

Post 2027 Discussion Paper

External cooperation

5 November 2024

Please note | This discussion paper was produced for the Post 2027 Harvesting event, taking place in Brussels on 25-26 November 2024. It is a tool to stimulate discussion and engagement on the topic. **It does not represent an opinion of Interact, Interreg or any other actor.** For more information about the Harvesting process, please see the Post 2027 section of [Interact.eu](https://interact.eu)

Interreg and its role in external cooperation

Overview

The European Union's external cooperation is built on strong partnerships between EU Member States and non-EU countries, fostering deeper connections and promoting stability and prosperity across regions. In recent years, this cooperation has played a critical role in advancing the EU's neighbourhood and enlargement policies, while also supporting development in its outermost regions with their neighbours.

Despite global crises, EU cooperation programmes have remained resilient, maintaining dialogue and collaboration, as seen in ongoing actions with Ukraine and in the Mediterranean. For countries in the EU accession pipeline, Interreg programmes have served as a valuable tool to align with EU regulations and practices, offering a practical framework for integration and engaging local and regional authorities in the European cooperation framework.

However, the increasingly tense geopolitical landscape, particularly due to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, has posed significant challenges. In response, the EU has suspended cooperation with Russia and Belarus. Bordering regions on the EU side now face notable security threats, alongside economic and development challenges.

This discussion paper explores proposals for the future of EU external cooperation, addressing the current three key dimensions: the neighbourhood (NEXT), enlargement (IPA) and the cooperation on outermost regions (OMR). This paper also introduces policy suggestions for the regions bordering Russia and Belarus. It highlights security and safety concerns, particularly related to external borders, as a crucial area for future cooperation programmes. These reflections are grounded on dialogue with the relevant Interreg programmes.

Methodology

The dialogue with Interreg programmes began at the Interreg Knowledge Fair in Riga in March 2024, setting the stage for further analysis and debate. The key takeaways from Riga formed the foundation for subsequent discussions led by Interact and TESIM, which took place in various formats, including focus group meetings, bilateral exchanges, and broader events and conferences. In addition, input was gathered through interviews with programme's representatives.

This discussion paper presents the most significant suggestions and insights that will be further explored during the harvesting event at the end of November, before being submitted to legislators. It is important to note that this document is not exhaustive; it highlights only the most impactful suggestions.

Key messages to decision makers

Cooperation architecture

Given the unique challenges Europe is currently facing, it is crucial to secure the continuity of EU external cooperation beyond 2027, with a focus on its various dimensions, including neighbourhood relations, enlargement efforts, and support for outermost regions

Cooperation between the EU and non-EU countries is becoming increasingly important for the countries preparing for accession. This applies not only to current Interreg IPA programmes but also to certain Interreg NEXT programmes. The role of these cooperation programmes in the accession process should be carefully considered when planning the framework for the future period. Keeping Interreg and Interreg IPA distinct, with a clear focus on enlargement and development would ensure that they complement each other rather than duplicate.

Current and previous Interreg IPA programmes have provided substantial added value by preparing the candidate countries for EU accession and they build on their past success from three consecutive programming periods. Their role has been vital in building the administrative and institutional capacities of pre-accession countries.

Cooperation within the EU's neighbourhood requires special attention, particularly in light of developments in the southern neighbourhood, including North Africa and the Near East. Programmes in the Eastern neighbourhood also face significant challenges, especially due to the ongoing war. It is therefore essential to ensure that these programmes continue addressing broader regional needs and challenges.

Outermost regions cooperation positioned as part of external cooperation is vital – their neighbours are also EU neighbours and supporting their specific challenges through cooperation is prominent and essential for these regions. They play a crucial role in redefining outermost regions (OMR) as strategic assets for the EU (rather than simply remote peripheries). The dedicated specific strand that goes beyond transnational and cross-border cooperation should be kept for the Outermost Regions' programmes.

Geographical coverage of current programmes is in general appreciated and opinions for the needs for changes vary. Beyond adjusting the programme territories, future programmes should be encouraged and allowed to extend their partnerships beyond their defined territories. This approach would help to spread the impact more widely, rather than limiting it to immediate neighbours. Greater efforts should be made to capitalise on successful practices and projects in other regions, both within and outside the EU.

Recognise the specific situation of regions bordering Russia and Belarus and consider the possibility of establishing cooperation programmes for the areas with similar challenges, even without shared border.

Objectives, purpose and orientation

Consider how the offered thematic menu would best serve programmes' needs. While current policy objectives seem to cover most of the needs in external cooperation, the specific objectives are considered too restrictive. Additional topics are also suggested for future support to better reflect evolving regional challenges.

Consider eliminating the compulsory objectives and direct programmes to focus on areas where cooperation truly adds value and is necessary for success. Current broad policy objectives may not always be the best for external cooperation programmes and specific objectives make the programmes fragmented. To simplify and focus on actual needs, giving up on specific objectives could be considered.

In order to effectively address evolving global and regional challenges the emerging priorities such as resilience, safety and security, civil protection and refugee support should be considered in the future thematic menu. These emerging objectives are essential components that reflect the contemporary

realities of cooperation on EU external borders. Addressing these challenges requires tough coordinated and sustained efforts. Varying levels of commitment and capacity to tackle these issues may hinder the progress and the lessons of current Interreg specific objective 2 – Safer and More Secure Europe are to be learned.

Note also that in the current period there is no possibility to work on topics directly related to enlargement/accession process or negotiation chapters and security related aspects (energy security, cyber security).

Focus on building sustainable partnerships and introduce flexibilities on applying the partnership principles as introduced in the European code of conduct on partnerships.

Partnership is a fundamental principle of Interreg and cross-border cooperation, with strong partnerships serving as the cornerstone of sustainable collaboration. As such, partnership principles should remain central in the future. However, flexibility in forming partnerships is also necessary, as strict application of these principles may hinder the creation of effective structures, particularly in multi-country programmes. The specific needs of non-EU countries must also be recognised, with particular attention given to ensuring the deep commitment of key partners, such as national authorities in non-EU countries.

Coordination and relationship-building with cooperation partners differs depending on the geographical area and context, e.g. bilaterally with non-EU countries and with intergovernmental organisations (CARICOM, Indian Ocean Commission). EU Delegations have also a key role to play in supporting the awareness and alignment of the EU's external action in these territories.

There is a need to deepen the coordination between DG REGIO and DG INTPA on the strategic vision and funds available in the same space. The neighbourhood dimension is supported by strategies at EU level, which is somewhat lacking for Outermost Regions allowing for a better integration of Interreg in this framework.

Future delivery

Strive to avoid the delay with the launching and implementation of external cooperation programmes and keep the specific features of these programmes

Delays in starting programme implementation due to the time required to sign and ratify the financing agreements have been an issue in several past implementation periods with programmes in neighbourhood and enlargement contexts. To overcome these delays, the negotiations on financing agreements should be started as soon as all the necessary elements for the agreement are in place, already before all the legal and programme documents are finalised and approved. This would also decrease the threat of de-commitment based on N+3 rule, applicable to all external cooperation programmes.

To facilitate the smooth transition to the new period and fluent launching of new programmes, the current rules and principles should be mainly kept, with only minor adjustments to areas that require improvement or fine-tuning. This would also facilitate the smoother adoption of the new rules and the financing agreements by the partner countries. It is essential to keep the specific features that foster successful cross-border partnerships and ensure smooth implementation of programmes such as higher-level pre-financing and co-financing rates.

Efforts for simplification should be continued. By mitigating the heavy, complicated and challenging procedures more potential beneficiaries can have access and be benefitted by external cooperation programmes.

For Outermost regions programmes the practical integration of ERDF and NDICI funds would simplify the management and give programmes a tangible opportunity to cooperate with third partner country beneficiaries. In the current period it is difficult to secure the budget from external funds and finding the right interlocutors for the mobilisation of funds. Experiences from NDICI (MAC, Indian Ocean) and EDF (Caribbean) articulation, as well as extensive experiences from NEXT and IPA contexts need to be

utilised in the integration. Having a dedicated strand should allow for a dedicated financing mechanism, adapted to OMR context, to be elaborated and proposed together between Commission and programmes.

Consider also to introduce built-in crises provisions to ensure programme resilience and adaptability, allowing for a swift and effective response to unforeseen disruptions. Functioning examples for such provisions are seen in Disruption Regulation (2022/2192) or CARE Regulation (2022/562). In crises situations the original strategic plans, predefined themes, indicators and financial allocations, may no longer align with the new reality. Therefore programmes should be enabled to adopt their strategies in response to crises.

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Furthermore, understanding and knowledge evolves throughout the programming period. If you spot something out of date or inconsistent, please contact us at communication@interact.eu

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