ISO2 and ISO3 |

A Safer and more secure Europe
More resilient regions bordering Russia, Belarus and Ukraine

Interreg Knowledge Fair session report | November 2025

Overview

This session focused on two of the three Interreg Specific Objectives proposed for the upcoming MFF period 2028-2034. The main aim was to explore the rationale behind ISO2 and the newly introduced ISO3 in the context of an evolving safety and security environment, and to clarify how these objectives connect with other policy areas addressing similar themes.

Methodology

The session opened with an introduction to both objectives by Simona Pohlova, Acting Head of Unt, D2, from the European Commission (EC), followed by a presentation from Interact on the general concept of resilience.

The EC also shared preliminary information on a forthcoming political communication concerning the EU's eastern borders, foreseen on the first quarter of 2026.

Two Interreg programmes then presented their practical experiences in implementing the current ISO2 and in supporting regions along the eastern borders:

- Malgorzata Chetko from the Poland–Ukraine Programme presented the ISO2 case and shared reflections on the future ISO3.
- Liina Luup from the Central Baltic Programme shared insights into the programme's work with eastern border regions.

These presentations were followed by a joint discussion focused on exchanging ideas, identifying key concerns, and reflecting on both the content and practical implementation aspects of the future ISO2 and ISO3.

Key discussion points

The discussion explored the strategic direction and future development of Interreg Specific Objectives 2 and 3 within the forthcoming MFF proposal 2028–2034.

Discussion highlighted that both objectives will play a vital role in strengthening the EU's internal and external resilience, especially considering the changing geopolitical and security environment. A key conclusion can be drawn that resilience, safety, and security are increasingly interconnected, and that Interreg should build on its cooperative approach to address these dimensions in a coordinated manner.

It was noted that broad and adaptable objectives will enable programmes to tailor their actions to local contexts and emerging risks. Future Interreg frameworks should therefore remain non-prescriptive, allowing flexibility, innovation, and cross-sectoral cooperation while maintaining coherent with wider EU priorities.

ISO2 – Safety and Security

While ISO2 was initially designed with a strong external border focus this has in practice later on limited the ability of internal programmes to embed it in their strategies, even though many recognise the need to deepen their understanding of this ISO, especially in view of the next programming period.

Participants underlined the need for clearer guidance on the civil scope of ISO2, particularly in contrast to the more defence-focused elements found in other policy priorities. Programmes stressed that a better understanding of how ISO2 should be interpreted and applied in internal border and central European contexts would support more consistent implementation. There was a shared interest in developing an explanatory note together with Interact to clarify the objective's civil content, and its practical implications for different territorial contexts. Participants also expressed a wish to broaden the thematic scope to encompass community preparedness, risk prevention, and the protection of critical infrastructure.

Discussions confirmed that while Interreg should not fund defence activities, it can support dual-use investments that strengthen both civilian and security capacities. Examples from Latvia and Lithuania demonstrated how infrastructure and technologies such as drones can serve both civil protection and, when needed, potential military support functions during natural disasters or evacuations.

The added value of ISO2 lies in its potential to connect policies, sectors and stakeholders, linking civil protection, public health, and infrastructure resilience within a cooperative framework. It was noted that flexibility and integration should guide the future design of this objective, allowing each programme to define priorities in line with regional needs and strategic vision.

ISO3 – More Resilient Eastern Border Regions

The forthcoming European Commission political communication on eastern borders (expected in Q1 2026) will be an important reference for defining the content and scope of ISO3. Communication will not limit only to Interreg or Cohesion policy but reaches out to all policy areas.

ISO3 is expected to address not only economic and infrastructural resilience, but also social and institutional stability, including access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and emergency response. References were made to analytical resources – including World Bank's catching up regions initiative, the Interreg Europe peer review, and the ESPON "Chanebo" study - as useful inputs for developing the future objective.

Interreg can play a key role in fostering cross-border cooperation and solidarity among regions facing shared pressures along the EU's eastern borders. It is foreseen that affected programmes are expected to contribute to ISO3.

The Concept of Resilience

Resilience was introduced as a comprehensive and cross-cutting concept, extending beyond climate adaptation and disaster management. It should also include social, infrastructural, and institutional dimensions, covering community preparedness, continuity of essential services, and the capacity of local governance systems.

It was noted that border regions are often overlooked in national policy frameworks, with centralised governance limiting local capacity to respond effectively to crises. By reinforcing a place-based and territorial approach, building on the experience of PO5 'Europe closer to citizens', Interreg programmes can further strengthen the role of local and regional stakeholders in addressing depopulation trends, improving access to essential services, and supporting the 'right to stay' in remote and vulnerable areas. This would ensure that interventions are better tailored to territorial needs and contribute to more balanced development across border regions.

Developing integrated resilience packages that combine civil protection, infrastructure, and social measures was considered as one possible way forward.

Regulations and articles of particular significance

ERDF-Interreg recital (13); art. 7.4. and 8.3. (b)

NRP recital (12)

Conclusions, plans for followed up

The forthcoming Interreg Plan proposal, to be published during 2026, will present the framework for the future ISOs. The Interreg community can contribute actively by sharing proposals and practical insights gathered from current implementation.

The session highlighted that the future of ISO2 and ISO3 should emphasise flexibility, integration, and local ownership, bridging the themes of safety, security, and resilience into a coherent and forward-looking Interreg approach.

Explanatory note to be prepared of the civil content of ISO2.

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