

# Stories of European cooperation

Key priorities supporting EU growth: policy objectives and the added value of Interreg



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# Introduction

Europe stands at a defining moment. Across our Union, geopolitical pressures, democratic fatigue, and growing inequalities are testing our cohesion like rarely before. At a time when distrust spreads faster than facts, choosing cooperation is not simply an administrative preference. It is a commitment to a Europe that thrives through unity rather than fragmentation.

This belief is anchored in my own experience. For 14 years, as Mayor of Kočevje, I saw how European cohesion policy can revive communities that once felt distant from national centres of power. In Kočevje, EU-funded projects helped strengthen local resilience, attract investment, and offer young people reasons to see their future at home rather than elsewhere. These were not abstract initiatives; they shaped streets, institutions, and opportunities. That is why, to me, cohesion is not a slogan - it is a lived reality.

But the political message is clear: Europe cannot afford to take cohesion for granted. In the upcoming negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework and the NRPPs, cohesion policy must not become a budgetary balancing item. It is one of the Union's most effective instruments for delivering fairness, stability, and long-term development. Reducing it would mean weakening regions that already face structural challenges - and widening divides at the very moment when we need unity most.

Interreg, in particular, deserves strong political defence. Cross-border cooperation may seem technical to some, but it is one of the most powerful expressions of the European idea. When firefighters from neighbouring countries train together, when environmental authorities jointly protect shared ecosystems, when hospitals coordinate emergency care across borders, citizens see Europe not as a distant bureaucracy but as a partner in daily life. Projects like COPE, Fresh Ways, or A3MAtlantic illustrate how local needs and European ambition can merge to create solutions that no single region could achieve alone.

A concrete example makes this even clearer: in many border regions, Interreg-funded health networks have ensured that patients receive care in the closest available facility - regardless of the national side it sits on. Such cooperation saves time, resources, and sometimes lives. It also builds trust between communities that may never have interacted otherwise.

For the Greens, defending cohesion is defending solidarity. It means ensuring that Europe's ecological transition is fair, that rural and peripheral regions are not left behind, and that young people everywhere - east, west, north, and south - can access opportunities that give them hope. Cohesion is the backbone of a Union that promises not only growth, but fairness and dignity.

As we look ahead to critical budgetary decisions, the responsibility is political and clear: to champion cooperation, protect cohesion, and ensure that the European project remains a project for all - not just for a few.



**Vladimir Prebilič**  
MEP, Greens/EFA Coordinator  
in REGI Committee

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# Atlantic SMEs dive into global Blue Economy

The A3MAtlantic project helps small businesses from Europe's outermost regions break isolation, innovate, and sail into international markets

Meeting with the Canadian Embassy during their visit to Gran Canaria (Spain).

*By Erica Usai*

From the far-flung islands of the Mid-Atlantic, a wave of innovation is connecting small businesses to the world. The A3MAtlantic project, funded by the Interreg MAC 2021-2027 programme, is empowering SMEs in the blue economy -from ship repair to ocean technologies- to compete internationally and grow sustainably.

Led by the Canary Islands Maritime Cluster (CMC) and supported by 19 partners from Madeira, the Azores, the Canary Islands, and West African countries such as Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, and Ghana, the project bridges Europe and Africa across the so-called Mid-Atlantic. Its goal: to turn the ocean from a barrier into a shared opportunity.

## From isolation to innovation

For many outermost regions, remoteness has long meant higher costs, limited market access, and dependence on a handful of sectors like tourism. A3MAtlantic addresses these challenges head-on by

helping local entrepreneurs internationalize, diversify, and innovate.

In its first year alone, 48 entities have taken part in trade missions and business matchmaking events, joining international fairs such as Nor-Shipping 2025 in Oslo and meeting with experts from the Canadian Embassy in Spain. Plans are also underway for participation in Europort and BOOT Düsseldorf, two of Europe's flagship maritime exhibitions.

## Real results, real people

One of the beneficiaries is 'DC - Servicios Ambientales', a Canary Islands environmental consulting firm specializing in marine sustainability. Supported by A3MAtlantic, the company showcased its expertise at World Maritime Week 2025 in Bilbao, where it gained valuable contacts and new business perspectives. DC's partnership with the Spanish Institute of Oceanography is already producing data on underwater



Participation of A3MAtlantic SMEs in the international Nor-Shipping fair (Oslo).

noise and its effects on marine life: the proof that local know-how can have global relevance.

As Francisco Dominguez puts it, “there’s still much to learn, but we’re committed to moving forward, making sure that progress in our islands is both innovative and sustainable.”

### Educating children to build a blue future together

Beyond business, A3MAtlantic also invests in blue vocations. Thanks to its support, the CEIP Maestro Félix Santana school in Telde (Gran Canaria) recently became the first in the city to earn the EU Blue School label – inspiring a new generation to see the sea not as a limit, but as a horizon.

A3MAtlantic continues a decade-long legacy of regional cooperation initiated by the Macaronesian Marine-Maritime Alliance (A3M) and earlier Interreg projects like Smart Blue and SmartBlue\_F. Together, they have already supported over 200 companies, fostered innovation networks, and helped the Macaronesian islands position themselves as pioneers in the sustainable blue economy.

“Events like these allow us to connect with international players and explore emerging fields such as underwater acoustics”  
**Francisco Domínguez,**  
 the company’s project director



Press conference on the A3MAtlantic kick-off meeting.

## INTERVIEW

### Francisco Domínguez Yanes. Project director at SME 'DC Servicios Ambientales'

Among the first beneficiaries of A3MAtlantic's pilot actions is the Canary Islands SME 'DC - Servicios Ambientales'. Its project director, Francisco Domínguez Yanes, represented the company -a consultancy specialising in marine environmental services- at World Maritime Week 2025 in Bilbao, held from 19 to 21 March. His participation opened new doors for collaboration and business growth.

This experience illustrates how A3MAtlantic is helping regional SMEs gain visibility and competitiveness in the blue economy. The following interview was recorded on 26 March 2025 at the Canary Islands Maritime Cluster (CMC) for the local radio programme 'El Espejo Canario'.

#### What exactly does the company do?

We are an environmental consulting firm founded in the Canary Islands. We provide integrated support to companies and public administrations, helping them achieve environmental sustainability and create value through technical solutions.

#### In which areas of technology is the company developing?

I would highlight two initiatives that are particularly relevant to the blue economy in our region.

First, we have a collaboration agreement with the Spanish Institute of Oceanography, through which we are based at the Canary Islands Oceanographic Centre in Tenerife. Together, we work in the field of underwater acoustics – an area that has become increasingly important in the Canary Islands due to the growing intensity of maritime activities.

We use hydrophones and advanced acoustic systems to assess and manage underwater noise pollution and its impact on marine fauna. This collaboration allows us to collect and analyze precise scientific data for specialized research and publications.

DC's partnership with the Spanish Institute of Oceanography is already producing data on

underwater noise and its effects on marine life: the proof that local know-how can have global relevance.

The second initiative involves joint participation in oceanographic campaigns on the islands of La Palma and El Hierro, where we also carry out acoustic monitoring activities.

#### What is the interest of a company such as 'DC - Servicios Ambientales' in participating in international events like World Maritime Week? What makes you want to be there?

For us, and for any company in our sector, it's essential to take part in international events such as World Maritime Week. These gatherings are global meeting points where the latest and most innovative trends in the maritime sector are presented and discussed.

They also offer an excellent opportunity to learn, exchange experiences, and establish strategic connections with key players on the international stage.

#### What specific benefits did you gain from the event?

We came away with new ideas, diverse experiences, and strategic contacts that we hope will help us continue advancing our commitment to the blue economy. We've seen that investment in sustainable technologies, such as floating offshore wind energy, underwater acoustics, and advanced environmental monitoring, is a key driver for the energy and ecological transition in the Canary Islands. Beyond the clear potential for renewable energy development, these technologies provide an excellent roadmap for diversifying the islands' economy, creating skilled jobs, and preserving our valuable marine ecosystems.

We still have work ahead of us and much to learn, but we are committed to moving forward, ensuring that this progress remains both innovative and sustainable.

## A3MAtlantic at a glance

- 19 partners from Europe and West Africa
- 48 entities, mostly SMEs, joined internationalisation actions
- 6 territories connected: Madeira, Azores, Canary Islands, Côte d'Ivoire, Cape Verde and Ghana
- 1st EU “Blue School” in Telde
- 4 years of cross-border cooperation

More  
information  
about this  
project:



A3MAtlantic kick-off meeting (partners' group photo).



Erica Usai

- Age: 25
- Nationality: Italian
- Region where you are deployed: Canary Islands, Spain
- Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:  
multiculturalism, impact, progress



# Renewport project: Harnessing renewable energy for cleaner Mediterranean ports

Mediterranean ports take a major step towards decarbonisation with a new open-access toolkit helping ports shift from fossil fuel dependence to renewable energy hubs

By Sarah Chaouch

Ports are the beating heart of the Mediterranean economy, powering trade, tourism, and industry. But this activity comes with a heavy environmental footprint. Port operations consume large amounts of fossil fuels, leading to significant greenhouse gas emissions and long-term air and water pollution. With many ports located close to densely populated coastal areas, this pollution affects local communities as well as the environment.

To address this, cutting fuel consumption and switching to clean energy has become a strategic priority across Europe. Yet, many Mediterranean ports still lack common tools and strategies to plan and accelerate their green transition. That is where the Renewport project steps in.

## Turning ports into clean energy hubs

Renewport is a test project funded under the Interreg Euro-MED programme, running until late 2026. It

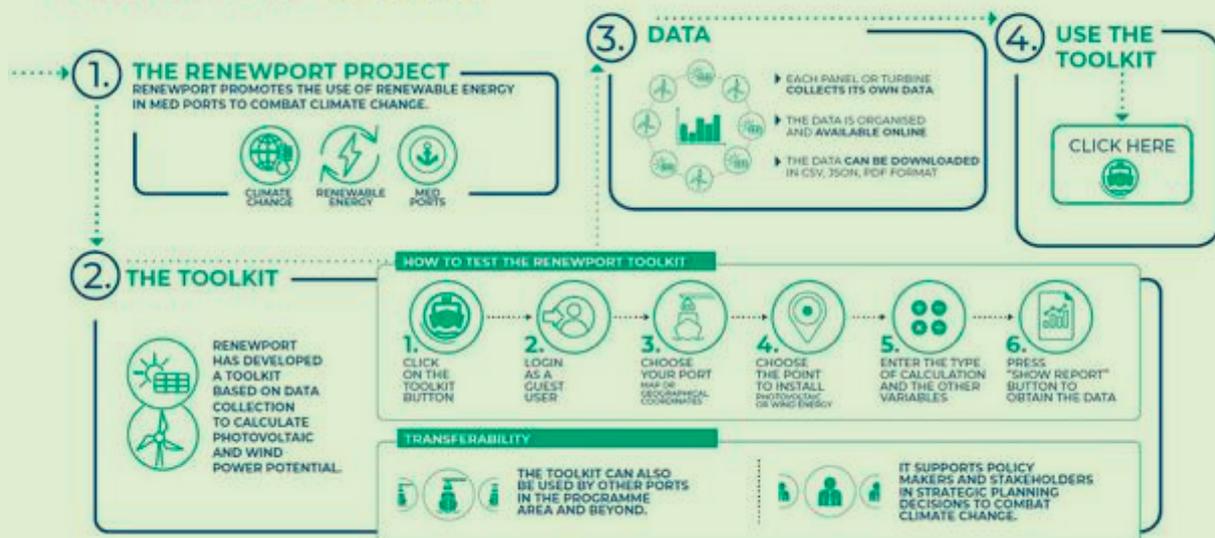
gathers 10 partners from seven countries --including port authorities, chambers of commerce, and maritime innovation organisations- to support ports in reducing emissions and adopting renewable energy solutions.

The project's goal is simple: help Mediterranean ports cut greenhouse gas emissions by unlocking the potential of renewable energy sources, mainly solar and wind power. Instead of treating ports as pollution hotspots, this project aims to turn them into active clean-energy producers, strengthening regional sustainability and energy independence.

## The RES Toolkit: renewable planning made accessible

At the core of the project is the Renewable Energy Sources (RES) Toolkit, a free online platform designed to guide ports in planning renewable installations and meeting EU climate goals.

## RENEWPORT TOOLKIT



### The tool allows users to:

- 1 Estimate solar and wind energy potential within port areas
- 2 Access practical guidelines and technical recommendations
- 3 Explore replicable examples from Europe and beyond
- 4 Understand planning implications through clear, accessible reporting tools

Unlike technical planning software designed only for engineers, the RES Toolkit is user-friendly and accessible to non-experts, empowering port authorities, municipalities, businesses, and even citizens to take part in driving the clean-energy transition. To build it, partners first carried out extensive benchmarking, analyzing the current situation in participating ports, studying international best practices, and identifying solutions that can be adapted to the Mediterranean context.

### From theory to testing in real ports

Pilot tests have already been launched in several participating ports. Early results show the platform's effectiveness in supporting practical renewable energy solutions, such as identifying suitable locations for solar and wind installations. Port authorities report stronger cooperation with local communities and energy providers, showing how shared planning tools can accelerate the shift towards cleaner maritime regions. As the toolkit evolves, it is designed to be replicable and scalable, offering a model that other ports across Europe -and beyond- can adopt.

### A blueprint for cleaner coasts

The Mediterranean is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions. By helping ports turn from fossil-fuel hubs into pioneers of clean energy, Renewport contributes to a more sustainable maritime future, where ports not only move goods and people, but also generate the energy that powers their coastlines.

As pilot results continue to emerge, the project could offer a powerful tool for accelerating the green transition of ports across Europe, proving that innovation, cooperation, and shared knowledge are key to achieving climate goals.

## INTERVIEW

### Veronika Carli - Port Network Authority of the Eastern Adriatic Sea (Lead partner)

#### Could you briefly explain how the RES Toolkit was developed?

Sure. In the first year of Renewport, all partners worked together on a big benchmarking exercise of Mediterranean ports. We wanted to understand where ports currently stand in terms of renewable energy and what good practices already exist in Europe and beyond. Based on that, we agreed on a common methodology for the toolkit: what it should include, what kind of calculations would be most helpful, and how to make it easy for different types of users.

From there, we built a web-based tool that's quite intuitive. People with little technical background can get quick estimates for solar or wind potential, while more experienced users can enter detailed parameters for more precise results. The tool uses reliable data sources like PVGIS for solar and the Global Wind Atlas for wind, and it presents results in a clear, visual way. It also lets you export data in several formats.

We shared an early demo within the partnership so everyone could test it and give feedback, and the tool has continued to evolve thanks to those exchanges.

#### Could you provide insights into how the RES Toolkit supported ports during the pilot tests?

The toolkit really helped ports move from ideas to concrete planning. During the pilot phase, port authorities and other stakeholders could run different scenarios, like changing the size of a solar plant or testing alternative layouts for wind turbines, and immediately see what kind of energy production they could expect. That made the planning much more grounded in real, local conditions.

In some pilots, we even had on-the-ground installations, such as walkable photovoltaic

panels in Valencia, and the toolkit helped estimate their impact and guide investment decisions. Beyond the technical side, the process encouraged collaboration between ports, municipalities, and energy providers, because everyone had a common reference point. This joint work not only improved the tool but also strengthened the community working toward cleaner energy in ports.

#### What are the next steps for the Renewport RES Toolkit (and the project in general) after the pilot tests?

The next big step is making sure the toolkit and all project results can be widely used, not just in the Mediterranean, but anywhere they're relevant. Everything was designed to be easily replicated, so public and private organizations can adopt the methods and apply them to their own planning. We've also made sure the data and methodologies follow solid standards and are available in open formats.

To support this transfer, we're launching an e-learning platform that walks users through how to apply the toolkit and the "ports as clean energy hubs" framework. Alongside that, we're setting up a community of practice where ports and energy stakeholders can exchange experiences, ask questions, and keep building on the project's work. Partners will also share the results within their institutional networks to help integrate them into regional policies and development plans.

And importantly, the materials won't disappear after the project ends. Everything will remain freely accessible on the project website, and the partner institutions have committed to continuing the collaboration and further developing the tools. The goal is to make Renewport a solid starting point for long-term energy transition in ports.

## Project at a glance

- **Name** RENEWPORT
- **Programme** Interreg Euro-MED
- **Duration** Until late 2026
- **Partners** 10 partners from 7 Mediterranean countries
- **Main goal** Support ports in transitioning to renewable energy sources and reducing emissions
- **Key output** Free online RES Toolkit to plan solar and wind solutions

## Impact

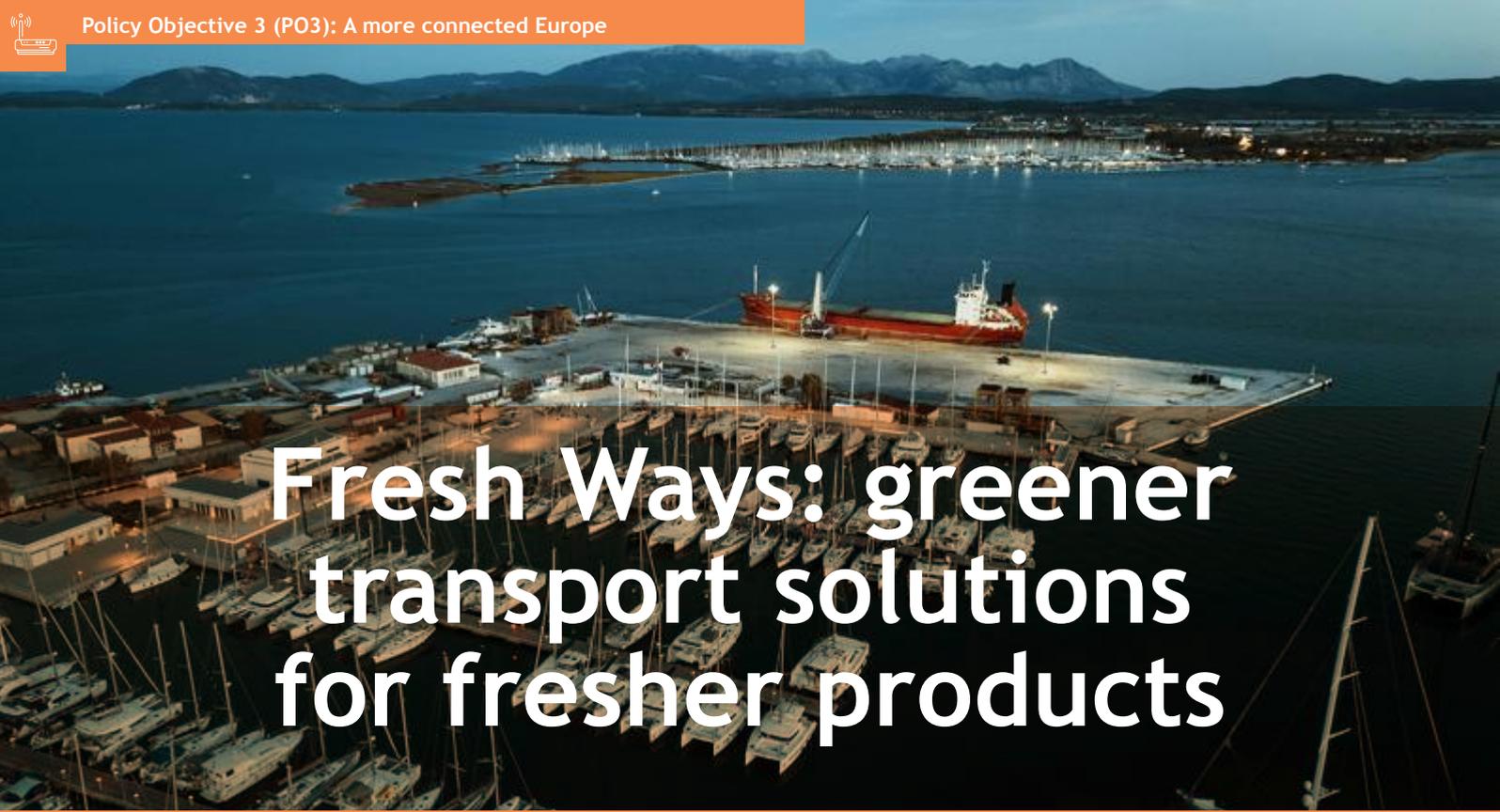
- 7 Mediterranean countries involved
- 10 major port operators and organisations collaborating
- Pilot tests already underway in multiple ports
- Toolkit built to support future adoption across the wider Euro-MED region

More information about this project:



Sarah Chaouch

- **Age:** 26
- **Nationality:** French
- **Region where you are deployed:** Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur (France)
- **Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:** solidarity, development, improvement.



# Fresh Ways: greener transport solutions for fresher products

This project brings healthier markets, cleaner air, and faster food routes to Greece and Italy

*By Fabio Barresi*

In the cross-border region between Puglia (Italy) and Western Greece, fresh food has always travelled, but not always easily. Despite centuries of trade across the Adriatic, transporting perishable goods today still relies heavily on trucks and long maritime journeys. The result? Higher emissions, slower deliveries, and a challenge to keeping products fresh and competitive.

To change this picture, the Fresh Ways project, funded by the Interreg Greece-Italy programme, has introduced a new model: using the empty cargo space on passenger flights to transport fresh goods. The initiative has strengthened greener, faster, and more efficient supply chains for local producers on both sides of the sea.

## Ionian transport challenges

The Ionian region's transport network remains heavily dependent on road freight. Trucks combined with ferry

routes often mean journey times of seven to fifteen hours, especially for fresh food moving from Puglia to inland Greek destinations.

This approach increases traffic, emissions, noise, and congestion while threatening the quality of high-value food products the region is famous for, from dairy and seafood to fruits and vegetables. To remain competitive and sustainable, the region needed modern, coordinated, multimodal transport options.

## Turning passenger planes into green logistics allies

Fresh Ways explored an innovative solution: optimizing existing passenger flights to carry fresh goods in their cargo holds. Through feasibility studies, market research, and cooperation with airports and local businesses, the project has demonstrated how regular passenger flights could also support freight, reducing



Inauguration of new hangar in Bari International Airport - Karol Wojtyla for Interreg Fresh Ways.

dependence on road transport and cutting delivery times.

A digital logistics platform and mobile app have been created to track shipments, support coordination, and help producers plan faster cross-border deliveries. A dedicated helpdesk and cross-border cooperation hubs have also improved dialogue between airports, authorities, and agri-food businesses.

### Real impact for businesses and the climate

The results speak clearly. The project is estimated to have helped reduce around 333 tons of road freight per year, cutting CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and easing congestion in sensitive coastal areas. Fresh Ways has also strengthened business links between Greece and Italy, supporting local SMEs in the agri-food and logistics sectors and improving seasonal flight use beyond the summer tourist peak.

This translates into better access to markets, fresher products for consumers, and year-round economic activity for border regions.

### Key Achievements

- Use of existing air passenger routes to carry fresh goods
- Around 333 tons of road freight avoided annually
- Faster cross-border deliveries
- Digital logistics platform & app created
- New cooperation hubs in Italian & Greek airports
- Stronger market access for small producers & exporters

## INTERVIEW

### Antonio Maria Vasile, President of Aeroporti di Puglia.

#### How has Aeroporti di Puglia benefited from the project?

Well, the project helped us on two fronts. On the practical side, we were able to recover an existing hangar in Bari and turn it into a logistics platform for fresh products, with an intermodal setup that also involves air transport. On the strategic side, leading the project gave us a stronger international role. It allowed us to rethink our airports not only as places for passenger traffic but as part of a wider logistics system, especially in the relationship between Italy and Greece. We also had the chance to test new multimodal solutions and to work closely with universities, research centres, and chambers of commerce, which really pushed innovation forward.

#### What data clearly shows the project's real impact on the area?

To start with, the project had a total budget of about €2.7 million under the Interreg Greece-Italy programme, which is already significant. Then there's the sheer number of Apulian companies—over 3,000 in the fresh-goods sector—that could benefit from easier access to the Greek market. Another concrete result is the creation of a collaboration platform among public institutions, universities, and businesses. That's something that clearly goes beyond the project itself and creates long-term value for the territory.

#### Was the project able to reach the expected reduction of at least 333 tonnes of road transport per year?

It's still too early to measure that kind of impact directly. Those results will only become clear over time. What we can say is that the project helped challenge the idea that Puglia is a 'peripheral' region compared to the main European production

hubs. It strengthened the region's strategy for better integrating local businesses into international logistics and value chains --so even if the exact reduction isn't measurable yet, the structural conditions to achieve it are now in place.

#### What strengths of this project could be capitalized on in a future project?

I'd say the most valuable elements are our geographical position, the dedicated infrastructure we now have, and the intermodal model we've tested. Bari airport, and Apulia in general, really sit in a strategic location within the Mediterranean. The project proved that we can evolve from a passenger airport into a real logistics hub. Then there's the cross-border network we built: cooperation with Greek partners and the involvement of so many local stakeholders. And finally, the potential for local SMEs—having faster, alternative export channels for fresh products is a big competitive advantage. All this can definitely be scaled up or replicated.

#### What was the added value of Italy-Greece territorial cooperation compared to non-cross-border projects?

Working with Greece added a real international dimension. It made the project more ambitious and more connected to wider regional markets. The Adriatic-Ionian corridor is a natural gateway, and this cooperation helped us leverage that position. It also created genuine business opportunities, since many Apulian fresh-goods producers already have potential markets in Greece and vice versa. Compared to a local project, this cross-border approach strengthens infrastructure planning, attracts more interest from international operators, and places Puglia in a broader Mediterranean logistics context.

## Project partners

**Lead Partner:** Aeroporti di Puglia S.p.A.

**Partners:** Chamber of Commerce of Bari  
University of Salento, Dept. of Innovation Engineering  
University of Patras, Dept. of Civil Engineering  
Chamber of Commerce of Preveza

More  
information  
about this  
project:



Patras Port.



Fabio Barresi

- **Age:** 26
- **Nationality:** Italian
- **Region where you are deployed:** Apulia, Italy
- **Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:**  
sustainability, integration, growth.



# Building confidence, connection, and career dreams: how CeMeWE empowers women

A Central Baltic initiative supports migrant women's skills and employment

*By Swathi Babu*

The CeMeWE project (The Central Baltic Mentoring for Migrant Women seeking Employment) is helping women across Europe discover their confidence, connect with each other, and pursue the careers of their dreams. As part of the Interreg Central Baltic programme, CeMeWE contributes to creating a more social and inclusive Europe by providing women with opportunities to learn, grow, and support one another, both personally and professionally.

CeMeWE's mission is simple yet powerful: to empower women to find not just any job, but the jobs of their dreams. The project offers one-to-one mentoring, hands-on workshops, and events that help participants build essential skills for employment, from communication and networking to professional development and self-confidence.

## A real space for women to speak up

Every event organized by CeMeWE is a safe space exclusively for women. Here, participants can freely express themselves, ask questions, and engage without fear of judgment. Many women who were once shy or uncertain now take active roles in planning and leading these events. One inspiring example is **Anjalee Madhushani**, a young woman who transformed her life through CeMeWE.

Anjalee shares, "I was busy finishing my thesis and had become quiet and inactive. After joining CeMeWE, I became more social and confident, maybe even more than before! The people around me motivated me, especially Nadiia and Swathi. I learned from their presentation skills every day."



CV making workshop.

“ I learned to manage time, take responsibility, and gained confidence, communication, and social skills”

She first discovered CeMeWE through a career event and began attending regularly after seeing how welcoming the community was. From being a participant, she grew into an event management intern, supporting the organization of activities and learning to manage responsibilities and time effectively. “It felt like starting a new job,” she says. “I learned to manage time, take responsibility, and gained confidence, communication, and social skills”.

CeMeWE’s workshops such as those on CV writing, motivational skills, and LinkedIn workshop for career

development have helped many women enhance their employability. At the same time, social events and peer gatherings have created a strong network of friendship and mutual support.

Anjalee smiles, “CeMeWE is the most welcoming and helpful group of women. Please join CeMeWE! You’ll make friends from different cultures, gain new skills, and have fun at the same time.”

#### Actual transformation through cooperation

Through stories like Anjalee’s, CeMeWE shows how cooperation across borders can lead to personal transformation and inclusion. The project is currently on track to engage over 500 women and create more than 800 cross-border participations by 2026, supporting immigrant women who face personal, social, and systemic barriers to employment.

By offering mentoring, skill-building workshops, and safe networking spaces, CeMeWE is not only helping women enter the job market - it is helping them gain confidence, community, and direction. By connecting women from different backgrounds in Finland,

Estonia, Sweden, and beyond, the project continues to embody the spirit of a more social and inclusive Europe - one story, one event, and one empowered woman at a time.

## CeMeWE at a glance

- **Programme:** Interreg Central Baltic
- **Countries:** Finland, Estonia, Sweden
- **Target group:** Migrant women seeking employment
- **Activities:** Mentoring, career workshops, peer support, networking
- **Duration:** 2023-2026
- **Goal:** Empower women to access meaningful careers and build confidence and networks

## Impact so far

- Hundreds of women already engaged in events and mentoring
- Strong cross-cultural support networks formed
- Participants reporting increased confidence, language skills, and professional readiness
- Several women taking leadership roles in planning and running events

## TESTIMONIAL

### Real stories through the camera lens

**By Maria Khrapunenko - Institute of Baltic Studies**

What does it really take to find a job in a new country? Courage, persistence, and sometimes a little help from those who've walked the path before you. As part of the CeMeWE project, we set out to capture the voices and experiences of migrant women navigating the job market in Estonia, Latvia, and Finland.

The result? A series of inspiring microlearning videos, created by women, for women, to offer both

practical guidance and emotional encouragement for others on a similar journey. The characters of the videos are not actors. These are real women: refugees, newcomers, career-switchers, students, parents, who've lived the challenges and small victories of looking for work in a foreign country.

Through interviews and open conversations, they share what helped them move forward: how they refined their CVs, overcame language and cultural barriers, built networks, and most importantly, stayed hopeful.



**Check out all the videos:** <http://bit.ly/4rPTQ6C>



Hands-on activities and lively discussions during the mentoring workshop in Riga.

More information about this project:



LinkedIn workshop, as part of the CeMeWE project.



Swathi Babu

- Age: 18
- Nationality: Indian
- Region where you are deployed: Jelgava, Latvia
- Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you: inclusivity, opportunity, unity.



# Bringing a neighborhood back to life

How the project COPE has helped revive a forgotten park and a community

*By Despoina Chatzikonstantinou*

When I first learned about the IVY programme and the Interreg-supported COPE project, I never imagined that within a year I would help transform my own neighborhood in Kavala or find myself in Copenhagen sharing our experience with cities from across Europe. What began as a simple volunteer role became a lesson in how cooperation can reshape both public spaces and the people who care for them.

### A European project with people at its core

COPE, funded by the Interreg URBACT programme, aims to help European cities redesign their public spaces by involving citizens directly. This year, as Interreg marks its 35th anniversary, I finally understood what European cooperation truly looks like: people talking, planning, disagreeing, trying again --and ultimately creating something together.

In Neapolis, an area of Kavala with both promise and long-standing challenges, COPE has set out to show what happens when residents, schools, associations, and local authorities work as one. The project's goal is clear: put citizens at the heart of neighborhood transformation.

### A community rediscovering itself

As an IVY volunteer, I have documented the process --listening to residents, talking with teachers, observing workshops, and capturing the small moments that reveal how communities evolve. What has struck me was not the technical side of the project but the willingness of people to show up.

One of them is **Kleopatra Thomaidou**, from the Parents' Association of the 24th Primary School. Her words captured the project's spirit: "I have met people from different countries who genuinely care about the green



transition. We've exchanged ideas, collaborated, and it has reminded us that we're not alone in this effort."

For her school, COPE has meant more than a nicer environment. Students have become more aware of climate issues, parents are also now involved, and teachers have gained new tools. The project hasn't simply changed a place: it has strengthened a community.

### A park reborn

The most visible transformation has taken place at Paphlagonia Park, a small green area that had long been neglected. It has been one of the few places where children could play, yet it lacked maintenance, accessibility, and features that encouraged people to stay.

Through COPE's citizen-driven approach, the Urban Local Group brought together residents, school representatives, municipal staff, and experts to rethink the park from the ground up. Decisions were made at shared tables where everyone had a voice. The result was a neighborhood space that finally felt like it belonged to the people who lived around it.

I still remember sitting there one afternoon: children running between the trees, parents chatting, older

couples resting on benches that had once stood empty. The park isn't just prettier: it has become alive again.

### A European movement in action

One of the highlights of my IVY journey is attending the COPE final event in Copenhagen. The energy in the room was unmistakable: cities from across Europe (from La Corunna to Korydallos, Vilnius to Bistrița, and Pombal) were sharing how they engaged their residents and how their neighborhoods had begun to change.

It felt less like a conference and more like a European workshop filled with ideas and honest conversation. Listening to each city's story made me realise that what happened in Neapolis is part of a much larger movement: communities across Europe working together for greener, more inclusive urban spaces. I left feeling proud, inspired, and certain that this work is far from over.

### More than a project: a community awakening

For me, COPE is not simply an initiative. It is proof that when people care about their community, even small spaces can regain their purpose. Through cooperation, the neglected park in Neapolis has become a place where people meet, talk, rest, and play. A place that feels like home again.

## TESTIMONIAL

### The role of citizens in Climate Action

By Eleni Feleki  
Ad hoc expert of COPE URBACT  
Action Plan Network

Climate action is the collective effort to combat the causes and consequences of climate change, which is undoubtedly one of the most pressing global challenges. While governments and businesses play a critical role in establishing policies and infrastructures, citizens are essential to driving change on the ground.

The actions of individuals—ranging from reducing energy consumption and adopting low-carbon transport to supporting climate-friendly policies—are foundational to the success of any climate strategy. In urban areas, citizens can contribute in several ways:

① **Engagement in local climate initiatives:** Many cities have developed local climate action plans, focusing on reducing greenhouse gas emissions

and adapting to climate risks. Citizens can actively participate in these initiatives by attending community consultations, joining environmental organizations, or advocating for sustainable policies.

② **Behavioral shifts:** Simple actions such as reducing waste, using public transportation, supporting renewable energy, and purchasing sustainable goods can collectively lead to a significant impact. Citizens' everyday choices influence demand for green products and services, shaping market trends and encouraging businesses to adopt sustainable practices.

③ **Climate education and awareness:** As awareness of climate change increases, so does the demand for informed citizen engagement. By participating in climate education programs, citizens can better understand climate science and the urgency of taking action, furthering their involvement in advocacy and policymaking.



## Project at a glance

- **Name:** COPE - Co-Create Public Space
- **Funded by:** Interreg URBACT programme
- **Focus:** Citizen-led transformation of neighborhoods
- **Involved actors:** Residents, schools, local associations, municipalities
- **Goal:** Build stronger, greener, more connected communities

## Impact in figures

(Neapolis, Kavala)

- 120+ students involved in workshops, activities, and planting
- 300+ residents participating in park events
- Joint action by multiple local associations for the first time
- Renovated park with new plants, safer walkways and seating

More  
information  
about this  
project:



Despina Chatzikonstantinou

- **Age:** 20
- **Nationality:** Greek
- **Region where you are deployed:** Kavala, Greece
- **Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:**  
solidarity, opportunities, teamwork.



# EUSALP: Unity and cooperation across mountains

The Alpine regions work together to tackle common challenges such as mobility and innovation

EUSALP's General Assembly in 2024 in Slovenia.

*By Noé Martin*

The Alps are more than a postcard landscape: they are home to 80 million people facing common challenges, such as climate change, depopulation, and unequal access to opportunities. For the past decade, the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP from now on) has been bridging these divides, connecting communities and countries to create a more sustainable and inclusive mountain region.

## Shared challenges

For many Alpine residents, life in the mountains offers both privilege and hardship --breathtaking views and clean air, but also limited public transport, declining job prospects, and unreliable digital connectivity. As temperatures rise and traditional industries shift, mountain communities risk being left behind.

Recognizing the need for a coordinated response, EUSALP was launched in 2016 as a unique cross-border framework bringing together 48 regions across seven countries: Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Switzerland. Its goal: to balance economic growth with environmental protection through regional cooperation.

EUSALP works through nine action groups, each focused on key priorities such as innovation, mobility, digitalization, and sustainable energy. It applies a multi-level governance model, uniting local authorities, national governments, businesses, NGOs, and research institutions.

To ensure coordination, the EUSALP Technical Support Structure (TSS) was established to connect the work of the nine groups and turn strategies into tangible projects.

## From ideas to impact

Over the past decade, EUSALP has evolved from a vision into a driver of real change. Projects like TRANSTAT help ski resorts adapt to climate change by diversifying their economic base, while ‘Discover Mountain Jobs’ inspires young people to pursue careers in their home regions.

In mobility, the ‘Nice-Cuneo’ railway (once at risk of closure) has found new life, improving cross-border travel. The ‘Smart Villages’ initiative empowers rural areas through digital tools, helping them stay connected and competitive. On the environmental front, EUSALP’s Forest Task Force (TF-MFSUT) brings together forest owners, NGOs, youth, and

policymakers to promote sustainable management of Alpine forests.

## A decade of cooperation

Ten years on, EUSALP stands as a symbol of what European cooperation can achieve. It has not erased all challenges -reaching consensus among dozens of partners is never easy- but it has proven that shared goals can transcend borders.

As the Alpine Strategy enters its next phase, its mission remains clear: to ensure that mountain communities continue to thrive, preserving their landscapes, traditions, and opportunities for generations to come.

## EUSALP’S latest project at a glance

- **Duration:** 3 years
- **Regions involved:** 48
- **Countries involved:** 7
- **Budget:** 4 000 000€
- **Initiatives financed:** 38
- **Focus areas:** Innovation, mobility, environment, energy, governance

The railway line Nice-Ventimiglia-Cuneo.



## INTERVIEW

### Xavier Garcia, European Cooperation Policy Officer at Région Sud - AG4 Co-Leader

#### As a direct beneficiary of the EUSALP, what are the notable results of cooperation with Région Sud?

Well, one thing that immediately springs to mind is project certification. The idea is to have projects of macro-regional interest certified through independent assessment and expert evaluation.

For example, we submitted two mountain railway lines, Nice-Tende and Ventimiglia-Cuneo, for assessment. The Nice-Ventimiglia line was in poor condition and was further damaged during Storm Alex in 2019. The entire Roya Valley, near Nice, had to be supplied by train, and the inhabitants emphasized the importance of the line to Manuel Macron when he visited the valley. The labelling process helped to support the European investment process and the restoration of the line.

#### What are the highlights of your work with EUSALP?

I would particularly highlight the quality of the cooperation. Working regularly with the same partners, getting to know each other and being able to rely on each other makes things simpler and more efficient. There is a wealth of technical exchange, which allows for continuous learning, even though I am not a transport engineer.

What is also striking, but in a more frustrating way, is the lack of budget and decision-making power. The action group can influence, propose and push priorities, but it cannot decide or finance. This sometimes ends up creating a feeling of going round in circles when things do not find political or financial follow-up.

#### In your opinion, what are the main barriers to transalpine cooperation?

For me, the two real barriers are structural. The first is precisely this lack of decision-making power: the EUSALP is totally dependent on the

goodwill of European states and programmes. The second is the political differences between countries. These disagreements create recurring tensions, for example, some countries want to label a motorway while others want railways and a massive modal shift. As a result, compromises must constantly be found between very distant national positions.

#### How would you like to see EUSALP evolve over the next three years?

I would like EUSALP to have much more direct contact with the authorities that finance the projects, whether it be Interreg or the Connecting Europe Facility. The strategy should have more influence in defining calls for projects, by communicating Alpine priorities directly, without going through so many filters. For me, this would be the best way to avoid getting bogged down in repetitive discussions and to maintain the interest of members while strengthening the real influence of the macro-region.

#### If you had to choose an animal to represent EUSALP, which one would it be and why?

I would choose the chamois. Firstly, because it is an animal that I personally associate with the Alps and my memories of hiking in the Mercantour. Secondly, because, in my opinion, it is the mountain animal par excellence, unrivalled, adaptable and agile. This ability to adapt is an essential quality in Alpine cooperation.





State Councillor Markus Dieth of Aargau, President of the Conference of Cantonal Governments, Marko Štucin, Slovenian State Secretary for European affairs and State Secretary of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs Alexandre Fasel hand over the Wheel of Kolo, EUSALP's symbol.

More  
information



## Impact in figures

- 10 years of cooperation across 7 countries
- Hundreds of regional members involved
- Dozen of initiative improving mobility, jobs, and sustainability
- One shared goal: a resilient, competitive, and greener Alpine future



Noé Martin

- Age: 30
- Nationality: French
- Region where you are deployed: PACA (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur)
- Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:  
Erasmus, Opportunities, USB-C



# Safer borders, stronger ties

At Europe's busiest border, Bulgarian and Turkish partners unite to strengthen security and protect vulnerable people with the project 'Joining for Safer Borders'

Joint training for improving the professional capacity and skills of the staff of the law enforcement departments", Kırklareli, 30-31 January 2025

By Selin Güllüoğlu

At Kapıkule-Kapitan Andreevo, where Bulgaria meets Türkiye, the border never sleeps. Trucks, tourists, and travelers flow through what is officially Europe's busiest land crossing and largest customs gate: the main gateway between the European Union and its southeastern neighbors.

The figures speak for themselves: around 87% of all pressure on Bulgaria's borders is concentrated here. It's also the point that records the highest number of irregular crossings, making it particularly exposed to smuggling and trafficking risks.

Because this border marks the external frontier of the European Union, the way it operates reflects the EU's own values. Border officers must balance vigilance with humanity, ensuring that safety measures go hand in hand with respect for human rights especially as rising

irregular migration raises concerns for women and children at risk of exploitation.

## Shared challenges, shared solutions

To address these pressures, five neighboring regions (Edirne and Kırklareli in Türkiye, and Haskovo, Burgas, and Yambol in Bulgaria) have come together under the Interreg IPA Bulgaria-Türkiye programme to launch 'Joining for Safer Borders'.

Their mission: to strengthen border management through better equipment, joint training, and long-term collaboration. This project creates a shared reaction capacity that improves both security and humanitarian response. Because sharing a border means sharing the problems... and the solutions.

## Training for trust and humanity

Thanks to ‘Joining for Safer Borders’, more than 100 border officers from Bulgaria and Türkiye have trained side by side, not only in legal and tactical procedures, but in humanitarian awareness. Workshops cover EU migration law, national policies, and human rights principles. Officers also participate in joint simulations and demonstrations to test their skills in real-life scenarios.

On the other hand, let’s not forget that communication is often a real challenge in the border. In this sense, language courses in Bulgarian and English help them communicate more easily, paving the way for long-term cooperation beyond the project’s lifespan.

The border forces are also becoming better equipped and faster to respond. New document readers, license plate recognition systems, and patrol vehicles ensure precise and efficient checks. How? By reducing bottlenecks and increasing safety for locals, travelers, and businesses alike.

3-Day joint training and demonstrations , Burgas, 2-4 June 2025

But equipment alone isn’t enough. What really changes the game is the cross-border bond between the teams. Together, they are developing a coordinated reaction capacity that protects vulnerable people while keeping the border secure.

## A safer, fairer frontier

The Bulgarian-Turkish border is one of Europe’s most visible frontiers. It’s where EU external policies meet real lives. Through this project, partners are proving that security and humanity can go hand in hand.

By investing in people, trust, and shared responsibility, ‘Joining for Safer Borders’ turns a line on the map into a bridge of cooperation, one that keeps both Europe and its neighbors safer.

“ Sharing a border means sharing the problems... and the solutions”



## TESTIMONIAL

**Şefik ODUNCU. Customs Officer, Kırklareli / Dereköy Border Crossing Point (Türkiye)**

**How will this project contribute to regional security and cross-border cooperation in the long term?**

In the long term, the information-sharing opportunity we received from the project during the trainings will bring significant benefits. Both the Bulgarian and Turkish sides perform the same type of work, and exchanging knowledge about our respective activities is very useful. Learning about the new and evolving smuggling methods observed by the Bulgarian side, and understanding how they handle certain challenges, while also sharing our own experiences, will make border protection much more coordinated and effective in the long run.

**What concrete improvements have you observed thanks to the equipment provided?**

The new document and passport readers installed within the project have significantly improved the efficiency of our work at the border. Previously, we used older devices that often produced reading errors, failed to recognize documents, or took a long time to process them. This caused long queues at the checkpoint. The new devices are much faster and far more reliable. We are clearly seeing their benefits in our daily operations.

**How did the trainings contribute to your work?**

My duty mainly involves passport control. The trainings were mostly about irregular crossings, which are not directly related to my unit's daily tasks. However, we learned about which countries irregular migrants come from, which routes they use for transit, and what methods they apply. We gained insight into the difficult choices migrants are often forced to make. In another training, we gained a broader, more academic perspective, covering topics

**“Working together makes our borders safer and our work more humane” Şefik Oduncu**

such as the historical roots and evolution of migration. Learning about the issue from different perspectives helps us be more aware of the importance and sensitivity of our duty.

**How was cooperation with your Bulgarian colleagues?**

We usually don't face communication problems with our Bulgarian colleagues. During the trainings, simultaneous interpretation was provided. In one-on-one exchanges, some speak Turkish and some of us speak English. Our interactions are sincere and friendly, and we share professional experiences and knowledge with each other.

**Did you attend the language training?**

I didn't attend because I already speak English. From what I heard, the courses went very well, but the participation rate was low since the class hours often overlapped with working hours.

**What did the project teach you regarding vulnerable groups?**

Migrants are not only young men; they include women, children, and the elderly, all moving together in search of safety and a better life, often as their last resort. Their living conditions are extremely harsh. The trainings focused on empathy and addressing their problems with constructive, solution-oriented approaches. We already receive institutional trainings that emphasize humanitarian conduct, but this project added valuable new perspectives and refreshed what we had previously learned. Overall, it was a very positive and useful experience.

**What should officers pay most attention to in terms of humanitarian principles?**

In our duties, we act based on national and international legal frameworks. Beyond these, we must put ourselves in the place of the vulnerable and recognize that their attempts to cross borders are often acts of last resort. This awareness already exists among us, but the project's training helped reinforce and deepen it.



Training on effective team work in situation of crisis and migrant communication strategies”, Edirne, 25-26 April

## Main impact of the project

- Enhanced security through modern technology and faster response times
- Over 100 trained officers in EU law, migration policy, and humanitarian standards
- Improved cooperation between Bulgarian and Turkish border institutions
- Protection of vulnerable groups, especially women and children at risk of trafficking
- Shared language and trust, enabling smoother collaboration in the long term

### More information



## Project focus

- Cross-border cooperation between Türkiye & Bulgaria
- Border safety & migration management
- Training on humanitarian principles
- Exchange of operational best practices
- Improvement of border-control equipment & procedures



Selin Güllüoğlu

- Age: 24
- Nationality: Turkish
- Region where you are deployed: Ankara, Türkiye
- Write three words that define ‘European cooperation’ for you: opportunity, connectivity, solidarity.

