

Interreg Programme Management Handbook

Guide to the 2021-2027 period

The Interreg Programme Management Handbook comprises a series of factsheets. They can be read individually, or collectively, to understand the relevance of certain aspects of Interreg management. They cover the relevance, legal basis, key challenges and approaches to the given subject.

Factsheet | The roots and evolution of Interreg / European Territorial Cooperation¹

The roots and evolution of Interreg

Europe is a diversified collection of countries and regions with regard to history, political and fiscal systems, economic development, national laws, social affairs, geography, culture, language, etc. Despite these differences, cross-border cooperation across European states and regions has existed and developed over the centuries, long before 'Interreg times'. The first cooperation initiatives between local authorities from different European countries started shortly after the Second World War with the establishment of bilateral town twinnings. Transboundary cooperation initiatives developed throughout the 1950s and 1960s, especially among the regions of Benelux, North West Europe, Baltic and the Scandinavian states. In the 1970s and 1980s cooperating regions started establishing new Pan-European associations to represent their interests at the Community level. The most important of these were the Association of European Border Regions (EABR), founded in 1971, the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions (CPMR), founded in 1973, and the Assembly of European Regions (AER), founded in 1985.

Border regions, despite the removal of physical borders due to the European integration process, continued to face challenges which individual member states were unable to address, and which called for joint action by both countries or coordinated action at EU level. They suffered from the historical consequences of borders and the changed landscape of Europe after the Second World War; peripheral locations far away from political, economic, cultural and social centers of nation states; limited activities and effects compared with their full potential obtained in central regions; the fact that national borders remained borders between different systems, sectors, countries and peoples' minds. The progressing process of European integration, which resulted in a deepening (i.e., creation of a Single Market and Economic and Monetary Union with the single currency Euro) and widening (successive enlargements) of the EU, further increased the institutional and socio-economic differences across member states,

¹ Since the 2014-2020 programming period Interreg programmes and their stakeholders can choose to either keep the name European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) dominant in 2007-2013 or the brand name 'Interreg'. Both terms are acceptable and used interchangeably.

especially their border regions. Internal borders within the EU have changed continuously over the years, and their number has grown with each enlargement. Even though the Single Market created great opportunities for growth and development, not all regions benefited equally from the advantages of free movement of goods, services, capital and people. Also, globalization and its impact on weakening the autonomy of nation states and increasing functional interdependence between places, lead to growing interconnectedness in the EU. In the globalizing economy, cities and regions (rather than nation states) have become the focus for investments. New and expanded communication technologies, transport growth² and processes of spatial development were influenced by transboundary rather than local factors and needed to be addressed through more extensive cooperation and collaboration.

Addressing these challenges required a structured approach to cross-border cooperation. Through coordinated actions and joint decision making, authorities and people from border regions could work jointly on developing their cross-border areas as centres of commerce and services, transitioning their peripheral locations into attractive Europe-internal locations. The goal has become to turn weaknesses into opportunities and recognize cross-border regions as bridges and hubs between European countries.³

² Investments in strategic European high-speed rail connections and other large scale infrastructure projects such as the Oresund Bridge between Denmark and Sweden, demonstrated interconnectedness between regions and the need for further cooperation.

³ Recognising these challenges led to the creation in 1958 of the first 'Euroregion' at the German-Dutch border called 'Euroregio'. This first 'Euroregio' facilitated institutional cross-border cooperation, which developed substantially along the Rhine River, and supported tangible projects for the benefit of the cross-border area. Creation of institutional cooperation structures such as Euroregions was a result of increasingly intensified cooperation between people and institutions on both sides of the border. The first cross-border cooperation strategy in the 'Euroregio' Germany-Netherlands received financial support from the European Economic Community in 1972. In 1986 the European Commission supported the second regional cross-border development strategy/programme for the 'Euroregio' and in 1987 a budget line of ECU 1.7 million was secured for cross-border cooperation. It was the first time a financial instrument was established in the EU budget for pilot cross-border cooperation projects. In parallel other cross border cooperation initiatives developed in Europe covering Western European Countries (D, NL, B, F, UK, CH, AT) and Scandinavia (DK, SE, FI, NO).

1. INTERREG I (1990 – 1993)

In the late 1980s the European Commission designed a policy for territorial cooperation, which meant moving away from short-term and one-off pilot actions towards a long-term, consistent strategy. This structured approach to cooperation also meant coordination of 'cooperation policy' with other EU policies and interventions.⁴ In 1989 the European Commission granted EUR 21 million of financial support under article 10 of the ERDF Regulation to 14 cross-border pilot projects. They were designed to address structural development difficulties in border regions in two areas: 1) institutional separation of border communities, where economic and social separation prevents coherent management of the ecosystems, and 2) actual peripheral location of cross-border regions in relation to their respective national economic centres.

These pilot projects were the basis on which in 1990 the European Commission created the INTERREG I Community Initiative, implemented as 31 operational programmes established at internal EU borders, with an ERDF allocation of EUR 1.082 million. This initiative was also a result of the European institutions' belief that 'it makes no sense for planning to stop artificially at national borders'. Consequently, actions supported through INTERREG I were devised to accelerate the integration of internal border regions into the Single Market, reducing the isolation of border areas with non-EU countries, and promote joint addressing of spatial development issues. INTERREG I offered authorities from the border regions both financial incentives and a legal framework to engage in cooperation projects supporting working together across borders towards common goals, addressing common territorial challenges, bringing Europeans closer together, sharing good practice and learning from each other.

The launch of INTERREG I represented the enhancement of multi-level governance⁵ in Europe, as INTERREG funding did not have to be awarded to individual nation-states but could be allocated directly to specific cross-border regions covered by an INTERREG programme. INTERREG built on existing structures and supported their further development, enabling a direct dialogue between the European institutions and regional and local authorities within member states. The approach of involving regions and municipalities directly in designing and implementing INTERREG programmes and a dialogue with the European institutions was often viewed as a means to circumvent national governments in pursuit of their own agendas.

⁴ An important milestone in the creation of INTERREG was a reform of structural funds in 1988. This reform introduced an important innovation as it enabled the European Commission on its own initiative 'to propose to the member states that they submit applications for assistance in respect of measures of significant interest to the Community' not covered by member states' individual development plans. These measures addressed problems that required EU-level intervention as member states were not able to address them on their own. [This was the application of the principle of subsidiarity in practice]. Through this (and other) Community Initiative, the European Commission has been able to focus attention on particular European problems and opportunities concerning regional development, experimenting with new approaches and emphasizing actions to promote the development of networks and cooperation between regions across national borders.

⁵ Multi-level governance is an approach often used to describe the policy process in the EU. It emphasizes complex interactions between different levels of governance in the EU: supranational (EU level institutions such as the European Commission, European Parliament, European Council, etc.), national, regional and local. The concept of 'multi-level governance' was first developed in relation to EU cohesion policy, which has been based on the 'principle of partnership' between European, national, regional and local authorities involved in the design and implementation of structural funds operational programmes. The core of multi-level governance is the claim that policy making competencies in the EU are shared among actors at multiple levels of governance (supranational, national, regional, local) and are no longer monopolised by nation states.

2. INTERREG II (1994 – 1999)

The success of INTERREG I was recognized and built on, and the initiative continued in 1994–1999 as INTERREG II. In its second edition, INTERREG witnessed the signing of the Treaty on European Union (1992), the accession of Austria, Finland and Sweden (1995), and extended cooperation along external EU borders. INTERREG II initially consisted of two strands: INTERREG IIA on cross-border cooperation (former INTERREG I) and INTERREG IIB on the completion of selected energy networks (former REGEN initiative). In 1997 a third strand, INTERREG IIC, on transnational cooperation was added in the context of the preparation of European Spatial Development Plans for large groupings of geographical areas.

The aims of INTERREG II A initiative were to assist border regions to overcome specific development problems resulting from their isolation from the centers of national economies, and to encourage the creation and development of cooperation networks on both sides of border regions. Projects financed within INTERREG II A programmes focused on tourism, energy and environment, agriculture and rural activities, creation of SMEs, transport and telecommunications, R&D, health, training and employment. The aims of INTERREG IIC were to promote a harmonious and balanced spatial development of the EU, foster transnational cooperation in the field of spatial planning, contribute to improving the impact of Community policies on spatial development, and to help member states and their regions cooperate in a pro-active way to address common problems in the field of spatial development and water resources management. INTERREG IIC supported transnational cooperation in 7 cooperation areas⁶: Western Mediterranean and Latin Alps, South-Western Europe, Atlantic Area, North West Metropolitan Area, North Sea Area, Baltic Sea Area, Central Adriatic Danube and South European Area. Flood mitigation programmes for transnational river basins⁷ and drought prevention⁸ programmes for Mediterranean countries were created in parallel. Furthermore, four Article 10 Pilot Actions were set up for additional large transnational cooperation areas (Northern Periphery, Western Mediterranean / Latin Alps, Alpine Space and Mediterranean Gateway). All these actions supported in ‘mega-regions’ under INTERREG II C were part of the process of preparing the European Spatial Development Perspectives – an approach promoting a polycentric balanced development and a new urban-rural relationship, parity of access to infrastructure, and knowledge and wise management of natural and cultural heritage. This was also in line with the logic of Europe 2000 studies stating that ‘it makes no sense for planning to stop artificially at national borders.’

The Community contribution to INTERREG II was approximately ECU 2.6 billion, which when match-funded by national, regional, local or private resources, amounted to approximately ECU 4 million. These funds helped finance more than 10.000 cooperation projects. From 1994 cross-border cooperation was supported by the PHARE Cross-Border Cooperation programme in the border areas of Central and Eastern Europe which had a common border with the EU. In the case of the States of the former Soviet Union, there was TACIS Cross-Border Cooperation programme.

The added-value of INTERREG was recognized also this time in ex-post evaluation, which stated “the overall assessment of INTERREG II shows that extensive added-value was generated by the programmes of all three strands. INTERREG II programmes have made it possible to recognize, and provided financial resources to deal with specific problems associated with national borders or issues of a transnational nature, which otherwise would not have been addressed.”

⁶ These programmes covering the following areas: Western Mediterranean and Latin Alps, South Western Europe, Atlantic Area, North Western Metropolitan Area, North Sea Area, Baltic Sea Area, Adriatic and Danube and South east Europe – CADSES

⁷ Two flooding programmes: IRMA (Meuse-Rhine area and France-Italy)

⁸ Four operational programmes for Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece

3. INTERREG III (2000 – 2006)

The INTERREG III Community Initiative continued in the 2000–2006 programming period with a budget of EUR 4.875 billion, and consisted of 5 different operational elements:

- 1) Strand A on cross-border cooperation, promoting an integrated regional development between border regions, including external and maritime borders;
- 2) Strand B on transnational cooperation was a continuation of INTERREG IIC, and contributed to the development of an integrated territorial approach to regional policy. B-programmes were designed around transnational strategies supporting the development of genuine transnational cooperation;
- 3) Strand C on interregional cooperation, expanding development potential for EU regions lagging behind and for those undergoing conversion, through interregional cooperation to improve cohesion policies and instruments, information exchanges and sharing of experience;
- 4) The programme ESPON (European Spatial Planning Observatory Network), focusing on the observation and analyses of territorial and regional development trends in Europe, and spatial planning networked research of relevance to EU territory;
- 5) The programme INTERACT (INTERREG Animation, Cooperation and Transfer) – technical assistance programme providing services to stakeholders implementing all INTERREG programmes.

The third edition of INTERREG was characterized by the eastern enlargement of the EU, along with Malta, and the consequent increase of cross-border cooperation programmes to 62. During this programming period great attention was given to territorial integration with candidate and neighbouring countries; strengthening of genuine Pan-European partnerships and cooperation, through enhancing the partnership principle and through the bottom-up approach to designing the programmes with greater involvement of local and regional partners; requirement for joint programme bodies and joint bank accounts; introduction of the lead partner principle and a lead partner in charge of financial management and coordination of partners in the operations; adoption of the Regulation on European Groupings of territorial Cooperation (2006).

INTERACT

At the initiative of the European Commission, the technical assistance programme INTERACT was created in 2003 to facilitate exchange of experience and good practice among INTERREG programmes through networking actions linked to experiences gained under Strands A, B and C of INTERREG III. INTERACT was both a support programme and an observatory for cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation, and its tasks included coordination and exchange of experience, good practice and actions undertaken through INTERREG III; technical assistance and promotion of the creation and consolidation of joint structures for programming, monitoring and management; coordination of interregional cooperation and collection of information on projects approved and their implementation; publications, databases and websites. Through INTERACT a new cooperation dimension for INTERREG was established, complementing activities undertaken by all three strands A, B and C

4. INTERREG IV (2007 – 2013): European Territorial Cooperation and objective three of EU cohesion policy

In 2007–2013 cooperation was recognized as a cornerstone of EU cohesion policy, and INTERREG was made into a separate structural fund objective – European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) – alongside the ‘convergence’ and ‘competitiveness’ objectives. The budget for cooperation almost doubled to EUR 8.7 billion; however, it had to be shared between 27 member states. Additional co-financing from governments and other sources added to this amount, making INTERREG IV a powerful instrument in financial terms. Becoming a separate objective of cohesion policy implied that European Territorial Cooperation programmes were considered on an equal basis with the mainstream national and regional development programmes. This meant more visibility for cooperation, an improved legal basis, closer links with existing thematic strategies, and higher expectations for achievements.

In the 2007–2013 programming period European Territorial Cooperation supported 75 cross-border cooperation programmes (including external borders) – Strand A; 13 transnational programmes – Strand B; 4 EU-wide programmes: INTERREG IVC, ESPON, INTERACT and the newcomer URBACT⁹ – Strand C. It was guided by the ‘Community Strategic Guidelines for Cohesion’ and directed towards achieving thematic priorities such as innovation, environment, accessibility and sustainable urban development. The cross-border areas within INTERREG IVA programmes became larger (one border = one programme) and interregional cooperation programme IVC began to be administered by one central secretariat based in Lille, France.

⁹ URBACT was created to facilitate transnational exchanges on integrated urban development. It was created in 2002 but it was integrated into European Territorial Cooperation objective in 2007. Previously URBACT was part of the Community Initiative URBAN.

5. Interreg V (2014 – 2020) and goal two of EU cohesion policy

In the 2014–2020 programming period, Interreg became one out of two goals of EU cohesion policy, with an allocated budget of over EUR 8.9 billion, which amounted to 2.75% of the global resources available for EU cohesion policy at the time. It was allocated across 79 multi-country programmes:

- a) 60 cross-border co-operation programmes along internal EU borders with an ERDF contribution of EUR 6,6 billion (this constituted approximately 74% of the cooperation goal budget)
- b) 15 transnational co-operation programmes covering larger areas of co-operation such as the Baltic Sea, Alpine, Danube, Mediterranean Region, etc. with an ERDF contribution of EUR 2,1 billion (approximately 20.36% of the cooperation goal budget)
- c) The interregional co-operation programmes: INTERREG EUROPE, INTERACT, URBACT and ESPON, with a global ERDF contribution of EUR 0,5 billion (approximately 5.59% of the cooperation goal budget).

Interreg / Cooperation goal-specific regulation - EC 1299/2013

In the 2014 – 2020 programming period Interreg, for the first time in its history, got its own regulation. This was motivated by the fact that the general regulations were ‘not fully adapted to the specific needs of the European Territorial Cooperation goal, where at least two Member States or one Member State and a third country cooperate.’ The regulation for the territorial cooperation goal laid down provisions which are specific to Interreg, and covered such elements as Interreg’s scope, geographical coverage, financial resources, thematic concentration and investment priorities, programming, monitoring and evaluation, technical assistance, eligibility, management, control and designation, participation of third countries, and financial management.

6. Interreg VI (2021 – 2027)

Interreg VI is the current version of Interreg, it continues to be European Territorial Cooperation, goal two of EU cohesion policy.

Compared to Interreg V, Interreg VI has introduced three significant changes:

1. The addition of strand D: Outermost Regions Cooperation. This expansion broadens the geographical scope of Interreg, and reflects the EU's commitment to fostering regional integration beyond its internal borders.
2. The 2021-2027 period aligns Interreg more closely with the cohesion policy objectives and the addition of two Interreg-specific objectives.
3. External cooperation programmes (former IPA II and ENI programmes - current IPA III and NDICI programmes) have been integrated as part of the Interreg family.

The budget for Interreg VI is EUR 9.072 billion, slightly higher than the previous period. This budget is allocated across 96 cooperation programs, distributed among **four** strands:

- Strand A: Cross-Border Cooperation: 73 programmes.
- Strand B: Transnational Cooperation: 14 programmes.
- Strand C: Interregional Cooperation: 4 programmes.
- Strand D: Outermost Regions Cooperation: 5 programmes

Areas of focus for Interreg VI

Interreg VI focuses on several key areas for the 2021-2027 programming period:

- Improving regional connectivity: Enhancing infrastructure and transportation networks across borders, making regions more accessible and connected.
- Increasing innovation and economic growth: Through cross-border collaborations, regions can share knowledge, pool resources and develop innovative solutions that drive economic growth.
- Environmental protection: By working together, regions can more effectively address environmental challenges, promote sustainability and reduce the impacts of climate change.
- Social inclusion and governance: Interreg VI places a strong emphasis on improving governance and social inclusion, to ensure that all citizens, regardless of where they live, can benefit from EU policies.

Key features of Interreg

What is it?

- EU's primary instrument to support cooperation across national borders, financed by the ERDF and match-funded by national/private funds;
- In 2021-2027 goal two of cohesion policy, it operates in all member states and consists of 4 elements: Strand A cross-border cooperation, Strand B transnational cooperation, Strand C interregional cooperation (INTERREG EUROPE, ESPON, URBACT and INTERACT), Strand D outermost regions cooperation;
- Has a genuine Community dimension, and contrary to other EU instruments supporting national policies, it supports Community goals and interests;
- Differs from the majority of cohesion policy programmes in one important aspect – it involves cooperation among authorities of two or more member states.

Strategic objectives:

Addresses the cohesion objective of ERDF: 'helps redress the main regional imbalances in the Community; reduces the gap between the levels of development of the various regions and the extent to which the least-favoured regions and islands, including rural areas, are lagging behind.'

Aims:

Strategic objectives of Interreg have been translated into the following aims:

- To prevent national borders from becoming an obstacle to integration and balanced economic, social and cultural development of the European territory;
- To correct negative effects and disadvantages of isolation of some regions located in the border or periphery of nation-states;
- To encourage regions to benefit directly from Interreg funding to address disadvantages of their location;
- To provide authorities with incentives to turn towards neighbours on the other side of their national borders, and with tools to jointly manage the socio-economic, environmental and territorial challenges of the region.

Focus of support:

- Facilitates development of cross-border, transnational, interregional and outermost regions cooperation as a method of work and a feature of daily activities for institutions and people across Europe;
- Facilitates establishment of lasting cooperation frameworks for action in support of economic development in areas where efforts were previously fragmented by the existence of a national border;
- Facilitates maturing of cooperation tradition, understood as existence and scope of legal framework conditions for cooperation, as well as existence and capacity of permanent cross-border structures;
- Facilitates pooling and exchange of experience and know-how in areas of shared interest and concern;
- Stimulates generating ideas 'locally' in the region and for the region, and translation of these ideas into tangible actions for the benefit of the region;
- Facilitates thinking of a region (especially cross-border or transnational) as a 'shared' rather than 'private' area;
- Supports activities which are genuinely additional in relation to member states' own efforts;
- Finances revitalization of regions along the Community's internal and external borders;
- Generates added-value in various sectors (cooperation networks, knowledge bases, policy proposals, development of a transnational planning culture, realization of projects with strategic character, testing innovative approaches, joint actions to address environmental challenges, etc.). Provides opportunities to develop and test innovation by experimenting with new approaches;

- Supports projects and networks carried out on a common cross-border basis and demonstrating positive impact on the development of either side of the border. Supports projects that seek to build on Europe's territorial assets through cooperation;
- Expected to deliver value in addition to that which would have been secured by national and regional authorities and the private sector. Interreg focuses on actions that member states and regions would not otherwise undertake and that can have significant leverage effects, bringing funds from other sources;
- Provides a laboratory for the principles of subsidiarity and partnership through direct involvement of regional and local interests and 'bringing the European Union closer to its citizens';
- Through a 'place-based' approach, Interreg promotes multi-level governance – involvement of actors from regional and local institutions or other local partners to actively devise, implement and take responsibility for development strategies in the region;
- Contributes to better integration of new members through cooperation and transfer of know-how between authorities from the 'old' and 'new' EU regions.

Features of supported operations:

- Prepared jointly by cross-border or transnational committees and all relevant partners from all countries covered by the programme;
- Good practice examples involve extensive cross-border, transnational or interregional cooperation and joint actions, and could not have been realized under a single mainstream programme of Structural and Investment Funds;
- Programme and project operational frameworks are developed through institutionalization of 4 cooperation principles: joint development, implementation, staffing and financing (i.e., setting up a joint monitoring (and steering) committee, joint secretariat, joint bank account, etc.), to facilitate the implementation of genuine multi-country cooperation programmes;
- Complex, due to many actors involved;
- Flexibility in the organisation of the joint management and implementation procedures.

Challenges faced by Interreg

- The level of financial support available through Interreg is small for the scale of problems addressed;
- Complex and resource-intensive coordination and administration of multi-country programmes and projects;
- Insufficient political backing for Interreg;
- Insufficient exploitation of Interreg project results;
- Weak complementarity of Interreg with other Structural and Investment Funds programmes;
- Developing and maturing of genuine cooperation and high quality of cross-border or transnational projects is often longer and more complex than expected;
- The spirit of genuine cooperation has not emerged clearly – many programmes support mainly infrastructure and endogenous development in each country's own border region; border programmes are developed in parallel in accordance with the national perspective and presented to the European Commission jointly with a neighbour country; (INTERREG II);
- Strong lack of experience in cooperation, especially in border regions; centralized administrative bodies and lack of mutual trust between different tiers of government (central, regional and local) challenge creation of lasting cross-border cooperation structures; in consequence, cross-border regions are locked in a vicious circle – low level of involvement of local and regional partners; (INTERREG II);
- Peripheral location, long isolation of border regions and separation from neighbours are major obstacles which are not addressed sufficiently; (INTERREG II).

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

Copyright: This product is licensed under Creative Commons, under the 'Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International' license (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

You are permitted to share and adapt this work. You are required to attribute the work, indicating if changes were made. You are required to offer revised work on the same license basis. The material cannot be used for commercial purposes.

For more information about this license please visit creativecommons.org

Publisher | Interact programme
Date | 23.04.2025
Author | Jon Bergthorsson
Contributors | Robert Mazurkiewicz



Interact



Co-funded by
the European Union
Interreg