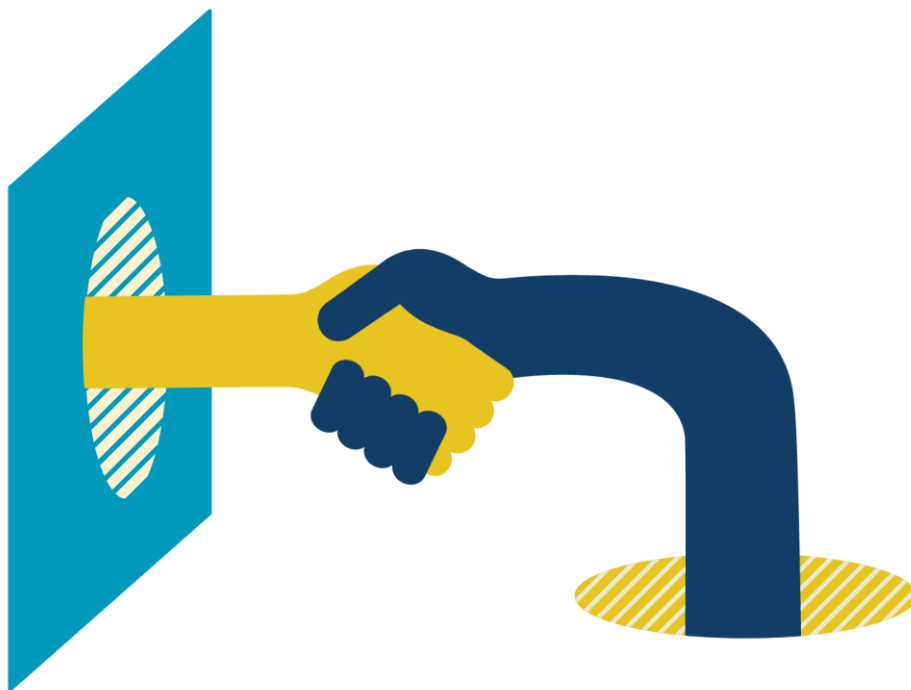


Post 2027 Consultation

Interact programme

Please note | This report was prepared using input gathered from stakeholders during the 2024 consultation process initiated by Directorate-General for Regional Policy and Urban Policy. It was acknowledged by the Interact IV Monitoring Committee on 28.11.2024.



Disclaimer: Cooperation can be complex, and while Interact's job is to make it easier, Interact cannot offer assurances on the accuracy of our pan-European information in any specific context.

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 If you spot something out of date or inconsistent, please contact us at communication@interact.eu

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1. Introduction and Context

Throughout 2024, Interact facilitated the exchange of ideas and inspiration for the future of Interreg. These discussions responded to a wider need to discuss the future of cohesion policy, as well as Interreg, which was initiated by DG REGIO. As an Interreg programme, Interact was also invited to conduct a consultation with relevant stakeholders to inform the design of the future Interact programme, and its ongoing mission to support the next wave of Interreg programmes to implement cooperation efficiently, effectively and to achieve more. This also includes Interact's work to support other cooperation actors, such as IJG (mainstream) programmes and EU macro-regional strategies (MRS).

To achieve these objectives, multiple methods were used, including surveys and in-person workshops. Additionally, online meetings were conducted with particularly relevant stakeholders. As a unique EU programme that facilitates knowledge exchange and supports cooperation between Interreg programmes, Interact focused solely on main stakeholders.

The conclusions, noted below, indicate the strong value added Interact offers Interreg, and opportunities to take this further, to ensure programmes achieve even more in the next period. This is set against the challenging context of rising costs and difficult budgetary discussions. Interact can save individual Interreg programmes time and money by delivering joint solutions, specific to the realities of Interreg.

By using Interact's services, programmes can achieve greater efficiency and focus on their core activities that add more value. Because Interact is close to the stakeholders and understands their needs, it's in a better position to deliver results effectively and efficiently, compared to any external provider.

2. Stakeholder Engagement: Participant Overview, Methodology, and Key Insights

2.1. Main stakeholders consulted

List of key stakeholders consulted:

- Interreg programmes under strand A – cross-border, strand B – trans-national, strand C – Interregional, and strand D – outermost regions' cooperation
- Member States, Norway and Switzerland (Members of the Monitoring Committee)
- IPA programmes/countries
- European Committee of the Regions
- Association of European Border Regions
- Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions
- Council of European Municipalities and Regions
- Transfrontier Operational Mission (MOT)
- EUSDR – Danube Strategy Point
- EUSAIR Facility Point
- EUSBSR – Baltic Sea Strategy Point
- Academia.

2.2. Methods of consultation

In February 2024, a survey on first reflections on Interreg post-2027 was distributed. It included two specific questions on Interact's future. The aim was to identify what aspects of Interact's work programmes value the most and collect suggestions for innovations, inspiration or changes that could make cooperation (in the future) easier. In total 26 responses were received.

In March 2024, the survey results were used to inform the topics for discussion and presented during the Interreg Knowledge Fair session "Future of Interact - Tools to make cooperation easier in post-2027" (Riga, Latvia). Over 40 Interreg specialists discussed how Interact could support the forthcoming wave of programmes. In addition, all participants at the Interreg Knowledge Fair were invited to contribute to two flip charts located close to the breakout rooms, the 'Interact post-2027 Wall of Love' and 'Interact Post 2027 What to change?'.

A number of messages were written on the boards, sharing the most positive feedback, as well as pointing out where there were opportunities for future improvements to enhance cooperation.

In June 2024, two in-person workshops were organised with representatives from the 27 Member States through Interact's Monitoring Committee Members (Valencia, Spain). Additionally, the Interact team (Sopot, Poland) had a workshop to focus on the future as well.

In October, participants at the EU Regions Week (Brussels, Belgium) were invited to join a public consultation on post-2027 at the Interact stand, "Interact, Interreg and the future of cooperation". An online survey, accessible via a barcode scanned on-site, allowed attendees to provide feedback and engage with Interact representatives. Additionally, the event organised by the Romanian MA for IPA programmes that month included on-site consultations with IPA countries on the future of Interact (Bucharest, Romania). Online interviews with representatives from the MRS supporting units took place between October and November.

Throughout 2024, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted online with various stakeholders listed in Section 2.1. The final report also incorporates relevant outcomes of the Harvesting event and feedback from the MC meeting, both held by the end November.

The consultation process was guided by the Managing Authority and carried out by Interact team members, with particular involvement from the Interact post-2027 group and an IVY volunteer.

2.3. Summary of the input on the key questions

Considering the unique nature of the programme and the guidance from the EC toolkit, the public consultation was designed around four main questions: What is working? What needs repairing/improvement? What is missing? And, what would be your vision for the future? These questions were examined through various lenses, such as Interact service delivery methods, enhancing exchanges between programmes, and the future of harmonisation and simplification. The report presents the inputs gathered from a range of stakeholders during 2024.

What is working?

(What do you value most about Interact's service offer? What would you miss the most if Interact did not exist?)

Interact is working

It delivers significant value to its target audiences. Its core mission is highly important, with the potential for its impact to extend to mainstream programmes as well. With a strong focus on enabling cooperation between programmes, the Interact team effectively fulfils this role.

Unique role of Interact

Interact plays a unique and highly valued role in bringing Interreg programmes together and facilitating the exchange of information. The 'cooperation' mindset that Interact brings to Interreg is essential to its success. It saves programmes time and money by streamlining processes and preventing duplication of efforts. This allows programmes to focus on high-impact activities rather than reinventing existing solutions, maximising efficiency and value.

One-stop-shop

Interact functions as the go to place for Interreg. Those consulted expressed the need for further support and assistance for programmes. They praised the variety of topics covered by Interact services and tools, as well as its prompt reactions to emerging programmes' needs. They emphasised the value of Interact in facilitating exchange of experience, knowledge sharing, networking, and its crucial role as a bridge between programmes and the European Commission. Interact is recognized as a one-stop shop for all matters related to Interreg and also cooperation in its wider meaning.

Flexible approach

The programme's flexibility and ability to quickly adapt to change were also praised, such as effectively responding to challenges posed by COVID-19. The programme is good at learning new ways of working, applying them successfully and sharing this with Interreg stakeholders. Its efforts are highly regarded, particularly for fostering knowledge within the Interreg community. Its vital importance is easily seen when new challenges arise and knowledge needs to be built. Interact can bring that knowledge together to create expertise. Given potentially larger transformations are on the horizon, Interact expertise and experience may prove necessary to assist programmes in successfully adapting to new circumstances and modalities.

With the focus on the value of cooperation in Enrico Letta's¹ report, one should consider this core Interact quality to be applicable in other contexts.

Focus on professional development

Interact is also appreciated for helping people in Interreg to grow professionally, focusing on skills, knowledge and confidence in order to bring new knowledge and experience back to programmes. There is potential to capitalise on this development method beyond purely Interreg environment with relatively low implementation costs.

Exchange, capitalisation and communication

Interact events that provide excellent opportunities for experience exchange, knowledge sharing and networking (be it online or in person) are highly valued. As is the support offered through geographically and thematically focused networks. The thematic networks are also a basis for both capitalisation and enabling the communication of shared Interreg results in given fields.

¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf>

Valued tools

Interact's offer of tools supporting Interreg programmes is regarded as strong (e.g. Interact Academy, Joint Electronic Monitoring System – Jems, INDEX, keep.eu, interreg.eu). The programme's website, publications, factsheets, and booklets are considered highly useful and informative.

What requires repairing / improvements?

The following insights provided by stakeholders during the consultation process highlights important areas where the programme needs to improve:

Budgetary Concerns

A significant issue raised during the consultations was the insufficient budget for Interact (and Interreg). Stakeholders expressed that the activities of the programme should be viewed within a broader capacity-building context. They called for a higher budget in the future to ensure the programme can fulfil its objectives effectively.

It was particularly noted that Jems was a huge financial saving for programmes in this period. With more IT solutions, Interact could potentially streamline and improve more aspects of programme management, however, it would be at the expense of other direct services. Stakeholders recommended additional funds from separate sources (e.g., Jems funding could potentially come from other IT-related resources) rather than reducing the scope of Interact's services.

Support for All Programmes

There was a clear call for Interact to ensure comprehensive coverage of all programmes, including those involved in external cooperation, through capacity-building and other support services.

Furthermore, stakeholders emphasised the need for continued support for programmes during both the planning and implementation phases (including evaluation and closure). It would be beneficial if Interact strengthens collaboration with programmes in the implementation phase by organising joint training sessions for projects, helping to better engage project partners.

Stronger system to support exchange

It was noted that often the individuals remain key to inspirational moments and innovations. Networks and other activities help, but stronger systems and systemic approaches could create more moments of innovation and be less reliant on individual ideas or sparks within Interreg.

Tailored Support

Moreover, stakeholders recommended offering more tailored support for programmes, particularly acknowledging differences in their maturity levels. More work to further reduce the administrative workload for Managing Authorities (MAs) and Joint Secretariats (JSs) is always appreciated.

Advocate of Interreg

Strengthening Interact's role as an advocate for the Interreg community with the European Commission and other stakeholders is essential, along with increasing Interact's visibility at the national level (EU funds).

Interact visibility and promotion

Interact should focus more on enhancing its visibility in the future by better promoting its services on social media and other platforms. Increasing its presence at events like Interreg Cooperation Day and country-specific events would help boost its visibility.

Expanding Training Opportunities

Regarding the Interact Academy, stakeholders emphasised the need for more frequent certified training sessions, with shorter time gaps between them. They also suggested expanding the target audience (e.g., to include audit and paying authorities) and broadening the range of topics (e.g. to include capitalisation).

Improving Knowledge Fair

The potential of the Interreg Knowledge Fair has not yet been realised. More input into the content creation for the Fair, really focussing on programmes' needs would further strengthen the new approach to the event and enable even more value to be extracted from it.

Acknowledge Technical troubles

Public sector technology challenges should be considered for future technological exchanges (currently offered in the IBM platform). It needs to be properly signposted, easy to navigate, aligned with relevant topics, and actively managed. Additionally, providing more support for onboarding new users is essential for fostering effective collaboration.

Tackle blocks on efficiencies

Some challenges in using Interact tools and services to their full potential, such as Jems, come from other stakeholders involved in managing Interreg. Interact could go further in supporting programmes to respond to regional authorities and other bodies who regulate Interreg. Harmonisation at the EU level can be undone if national and regional systems and processes do not follow. Interact could organise and coordinate events to promote harmonisation, troubleshoot issues with relevant bodies, share ideas and practices to realise the full potential of improvements.

What is missing?

During the consultation, stakeholders put forward a range of suggestions to enhance Interact's effectiveness and visibility.

Benchmarking and best practice sharing

Interact could support benchmarking for Interreg programme management. Not just where implementation is, but how the management and organisation of Interreg works on a macro-

level. It could further identify good or common practices on management, spending, and thematic focus to improve programming processes.

Enable more strategic focus

Assisting MAs in the preparatory phase of the programmes is essential. Stakeholders requested Interact to provide more support in fostering strategic thinking, with a special focus on economic and social development of territories, their contribution to the single market, as well as wider cooperation efforts. These activities should begin before the official programming period and involve a diverse range of experts, including university professors, to introduce fresh perspectives from beyond the cooperation bubble. Also, to inspire and encourage more experienced MAs with strategic thinking to share their ideas and views with less experienced MAs.

Be technological innovators

The importance of using new technologies for Interreg was noted. Interact could further support programmes by testing new technologies, as well as adopting them for its own management and services. One idea was an AI chatbot for programme management.

Furthermore, it was suggested that making it mandatory for programmes to submit relevant data to keep.eu would strengthen Interact's position, while fostering a more integrated system data management, not just Interact tools but wider reporting structures. Thereby streamlining information flows and improving data exchange.

Stronger focus on added value

Stakeholders believed that increasing the visibility of Interact would further strengthen its position and boost the use of its products. Additionally, they called for more visibility of Interact, focusing not only on its results but also on explaining its purpose, importance, and the added value of cooperation and partnerships to policymakers.

Language of cooperation

The translation glossary of common terminology to improve clarity and communication should be re-provided. They also proposed offering services in multiple languages, particularly for certain events involving smaller programme groups, to make Interact more accessible.

Provide contact points for programmes

The absence of dedicated contact points for programmes or member states was noted. Having such contact points could improve communication and support. They also advised organising a fair of good practices to showcase innovative and unusual solutions. Another creative idea was the development of podcasts based on the experiences of different programmes, sharing lessons learned and reaching a wider audience.

Provide more ways to connect

The fact that programmes have shared regional, strand, thematic, and other specialised focal points provide more ways to connect people in Interreg and develop collaboration. This is both between people handling similar tasks and those working in related roles. The Thematic networks (not live in March 2024), were missed, and much needed to provide exchange between programmes.

What would be your vision for the future?

(What is the biggest innovation, inspiration or change a future Interact programme could offer to make cooperation easier?)

Interact is envisioned as playing an inspirational, high-level role in the future. It is seen as a key force for cooperation - often behind the scenes but essential, especially in today's challenging and evolving environment.

Think tank and thought leadership

Acting as a Cooperation Think Tank, Interact could shape a longer-term vision for cooperation across Europe. It could draw on global best practices to find effective solutions, as well as do more to share and promote innovative ideas and best practice. This should have a strategic orientation, to enable future programmes to achieve more.

Additionally, it brings Interreg programmes closer together, serving as a powerful ambassador for cooperation. By promoting fact-based results, it raises awareness among citizens, politicians, and youth, while fostering strategic partnerships. It also addresses negative narratives surrounding cohesion policy.

In the future, Interact is expected to continue building up a positive environment for cooperation that fosters the exchange of experience and encourages innovative thinking.

Connecting Interreg to the wider EU bubble

Stakeholders foresee the future programme as a bridge connecting Interreg with mainstream programmes and facilitating links between Interreg and other EU funds and initiatives like Horizon, Erasmus, European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, in the future. This role is based on the programme's strong position to support exchange and learning, strengthening collaboration and knowledge sharing across these entities. Furthermore, they also see Interact as a key interlocutor between the European Commission and external programmes in the future.

It was suggested that the programme take a more active role as a spokesperson for Interreg while continuing to offer its services to these programmes.

Stronger role in external cooperation

Stakeholders advocated for a broader geographical and thematic scope for the future programme, highlighting the importance of addressing the current sensitive geopolitical landscape and the evolving needs of various programmes. They emphasised the necessity of considering enlargement and the potential to provide support to candidate countries, bringing Interact's extensive experience in fostering cooperation and development to the candidate countries, and in supporting the administrative capacity of candidate countries, especially in managing EU funds.

More money to do more for programmes

Additionally, they called for an increased budget for the next programming period, asserting that additional funding is essential to effectively implement these expanded initiatives and

support the evolving needs of the programme's stakeholders. Stakeholders also recommended embracing emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), to enhance the programme's effectiveness. They emphasised the potential of harnessing AI to tailor guidance and support, ensuring that resources are customised to meet the specific needs of users.

Lots of potential for cooperation to go further

Several areas were identified where additional assistance and support will be needed in the future, including synergies between geographically connected programmes; capitalisation; harmonised brand and communication; state aid; Interreg promotion and showcasing project results; simplification and harmonisation; and IT integration.

There is potential to further advance the MRS embedding process, establishing a stronger link to mainstream programmes and acting as a driver for all MRS by providing targeted thematic support and engaging key actors from MRS governance structures, such as priority area coordinators (PACs).

Maintain and improve shared management concept

The Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT) should be retained and further developed where possible. Jems, or another future monitoring system, should continue and continue in its approach as a voluntary software open to new plugins and editing. More functionalities and better integration with other tools (e.g. Kohesio) could be realised. Other stakeholders proposed that Jems should be mandatory in the future in order for Interreg better realise these benefits.

To ensure continuity and better meet the programme's needs, stakeholders stressed the importance of strategically co-designing services with Interreg programmes. They suggested enhancing delivery methods through peer-to-peer reviews and establishing communities of practice that foster open discussions, allowing diverse opinions to be shared safely. This collaborative approach aims to improve the cooperation environment across legal, administrative, and cultural dimensions.

Core business to simplify and harmonise

Interact's crucial role to sustain momentum to seek harmonisation and simplification was noted. The development and implementation of new initiatives (such as SCOs) needs Interact's support. Interact should also continue to focus on finding and sharing best practices to foster learning across programmes, as well as seeking examples from outside the Interreg world.

Make inter-programme communication easier

It was suggested that a simpler approach, such as chatrooms on interact.eu, could provide better and easier space for programmes to exchange documents and ideas, to foster collaboration and innovation.

2.4. Interesting quotes

What do you value most about Interact's service offer? What would you miss the most if Interact did not exist?

- Facilitating the knowledge sharing between Interreg programmes. A scenario where Interact didn't exist would be a nightmare - I would miss the confidence I get from comparing notes with other programmes and Interact experts (Merike Niitepöld, Central Baltic Programme)
- Interact plays a crucial role in gathering and sharing professional knowledge, which is essential for territorial cooperation programmes. Without Interact, we'd miss crucial expertise sharing across Europe. It provides invaluable contributions by spreading best practices, offering guidance, and promoting innovative approaches – all accessible to everyone at no cost. It is of great help that Interact developed the monitoring systems eMS/Jems used by our Programme (Daliana Vigu, Interreg VI Romania-Hungary)
- Mediator or "Bridge" to the Commission to represent the interests of Interreg programmes (Yvonne Schönlein, Interreg Saxony – Czechia)
- Some topics are anticipated by Interact well before the regulation is out, such as health. (Martin Guillermo Ramirez, Association of European Border Region)
- Interact is an extremely competent facilitator. Its added value is the expertise, skills and contacts to make cooperation happen. (John Bachtler, University of Strathclyde).

What is the biggest innovation, inspiration or change a future Interact programme could offer to make cooperation easier

- To compare Interreg and Horizon in order to take on board their simplified rules, especially on state aid (Curzio Cervelli, Interreg Euro-MED);
- Interact can play a pivotal role in connecting Interreg and research programmes/projects. (Eleni Marianou, Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions);
- Have all Interreg-programmes use Jems. Stop allowing MS using "their" own systems... Just do it! (Magnus Schönning, Interreg Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak (Denmark, Sweden and Norway));
- For the implementation phase Interact could cooperate more with programmes to reach the partners by organising joint trainings for projects (Christina Papageorgopoulou - Interreg VI-A "Greece-Bulgaria 2021-2027");
- Broaden the topic coverage to include topics such as ethics in CBC and trust building. (Martin Guillermo Ramirez, Association of European Border Regions);
- A specific coach for each programme, on request. (Roberta Fusco, ALCOTRA France-Italie).

3. Executive Summary

In the consultation process, stakeholders expressed strong interest in leveraging Interact's support moving forward, emphasizing the significant opportunities for experience exchange, knowledge sharing, and networking. They highlighted its pivotal role as a bridge between programmes and the Commission, all of which greatly enrich the Interreg community. They offered insights into enhancing Interact's assistance by broadening its geographical and thematic coverage, embracing emerging technologies like AI, further tailoring support to meet the diverse needs of programmes, focusing on harmonisation and simplification, and enhancing flexibility.

Interact post-2027 consultation summary:

1. Strengthen the Role of Interact as a Cooperation Think Tank

Position Interact as a high-level Cooperation Think Tank that shapes long-term cooperation visions across Europe by utilising global best practices and fostering innovative solutions and increasing efforts to raise awareness of Interact's role. Interact should assist programmes in transitioning from implementation to strategic thinking, particularly in preparation for sound financial management under the new financial perspective.

2. Expand Geographical and Thematic Scope

Expand geographical and thematic scope for Interact, ensuring responsiveness to geopolitical changes and the evolving needs of external programmes, including tailored support for EU candidate countries. Enhance Interact's role in connecting Interreg with mainstream and other EU funds and initiatives (e.g., Horizon, Erasmus), fostering stronger collaboration and knowledge sharing.

3. Increase Budget

An increased budget for Interact in the next programming period is essential to support expanded initiatives and effectively meet the growing needs of stakeholders. Particularly if Interact is to continue and expand an IT based offer, including supporting the practical application of AI. Such IT projects are high cost, and the money saved for programmes could be at a cost to Interact's core service portfolio.

4. Building Cooperation Skills for Effective Cohesion Policy

The strong focus on strengthening administrative capacity for a more effective Cohesion Policy can be seen as an investment in cooperation skills – skills that are essential for any public administration, not only for Interreg.

5. Position Interact as a Spokesperson for Interreg

Take on a more active role in representing Interreg, while continuing to provide tailored services to programmes. Actively promote Interreg among non-Interreg political stakeholders and decision-makers to enhance awareness and support for its initiatives.

6. Enhance Interact's own visibility

Interact should improve its visibility by promoting its services more effectively on social media and at relevant events to reach a broader audience.

7. Embrace Emerging Technologies

Interact to explore the use of emerging technologies, such as AI, with the aim to enhance programme effectiveness by tailoring guidance and support to user-specific needs (e.g., an AI chatbot for programme management to streamline processes and improve user experience).

8. Strengthen Support for Programmes

Interact to continue expanding the range of support and assistance provided to Interreg programmes as per their evolving needs. Also, to increase the variety of topics covered by Interact services and tools, while ensuring effective exchange and communication between programmes on topics, thematics, geographies and more.

Provide dedicated contact points for programmes or member states to improve communication and to provide tailored support, potentially offering services in multiple languages. Make it easier for programmes to find and communicate with each other.

Annex 1: List of abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
DG REGIO	Directorate-General for Regional Policy and Urban Policy
EU	European Union
EU Regions Week	European Week of Regions and Cities
EUSAIR	EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region
EUSBSR	EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
EUSDR	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
HIT	Harmonised Implementation Tools
IJG	Investment for Jobs and Growth
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
IVY	Interreg Volunteer Youth
Jems	Joint Electronic Monitoring System
JS	Joint Secretariat
MA	Managing Authority
MC	Monitoring Committee
MRS	Macro-Regional Strategies
PACs	Priority Area Coordinators