyson et al. (2017)'s classification of learning sources, evaluation is expected to support mostly "endogenous" learning (i.e., within the same policy field and policy organization) rather than from different policy fields and geographic locations. Furthermore, policy learning is rarely a systematic and institutionalized process (Schoenefeld & Jordan, 2017; Van der Knaap, 1995).

The traditional rational-objectivist evaluation model can be closely linked to the instrumental definition of policy learning, which serves better goal attainment by governments (P. A. Hall, 1993; Van der Knaap, 1995; Lee & van de Meene, 2012). However, the newer argumentative-subjectivist approach suggests that evaluation may also serve as a means of argumentation, legitimation, and support. This former approach corresponds well with the most common definitions derived from Sabatier (1987)'s advocacy coalition framework: policy learning is the updating of policy beliefs based on knowledge and information on the policy problem (Raudla et al., 2018) or alterations of thought or intentions regarding the attainment or revision of policy objectives (e.g., Goyal & Howlett, 2024; Pattison, 2018).¹ According to Hecló (1974), policy learning may be seen as a change in reaction to a perceived stimulus. The most obvious stimulus is a policy problem, and the type of it (e.g., its tractability) often determine the type of policy learning (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2018).

Regarding policy learning, evaluation may both support the intra-governmental stages of the policy cycle (see the notion of "endogenous learning" in Moyson, 2018) and facilitate the dialogue between policymakers and societal actors (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2023; Van der Knaap, 1995). This second element refers to the conditions under which policymakers feel obliged to respond to evaluation outcomes to maintain accountability (Bennett & Howlett, 1992).

The existing evaluation literature observes different perspectives on potential policy learning factors (for a systemic review, see Zaki et al., 2022). Remarkably, several studies have been concentrated around a single factor, for instance, policy actors' paradigm, treatment of single policy problems or information provision and treatment (Coletti & Dotti, 2021; Dotti, 2018; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013; Hall, 1993; Pattison, 2018). Other recent studies focused on policy learning across space (Stark & van der Arend, 2024), multiple tiers of government (Zaki & Wayenberg, 2023), policy failures (Leong & Howlett, 2022) and risks in specific settings such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Zaki & Pattyn, & Wayenberg, 2023).

Indeed, all four factors we propose in our framework have been recognized in the extant literature but have yet to be integrated into a comprehensive learning model, as proposed in this paper.

Our contribution aims to overcome the limitations caused by considering a single factor in policy learning, especially when complex policies are considered, as in the case of the EU CP. To address this limitation, our contribution integrates the four policy learning factors into the novel framework. It applies them to empirical evidence from the six cases in the context of the CP.

3 | ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: THE FOUR FACTORS UNDERLYING EVALUATION-BASED POLICY LEARNING

3.1 | Policy relevance

In the case of public policies, relevance has two primary meanings. First, and particularly for policies involving public expenditures like CP, relevance refers to the level of funding in relative and absolute terms (Dotti, 2013, 2016a). In other words, a given policy might be “relevant” even if the amount of funding is small but relatively important for a specific policy field: a small amount of EU funding can be seen as highly relevant for a region or a city with a small budget given its size (Dotti, 2016c) or because it has high political visibility (Flanagan & Uyarra, 2016).

Relevance is crucial to mobilize policymakers. When decision-makers find a policy “relevant,” they are more likely to engage in evaluation to learn how to handle complex challenges (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013) and hardly tractable situations (Schrefler, 2010). Furthermore, dissatisfaction with policy outcomes or performance can lead to opportunities for policy learning (C. M. Hall, 2011). However, this dissatisfaction arises for “relevant” policies, for which decision-makers decide to carry out evaluation to substantiate this dissatisfaction (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Moyson et al., 2017; Stephenson et al., 2019).

To sum up, policy relevance drives policy learning due to the necessity for improving policy performance and the willingness to be accountable and justify using public resources.

3.2 | Resources and organizational setting

Policy evaluation requires sufficient resources and adequate organizational settings for two main reasons. First, they are essential for carrying out evaluation studies. Second, they stimulate policy learning via information sharing with relevant experts and stakeholders (Maybin, 2015; Olejniczak et al., 2016, 2017; Zaki & Wayenberg, 2023). The internal capacity to use knowledge in the policy process interacts with the external pressure on policymakers to be accountable, especially for “relevant” policy under scrutiny (Raudla et al., 2018; Rimkutė, 2015; Schrefler, 2010). Examples are financial and human resources, devoted time, organizational costs for compliance and enforcement, and administrative capacities (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Lee & van de Meene, 2012; Santos et al., n.d.).

Four organizational settings' dimensions are identified to foster policy learning: (1) a non-politicized, uncontested policy environment; (2) partnership and shared responsibility among public civil servants; (3) the presence of a systematic process for learning; and (4) testing the policy trials aimed at improving the governance and policy process instead of labeling them “success” or “failure” (Dunlop et al., 2024b; Stewart & Jarvie, 2015).

In complex settings like CP, the multilevel interaction between institutions and organizations is essential for policy learning as it stimulates the transmission of knowledge between

these different actors (Crossan et al., 1999; Zaki & Wayenberg, 2023; Zito & Schout, 2009). In other words, individuals shape insights and innovative ideas and share them, whereas organizations adopt specific actions or not.

Resources and organizational settings are needed to promote evaluation and facilitate stakeholder interactions by acquiring, translating, and disseminating information (de Voogt & Patterson, 2019). Finally, organizational leadership is crucial to ensure that the “learning products” (e.g., evaluation reports and findings) can contribute to improving policymaking (Goyal & Howlett, 2024; Heikkilä & Gerlak, 2013; Slembeck, 1997).

3.3 | Quality of evaluation

Accurate data, well-defined scope of information, sound analysis, and unbiased, evidence-based findings, as well as conclusions, are essential elements of making the quality of evaluation (Schwartz & Mayne, 2005; Stephenson et al., 2019). Quality evaluation facilitates policy learning (Batterbury, 2006; Taylor et al., 2001; Zaki & Dupont, 2024). In CP, quality is affected by the legislative requirements, stakeholder involvement and available resources (Mastenbroek et al., 2016). However, not the objective quality but the perception of quality increases the likelihood of knowledge use and facilitates learning (Bundi et al., 2021; Kupiec, 2022). Moreover, experts in a given policy area can be instrumental in pushing forward policy learning (P. A. Hall, 1993; Schwandt, 1990).

Notably, the evaluation quality is linked to the general capacity of administrators and evaluators. Remarkably, the literature has found significant divergences across the Member States and within the EU Commission regarding resources, such as the availability of experienced evaluators and lack of evaluation expertise within public administrations (Batterbury, 2006; Borrás & Højlund, 2015; Polverari & Bachtler, 2004; Potluka, 2024; Zaki & Dupont, 2024). For instance, if the evaluation is externalized, writing adequate terms of reference is a fundamental prerequisite for producing a sound evaluation; otherwise, the quality will likely be low (Pellegrin & Colnot, 2020). Along these lines, high-quality evaluations result from the evaluators' ability to use sophisticated, advanced evaluation methods and the policymakers' capacity to ask for and learn from them. On the other hand, poor quality undermines the reliability of evaluation judgments, which in turn hinders policy learning.

To conclude, policy learning can flourish from high-quality evaluations, which depend on stakeholders' skills, making it possible to process available evidence and data effectively.

3.4 | Evaluation culture

Evaluation culture has some characteristics: self-examination, self-reflection, encouragement for experimentation and change, and engagement in evidence-based learning (Potluka, 2024). In other words, evaluation culture refers to various policy practices and commitments concerning evaluation, such as a set of empirical, expressive values, beliefs and symbols governing the performance of a political system (Bachtler & Wren, 2006; Dotti, 2016a). This factor stands for various practices and commitments related to evaluation, including a set of empirical, expressive values, beliefs, and symbols that govern the political system's performance (Dunlop et al., 2024a; Pye, 1972).

We can observe that north-south and east-west divides mark evaluation culture. In northern parts of Europe (e.g., the Netherlands, Germany, and Nordic countries), policy evaluation has a

long tradition, whereas, in southern Europe (e.g., Italy, Spain), evaluations are not so established in a political-administrative culture (Casavola & Tagle, 2003; Osuna Llaneza et al., 2000). Furthermore, countries that joined the EU at a later stage also have lower degrees of maturity in their evaluation culture. These differences come from longstanding administrative and policy cultures (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

Several factors determine this situation, such as the availability of qualified and experienced evaluators, the presence of relevant knowledge and skills among decision-makers and evaluators, and the institutional frameworks for managing the evaluation and dissemination of results (Bachtler & Wren, 2006; Dotti, 2016a). Furthermore, policies designed with the involvement of regional and city decision-makers, such as in CP, stimulate the collective learning process (Diez, 2002; Eser & Nussmueller, 2006).

Network theory argues that political culture fosters policy learning through collaborative actors who share knowledge to find new ways of solving problems (Benz & Fürst, 2002; Lawson & Lorenz, 1999). Advocacy coalitions act as mediators and platforms by updating their views with new evaluation-based information and facilitating their entry into the policy debate. If policies are not systematically evaluated, these coalitions call for more knowledge on how policies work (Borrás & Højlund, 2015; Højlund, 2015; Sanderson, 2002).

Summing up, values and networks are the founding elements of the evaluation culture, making it possible to generate policy learning from evaluation.

4 | THE EVALUATION REQUIREMENTS IN THE CASE OF THE EU CP

CP is the main EU's investment policy, amounting to nearly one-third of the EU's 7-year budget. It is meant to reduce regional disparities and achieve economic, social and territorial cohesion across and within Member States (Dotti et al., 2024; Hoerner & Stephenson, 2012; Mendez & Bachtler, 2017; Walczyk & Dotti, 2023). CP is implemented through the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), including the European Regional Development Funds (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund (CF), the European Social Fund+ (ESF+, previously known as ESF), and the Just Transition Fund (JTF). The ESIF funds are managed and delivered in a multilevel governance setting called 'shared management' by the European Commission and Member States' authorities. CP is implemented via Operational Programs (OPs) managed at Member States' national and regional levels by Managing Authorities (MAs), usually ministries or regional governments.

Evaluation is a key step in the "life cycle" of CP since it supports policy design and implementation by providing evidence on outcomes and impacts of ESIF investments. The five official evaluation criteria are relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, and EU-added value. Evaluation has been historically embedded in CP, given that it is traced back to the first programming period in the 1980s (Dotti et al., 2024). Over time, CP has been characterized by significant transformations considering the size of its budget, legal provisions, and policy priorities. At the same time, the development of CP evaluation has experienced different phases. From a historical perspective, the development of CP evaluation is not a smooth, linear process. Table 1 summarizes the historical evolution of the place of EU legal rules for evaluating CP.

For instance, in the programming period 2000–2006, a particular focus was given to formal obligations to carry out a wide range of evaluations. The following period (2007–2013) was characterized by giving Member States more competencies regarding the exact coverage of evaluations while focusing more on the impacts of CP's interventions.

TABLE 1 Overview of the role of EU legal rules in Cohesion Policy.

Programming period	Status of evaluation in CP
1989–1993	Experimentation phase of evaluation with limited legal requirements.
1994–1999	
2000–2006	The importance of evaluation is consolidated with mandatory legal requirements determining the increased volume of performed evaluation studies.
2007–2013	Attempted maturation phase of evaluation with additional flexibility and new optional tools (e.g., evaluation plans).
2014–2020	Result-oriented phase with more stringent requirements (e.g., impact evaluations, compulsory evaluation plans).
2021–2027	Simplification of evaluation requirements to develop a needs-based approach

Abbreviations: CP, Cohesion Policy; EU, European Union.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Bachtler and Wren (2006); Manzella and Mendez (2009); Taylor et al. (2001); van Voorst (2017).

Moreover, the EU legal framework 2014–2020 established specific evaluation requirements, including mandatory ex-ante, ongoing, and ex-post evaluations and impact studies to ensure completion at different stages of the policy process across the EU countries (Pellegrin & Colnot, 2020). Member States were responsible for carrying out ex-ante and ongoing evaluations, including impact ones addressing the priority of each OPs. In contrast, the European Commission was in charge of carrying out ex-post evaluations.

The “result-oriented” approach aimed to consolidate the monitoring system by improving data availability and thus enhancing evaluation quality. The 2014–2020 framework also specified general principles, governance, and practical aspects of organizing evaluation: Evaluation Plans are mandatory to incentivise Member States to adopt a long-term strategy for evaluating CP (Pellegrin & Colnot, 2020). Additionally, the European Commission made substantial efforts to support Member States' authorities by providing soft actions promoting impact evaluation approaches. Finally, for the 2021–2027 period, the evaluation approach has moved towards more flexibility and is considered “needs-based” (Table 2).

5 | METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH, CASE STUDY SELECTION, AND DATA COLLECTION

This research employs a cross-national comparative design. This methodology adheres to the principles established by Lijphart (1971), who regards the comparative method as a legitimate scientific approach for formulating general empirical propositions, and Sartori (1991), who considers comparison a valid technique for controlling variables.

The six Member States selected for this empirical analysis are France, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania. The selection process was guided by the maximum variation strategy intended to control several important variables in the policy learning process (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In detail, the variations in the selected sample are reflected in terms of:

- Size and geographical position (Pellegrin & Colnot, 2020);
- Administrative traditions and level of de/centralization (Bianculli et al., 2013; Peters, 2021);

TABLE 2 Summary of the main evaluation requirements as in the programming period 2014–2020.

Stakeholder	EU Commission (EC)	Managing Authorities (MA) (Member States/regions)
Number, types, and content of evaluation	Possibility to carry out, by its own initiative, ongoing evaluations of Operational Programs (OPs). The corresponding MA and MC must be informed and get the results (Article 56 of the CPR). Obligatory ex-post evaluations by the EC or the MS in collaboration with the EC.	Obligatory ex-ante evaluation for each OP to improve the design quality (Article 55 of the CPR). Obligatory inclusion of a Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) for Major Projects (Article 101). Obligatory evaluation of each OP priority at least once during the programming period (ongoing evaluations) to assess the contribution of Funds (Article 56). Obligatory evaluations on the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of joint support from the ESF and the specific allocation for YEI at least twice (Article 19 of the ESF Regulation). Possibility to conduct ex-post evaluations in collaboration with the EC (Article 57)
Evaluation methods and capacity	Obligation to provide evaluation guidance to MS (Article 54).	Possibility to use Structural Funds for technical assistance related to evaluation (Article 59).
Organizational and communication aspects	Advisory role in the Monitoring Committees (Article 48). Obligation to make all evaluations public (Article 54). Obligatory synthesis of evaluations (Articles 50 and 57).	Obligation to set up a Monitoring Committee covering one or more OPs (Articles 47 and 48). Functional independence of (internal or external) evaluators (Article 54). Obligation to draft evaluation plans (Article 56). Obligation to carry out the planned evaluations (Article 56). Obligation to synthesize all the evaluation findings and send them to the EC by 2022 (Article 114). Obligation to make all evaluations public (Article 54).

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the EU Regulation, 1303/2013 (2013).

- Level of institutionalization of evaluation (Stockmann et al., 2020);
- Importance of CP, in absolute and relative terms (Bachtler & Wren, 2006; Dotti, 2016b).

The analysis of the cases relies on different sources of empirical evidence, including a review of national policy documents, relevant academic literature and semi-structured interviews with national and regional stakeholders in the Member States. Each case study discusses the response to EU evaluation requirements in the considered Member State and tests the role of the policy learning factors identified in the first step.

6 | EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

6.1 | Policy learning factors

Regarding relevance, the level of EU funding varies considerably across the six Member States. In Lithuania, Poland, and Romania, the ESIF constitutes a substantial source of public investments. Italy has traditionally featured a strong North-South regional divide, reflected in the ESIF amount, making CP particularly relevant. By contrast, Ireland has historically been a big beneficiary of CP funding, but its relative importance has become smaller recently. Finally, for France, the ESIF funds are mainly complementary to national public funding, making them of relatively more minor importance.

The picture regarding available resources and organizational is also significantly mixed across the six cases. The most extreme case is the Polish evaluation model with significant resources, contrasting with limited ones in France (Polverari, 2015), while the other selected countries are more aligned. Regarding organizational settings, the evaluation models in the six countries are diverse due to the flexibility allowed by the EU legal framework. Two broad types of governance models can be distinguished, namely centralized (Lithuania) and decentralized (France, Ireland, Italy, Poland), together with some hybrid ones (Romania). Both centralized and decentralized models have benefits and drawbacks. Specifically, regarding (human) resources, centralized governance is characterized by accumulating these resources in a central institution, whereas their dispersion across several managing authorities marks decentralized governance. Additionally, centralized systems focus on strategic evaluations (i.e., external audience and accountability), while decentralized ones prioritize inward-oriented learning and operational evaluation (Kupiec et al., 2021; Zaki & Wayenberg, 2023).

Another mixed picture across our cases is observed in the quality of evaluation. According to data from the evaluation helpdesk, the average quality of CP evaluations for 2014–2020 was estimated at 2.5 on a 4-point scale (EU Commission, 2019). Insights from the national levels are more challenging to obtain, but all countries exhibit some limitations in quality, according to the case studies. In France, some progress is observed due to the development of impact evaluations with high methodological standards. By contrast, in Lithuania, some reforms in the public procurement system led to a lowering evaluation quality because of attempts to apply more “objective” tender evaluation criteria. Therefore, the picture is quite mixed. The OECD appraised the methodological quality of evaluations (not restricted to CP) in different EU countries through its “Regulatory Policy Outlook” (OECD, 2021).

The assessment of evaluation culture requires combining multiple criteria, such as evaluation offer, the existence of an evaluation society, and extensive use of evaluations. For our analysis, we refer to Stockmann et al. (2020), although other, less recent sources exist (e.g., Bachtler, 2012; Furubo et al., 2002; Melenciuc, 2015). Regarding evaluation culture, France is ranked as “mature,” while Italy and Ireland are in an intermediate stage. The three Member States that accessed the EU at a later stage are found to be in an early development phase, with strong external pressures (see also Kupiec et al., 2020; Zaki & Pattyn, & Wayenberg, 2023).

The status of the four policy factors of the case studies is summarized in Table 3.

6.2 | Role of EU evaluation requirements

The evaluation requirement of the 2014–2020 programming period influenced various policy learning factors, though the picture is mixed across the selected Member States. While it

TABLE 3 Overall overview of policy learning factors in the six cases.

Country	Policy relevance	Resources and organizational settings	Quality of evaluation (not restricted to Cohesion Policy, CP)	Context and culture
France	ESJF is complementary to national funds. Limited emphasis on evaluations on impacts.	Decentralized evaluation governance. Limited resources and volume of evaluations. Involvement of external evaluators.	OECD quality scores for 2021: 0.54	Mature evaluation culture Persistent issues because evaluations are typically conducted on an ad-hoc basis.
Ireland	High historical relevance of CP funding, but currently weaker. High emphasis on impacts.	Decentralized evaluation governance. Existence of a tracking system of recommendations. Evaluations typically carried out by external evaluators.	OECD quality scores for 2021: 0.31	Intermediate evaluation culture. Historical link with CP and high awareness in CP public administrations.
Italy	Strong interregional differences in the importance of CP funding. Limited emphasis on impacts	Decentralized evaluation governance. Involvement of external evaluators.	OECD quality scores for 2021: 0.74 (strong heterogeneity within the country)	Intermediate evaluation culture. Noted tension between national and regional levels.
Lithuania	High importance of CP funding. High emphasis on impacts	Centralized evaluation governance Tracking of recommendations. Development of an evaluation labor market linked to CP evaluation.	OECD quality scores for 2021:0.47 Anecdotal evidence of quality issues, but with progressive improvements.	Limited evaluation culture. Strongly linked to CP, with progressive improvements outside CP.
Poland	High importance of CP funding. Limited emphasis on impacts.	Decentralized evaluation governance. Existence of a tracking system of recommendations. Important resources dedicated to CP evaluation. External consultants involved in CP evaluations, though declining in the recent period.	OECD quality scores for 2021: 0.52 (strong heterogeneity within the country, with progressive improvements)	Limited evaluation culture, strongly linked to CP with swift improvements.
Romania	High importance of CP funding.	Centralized evaluation governance (with decentralized features) External consultants involved in evaluations of CP, but with a small, limited labor market.	n/a	Limited evaluation culture, strongly linked to CP.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Bachtler and Wren (2006); Furubo et al. (2002); Kupiec et al. (2021); Pellegriin and Colnot (2020); Polverari (2015).

generally promoted higher evaluation quality, its influence on other policy learning factors was more complicated. First, formal requirements effectively mobilize policymakers because they understand the relevance of complying with this obligation.

Regarding resources and organizational settings, the requirement exhibited contrasting effects. In Poland, the reliance on previous evaluations enhanced capacity despite a particularly large amount of evaluation conducted. At the same time, France faced challenges due to limited funding and a bureaucratic perception of the process. In this respect, the long-term stability of EU requirements has helped Member States effectively meet this obligation.

An essential element to consider is the degree of centralization. For example, Lithuania centralized its evaluation organization through a precise calendar, whereas Italy largely considered evaluation plans as a bureaucratic obligation. In France, Lithuania and Romania, the evaluation plans served as overall guidance rather than a strict list of evaluations to be conducted. The evaluation plans are a double-edged sword: while they ensured long-term planning, they also limited the reflections on the best data and methods to be used, affecting evaluation quality.

The effects of the formal requirement for the functional independence of evaluators varied across countries. While the EU required it, member states interpreted this differently. Some had internal evaluation units (Ireland), while others relied on external consultants (Lithuania, Poland, Romania), which contributed to creating a local labor market for evaluators. This diversity made it hard to assess the overall impact. Independence improved evaluation quality by professionalising this role. However, this requirement must be combined with guaranteeing enough resources, as seen in France and Lithuania.

The EU requirements obliging communication and disseminating evaluation findings had a limited impact. In our cases, there is no evidence of whether this benefited the dissemination of evaluation findings across stakeholders because of rare discussions on evaluations in public debates. Nonetheless, some countries went beyond the requirements for dissemination. The development of tracking systems of recommendations or the realization of dedicated websites with databases

7 | POLICY LESSONS

Our framework identified four factors enabling evaluation-based policy learning. Specifically, we aimed to contribute to the policy debate on the potential implications of loosening the formal requirements on evaluation practices and the theoretical implications.

The four factors of relevance, resources and organizational settings, evaluation quality, and evaluation cultures should be considered preconditions for evaluation-triggered policy learning. The EU formal requirements did play an influential role in promoting policy learning when these four factors were in place. However, these factors interact with each other and are affected by the experiences developed during a CP programming period. Specifically, these factors should not be seen in a linear, causal way but more as a set of mutually interdependent conditions developing over time.

The main lesson is that formal requirements should be integrated by complementary actions that invest in these factors in an integrated way. For instance, Member States need to understand the relevance of CP evaluation, thus allocating resources and developing adequate organizational settings. Improving evaluation quality leads to policy learning, although these benefits can be evident in the long run. The EU can support this process by promoting integrative measures such as communities of evaluation professionals, training for related public procurement, and investments in

organizational settings. Our framework can help decision-makers adopt a more holistic perspective instead of focusing on single evaluation and policy learning variables.

8 | CONCLUSIONS

Our paper contributes to the existing evaluation literature by developing a novel framework of the four factors for evaluation-based policy learning. As demonstrated by our empirical evidence, the impact of the formal EU requirements on policy learning across the six selected Member States was mixed. While this requirement clarified the relevance of policy evaluation, the mixed results come from the heterogeneity of the allocated resources and organizational settings and the differences regarding evaluation quality. Nonetheless, this formal requirement generally pushed member states to invest in these factors and, significantly, had no purely negative impact.

Some policy learning factors, such as evaluation culture, were difficult to track despite being reported via qualitative analysis (i.e., interviews and documentary analysis). Some relationships between the formal requirements and the policy learning factors were positive, especially on specific factors such as the functional independence of evaluators, despite indirect evidence.

Based on the proposed framework and our empirical evidence, the main policy lesson is that formal requirements did improve policy learning, though with mixed effects determined by the four factors mentioned. These findings call for a holistic approach where formal requirements are combined with integrative action on the four factors we identified.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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ENDNOTE

¹ In a relatively recent systematic review of policy learning literature these types of definitions account for almost 40% of the total (Zaki et al, 2020).

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How to cite this article: Walczyk, J., Pellegrin, J., Colnot, L., Kupiec, T., & Dotti, N. F. (2024). Triggering policy learning via formal EU evaluation requirements in the case of Cohesion Policy. *European Policy Analysis*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1226>