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Introduction

Cross-Border Cooperation: A pillar for tomorrow's Europe

Europe has always been a space for encounters, exchanges, and cooperation. In a world where transnational challenges are multiplying, cross-border cooperation remains an essential lever for building a more inclusive, sustainable, and united future.

It is in this spirit that we have succeeded in advancing, within the European Parliament, the file relating to the European Cross-Border Mechanism, which will soon be voted on in plenary session. This instrument, which will facilitate the resolution of legal and administrative obstacles hindering cross-border projects, represents a major breakthrough for our territories. Thanks to it, we will strengthen the capacity of border regions to develop synergies, simplify the implementation of joint projects, and improve the daily lives of millions of European citizens.

This progress comes in an international context marked by new tensions and uncertainties. More than ever, cross-border cooperation is a bulwark against divisions. It embodies the very essence of the European project: uniting rather than dividing, bringing together rather than excluding. It concretely reflects our objective of enhanced cohesion. Our border regions are laboratories of innovation and solidarity, where tomorrow's solutions are being invented. The European Union must continue to give them the means to act.

It is in this spirit that I went to Gorizia to celebrate the 35th anniversary of Interreg. The Interreg GO! 2025 meeting perfectly illustrated the value of this cooperation. By uniting the cities of Gorizia and Nova Gorica, the Interreg project between Italy and Slovenia demonstrates that borders can be transformed into bridges, opportunities, and spaces for dialogue. Culture, economic development, and spatial planning come together to create an exemplary cross-border dynamic.

Europe needs more initiatives like those supported by Interreg, and it is our common responsibility to defend and strengthen them. The European Parliament will continue to mobilize for ambitious and effective cross-border cooperation, serving citizens.



Younous Omarjee
Vice-President of
the European Parliament

Publisher:
Interact Office Valencia,
C/ Isabel la Católica, 8 - 46004
Valencia, Spain
www.interact.eu
2025

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Graphic Design:
Estudio Gráfico Quinto A
www.cincoa.es

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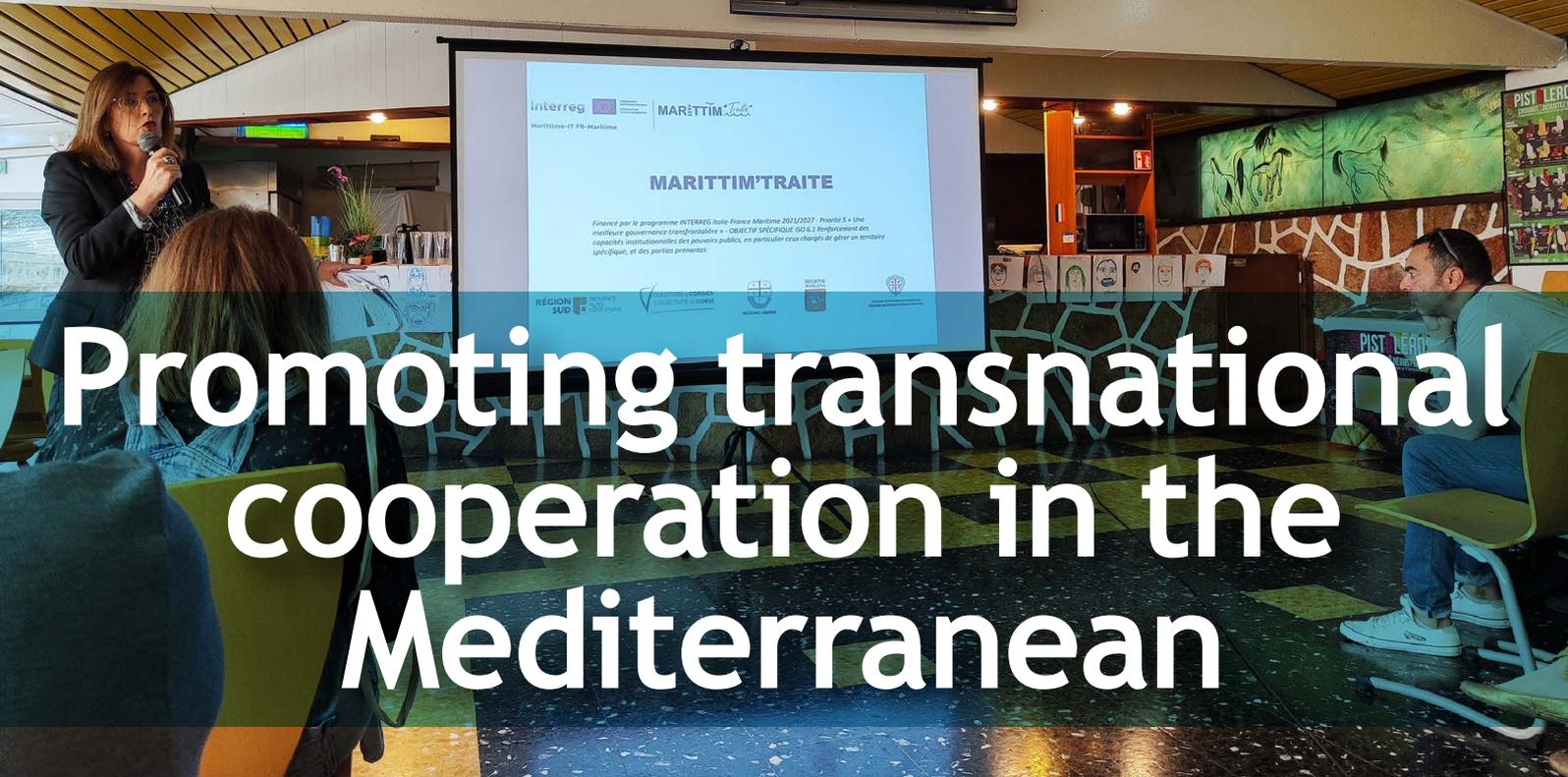
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Rule of Law



Promoting transnational cooperation in the Mediterranean

Marittim'Traité: An initiative rooted in the Quirinal Treaty to address common challenges faced by maritime and insular regions of France and Italy

Presenting Marittim'Traité at the Cap d'Ail seminar.

By Martina Maddaluno

France and Italy are both bordered by the vast Mediterranean Sea and are home to island communities. These similarities bring shared challenges. What's the best way to tackle them? Together! How? Boosting cooperation between the maritime and insular regions of both countries can be a solution to address these challenges hand in hand. That's the aim of the Marittim'traite project, a new initiative launched in March 2024 and rooted in the Quirinal Treaty, which reflects EU members' commitment to the rule of law, ensuring that their actions are loyal to democratically approved treaties.

Addressing key challenges

Cooperation is the keyword for this project. Its fundamental goal is to strengthen the capacity

of public authorities and local stakeholders to collaborate across borders. Marittim'traite is funded by the Interreg Italy-France Maritime programme, and focuses on three main areas of work:

1. Knowledge integration

Enhancing mutual understanding of the specific needs and opportunities across territories is one of the primary objectives of the project. To achieve this, it is essential to view the area not as a region divided by the border between France and Italy, but as a unified zone facing common challenges. This is why collecting shared data on maritime and insular issues is crucial, as it will help inform decisions and



Kick-off meeting in Cap d'Ail: Italy and France non-formal mobility stakeholders.

shape common policies. A further step toward this goal is getting to know each other better. One key approach is to involve not only technical experts and public authorities but also the youth parliaments of the three Italian partner regions and the two French ones, bringing them together at the same table to discuss shared issues. This can facilitate meaningful dialogue and help cultivate a sense of shared identity and common purpose. It can not only empower youth, but also promote a culture of active citizenship, which is vital for building a robust democratic society.

2. Empowering youth through participation

As a second priority, the partnership wants to promote mobility and volunteer opportunities for youth across the regions. The aim is to promote networking among organizations with limited connections and not yet developed collaborative working habits. By improving communication and understanding, the project will lay the

groundwork for long-lasting relationships, paving the way for future mobility projects and collaborations within the framework of European territorial cooperation programmes or thematic initiatives.

A highlight of this effort was the dynamic seminar held in Cap d'Ail, which brought together associations, organizations, and volunteers from the Franco-Italian Civil Service to share their experiences. The objective of this event was to forge connections, showcase the exciting goals of the Marittim'traite initiative, and learn from the strengths and challenges faced by participants. The seminar provided an excellent opportunity to build a shared vision for the active mobility we aspire to achieve through this project.

3. Territorial Cohesion

Through the establishment of a task force dedicated to maritime and insular governance,

Marittim'traite aims to amplify the voices of island communities in policy discussions. This initiative not only addresses the unique challenges posed by insularity but also advocates for the needs of these communities during the development of regional and national policies that affect their growth and sustainability.

Expected impact and real data

Thanks to the strong cooperation between the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region, Liguria, Tuscany, Sardinia and Corsica, the Marittim'traite project is set to create significant impacts over the next two and a half years, with the hope that its effects will be long-lasting.

First, the creation of a cross-border database will collect shared information and data on issues of interest to the Marittimo programme. Additionally, to foster mutual understanding, discovery trips will be organized for stakeholders to exchange perspectives, best practices, and challenges.

Second, to strengthen the ecosystem of youth mobility, a panorama document will be created on the main actors involved in youth mobility and existing initiatives. In this context, workshops will be held to allow stakeholders to meet and get to know each other better. As a result, the project will create a shared operational roadmap, including pilot mobility actions to increase the number of young people participating in cross-border mobility.

Last but not least, the focus will be on highlighting the value of island territories by developing a database of best practices and existing regulations related to island-specific issues. This will lead to the creation of a task force on insularity, composed of experts and policymakers, to advocate for the inclusion of insularity as a priority theme within the Quirinal Treaty. The task force will work on lobbying political institutions, such as the European Commission, and beyond. Following this, efforts will be made to broaden the dissemination of results and transfer best practices on a supraterritorial scale.

INTERVIEW with Sandrine Genty, Representative of the SUD Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur Region, France (project leader)

How did the seminar in Cap d'Ail help the project grow?

First, during the seminar in Cap d'Ail, we had the opportunity to present our project and raise awareness about our work in the mobility sector. We also met key stakeholders in this field from both the French and Italian sides, including the President of the French Service Civique Agency and the President of the Italian Civil Service Department. The seminar provided us with a platform to exchange ideas and gain a deeper understanding of the broader mobility landscape, which is essential for the successful completion of our project. It also helped us understand the challenges encountered by the new initiative proposed by the Quirinal Treaty: the

experimentation of a new mobility program called the 'Franco-Italian Service Civique.' We now have a clearer insight into the issues young people face during their mobility periods and the changes we can make moving forward.

What have been the most significant obstacles you've encountered so far in implementing the project?

The project officially began in March 2024, but, like many European initiatives, its progress has been slower than expected. One significant obstacle has been delays in finalizing the inter-partner agreements. For instance, we encountered technical issues with electronic signature software, as French and Italian systems

were not compatible, forcing us to revert to paper signatures. This is an example of an administrative and technical challenge in cross-border cooperation, which may seem trivial but represents a real barrier. Additionally, political factors have contributed to delays. The launch event for Marittim'Traité, planned within the framework of the Treaty of Quirinal's cross-border cooperation committee, has been postponed multiple times - initially in June, then in November, now once again - due to the French political situation, further hindering the project's momentum.

As you look towards the future, what specific goals do you have for the next phases? What is the added value of such a cooperation project according to you?

Looking ahead, one of the key goals for the next phase of the Marittim'traite project is to test the data-sharing methodology developed as part of the Observ' Alp project, financed by the Interreg Alcotra programme, which established the foundation for a cross-border territorial observation system covering the French, Italian, and Monegasque territories. If the results of this testing phase are successful, we aim to establish a larger project focused on territorial observation in the maritime domain, specifically within the Marittim'traite programme area. Beyond its immediate objectives, we envision this project as a catalyst for establishing a lasting network of cooperation that will continue to thrive after the project's completion, supported by other initiatives financed by the Interreg Marittimo programme.



Working together on non-formal mobility at the Cap d'Ail event.



Martina Maddaluno

- **Age:** 28
- **Nationality:** Italian
- **Region where you are deployed:** Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (France)
- **Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:** federalism dream, youth empowerment, shared path



Alcotraité: Strengthening cross-border cooperation and governance

The project aims at finding concrete solutions to overcome existing cross-border barriers in the fields of healthcare, biodiversity and public transport

Headquarters Regione Piemonte.

By Sara Smaniotto

The Interreg France-Italy Alcotra programme funds the Alcotraité project and aims at strengthening cross-border cooperation and governance between Italian and French bordering regions and local communities. Focusing on specific objectives included in the bilateral Quirinal Treaty signed by Italy and France in 2021, Alcotraité investigates, addresses and aims at finding concrete solutions to overcome existing cross-border barriers in the fields of healthcare, biodiversity and public transport.

Thanks to the active participation of all five regions at the terrestrial border (Regione Liguria, Regione Piemonte, Regione Autonoma Valle d'Aosta, Région - Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and Région Auvergne Rhône-Alpes) and of the Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière

(MOT), Alcotraité favours multi-level bilateral cooperation and fruitful exchanges between stakeholders who have the keys to bring solutions to overcome border-related obstacles. Limited transportation options, challenging access to healthcare and social services, language barriers, normative and administrative differences are some of the core cross-border issues identified by the project partners.

With activities and initiatives that range from institutional events and technical meetings to workshops and surveys open to the public, Alcotraité enables partners and stakeholders to be very actively engaged in jointly identifying and addressing the above-mentioned topics, as well as in developing common solutions. The project also supports institutional cooperation while listening carefully to citizens' needs. Its



Partners' working session, hosted by the Piemonte region.

structure, which is two-years in duration and focus, will allow significant governance advancements between Italian and French Authorities and local actors, as well as stakeholders' expression of ideas through a bottom-up approach.

Governance and institutions

The year 2021 marked an important advancement in terms of bilateral cross-border cooperation between Italy and France. Signed in Rome in November 2021, and entered into force in February 2023, the Quirinal Treaty shows the commitment to improve (among other objectives) cross-border cooperation, governance and citizens' daily life. The Treaty stresses the importance both Italy and France give to the growth and strengthening of their bilateral relations and cooperation. The Quirinal Treaty also highlights France and Italy's engagement in coordinating their actions on, e.g., international and European affairs, security and defense,

economic, industrial and digital cooperation, sustainable social development, education and research and - as stated under Article 10 - cross-border cooperation. To stress the importance of this Treaty and its relevance for cross-border cooperation, partners have decided - in the framework of Alcotraité - to celebrate the signing of the Treaty with an annual ad-hoc event. This year, the conference was hosted by Regione Piemonte in Turin on November 26th, and it represented a unique opportunity to mark the exact three-years anniversary of the Quirinal Treaty's signature. The Alcotraité project (officially approved in July 2023) builds upon shared objectives stated under the above-mentioned Article 10 « Cross-border cooperation » of the Quirinal Treaty, and it supports shared and strengthened bilateral multilevel governance. It is through shared governance and joint actions that a positive and successful management of cross-border areas can be ensured, and citizens' quality of life can be truly improved.

Territorial challenges

Alcotraité decided to focus on transport, access to healthcare and social services, biodiversity and environment protection. These topics, which are consistent with the priorities outlined under article 10 of the Quirinal Treaty, were also indicated as the most pressing issues for citizens and stakeholders living and operating along the Italian-French border areas in a recently-conducted survey.

Limited transportation options are widely recognized as the very top priority. Persistent shutdown of tunnels and railway lines, as well as few suitable road connections, are the main cause of long and difficult journeys from one side of the border to the other. Access to healthcare and social services is also crucially important for those living along the French-Italian border. Currently, there is no framework agreement on healthcare between France and Italy, and this generates practical difficulties for patients that seek medical care in neighbouring across-the-border hospitals and medical centers. Biodiversity and environmental protection (and green means of transportation) - along a geographic border that goes from the Alps all the way to the Mediterranean Sea - is also quite up in the agenda.

Very relevant for bordering communities are also linguistic and normative challenges, as well as cross-border employment opportunities. Thanks

to the Alcotraité project, positive developments are already underway. A very important step forward to improve cross-border transport has been possible, for example, thanks to the set up of a working group organized in Ventimiglia at the beginning of December, which attended not only the representatives of the five Regions, but also transport agencies and operators. Bringing all these important actors together will improve transportation services for citizens in the months to come, especially regarding harmonized timetables for rail connections.

Citizens and local actors

Alongside institutional cooperation, Alcotraité pays close attention to engaging citizens, stakeholders and local actors living and operating in the French-Italian border areas. More precisely, the project aims to analyze the specific barriers that local communities encounter in their daily cross-border activities. These activities can include travel for leisure or work, access to education and job opportunities, and participation in joint projects across borders. Through a survey open to the public, as well as to several thematic and territorial workshops, Alcotraité aims to understand and identify cross-border barriers' root causes and develop solutions to be implemented to overcome these obstacles by bringing them to the table of the 'Cross-border cooperation Committee', on which the Ministers of both States sit.

Expected results

- Comparative law study on the legal competencies of healthcare, biodiversity and public transport on both sides of the border.
- Extensive analysis of cross-border dynamics (survey, workshops, strategic line of actions to overcome existing cross-border barriers) leading to the production of thematic and territorial roadmaps.
- Exchange of project perspectives and experiences in the framework of international events (comparison with similar projects carried out at the European level, other funding programmes, EUSALP).

Expected impact and relevance of the project

- Improved multi-level governance (engaging both national and local institutions)
- A 'beyond Interreg' logic, by engaging actors not normally active in the framework of Alcotra projects, but nevertheless of key importance to overcome major administrative obstacles
- Joint reflection for the next ETC 2028/2034 planning

Key figures

- 700 contributions received via the online consultation on border obstacles
- Project timeline: 24 months (October 2023 - October 2025)
- Total ERDF budget: € 400.000,00
- Total budget of the project: € 500.000,00

INTERVIEW

Marco Rolandi, European Territorial Cooperation -DG for Economic Development (Regione Liguria)

How was the project developed and what led three Italian regions and two French regions to cooperate in the framework of Alcotraité?

Interreg Alcotra Italy-France 2021-2027 programme has selected Interreg specific objective 1 'A better cooperation governance'. In that framework and funding period, the project Alcotraité comes into being - through a partnership which includes all the five Alcotra Programme partner Regions (Piemonte, Liguria, Valle d'Aosta, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes and Région Sud). The overall objective is to work on the normative and institutional barriers that currently obstruct or limit the efficiency of cross-border cooperation in some areas identified by the Programme, and to address the topics highlighted by the Italian-French cross-border Cooperation Committee founded by the Quirinal Treaty.

How will the project contribute to making the Quirinal Treaty more known to the public? What initiatives are being organized to engage both the institutions and the local communities?

The activities and the planning set by the Alcotraité partnership are closely related to the Italian-French Cross-border Cooperation Committee (art 10 of the Quirinal Treaty), with the objective to create a link and not any overlapping or duplication (with the cross-border Cooperation Committee) by providing the Italian and French Regions experience in terms of territorial diplomacy. The Alcotraité project provides a platform for exchange and dialogue between Alcotra Programme partner administrations, the Cooperation Committee members and citizens of cross-border areas, as well as young people and associations. The idea is also to increase the visibility of the Quirinal Treaty, which gathers the territories' needs to bring forward possible solutions to all parties involved.



cover survey.

What topics will the project focus on to improve cross-border daily life?

The project clearly responds to the need - emerged from the local area's daily activities - of finding a model of joint Italian-French Governance, that can be implemented and replicated also in other areas of cooperation, to increase consultation and to support the political and strategic choices of the cooperation area, in a shared manner. More precisely, within the framework of the Alcotraité project, there are three main topics: transport, biodiversity and healthcare - for which technical round tables with sectoral experts and specific normative-legislative studies are planned. More broadly, other topics - namely education, climate change, risk management, employment, data exchange and bilingualism - will be addressed and covered through surveys and discussions in the framework of the project and working groups organized at the local level.

Why are those topics (transport, biodiversity, healthcare) important to address in the area of cooperation?

The topics mentioned above are crucially important for the cooperation area as limited transport options, uneasy access to healthcare, and environment protection concerns are some of the major challenges to more integrated cross-border activities. Transport is notably a pressing issue,

as the prolonged shutdown of tunnels and railway lines, as well as infrastructural difficulties, do not enable smooth journeys to and from Italian and French bordering areas and cities. A positive advancement in this sense has been possible thanks to a working group organized on 4 December in Ventimiglia. For the first time in years, this action group has gathered not only Italian and French public administrations, but also transportation agencies and operators. The objective was to identify the main issues concerning, e.g., trains' frequency and timetables.

We will build upon the outcomes of the meeting to provide citizens with improved transportation services. Access to healthcare is also a top priority. For the time being, there is no signed framework agreement on healthcare between Italy and France. This causes delays in the reimbursement of healthcare fees and serious inconveniences for, e.g., Italian patients that seek medical care in French hospitals that are closer to them than Italian healthcare centers. Finally, from several contributions to the online survey launched this past summer, we have also seen how environmental concerns and the willingness to resort to green means of transportation are important for the communities along the concerned Italian-French border. Thanks to, and through, the Alcotraité project we can practically identify all obstacles to cross-border cooperation and daily activities, to then proceed to implement practical and appropriate solutions.

More information:

<https://interreg-alcotra.eu/fr/alcotraite>



Sara Smaniotto

- **Age:** 26
- **Nationality:** Italian
- **Region where you are deployed:** Paris, Île-de-France (France)
- **Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:** dialogue, understanding, joint projects



Freedom



Creating opportunities for young people in the Pyrenees

Trampoline II promotes and facilitates cross-border mobility of young people between Spain, France and Andorra



CTP and Interreg Poctefa teams.

By Cezara Demetra Corduneanu

Freedom of movement within the EU is a fundamental right, allowing citizens to move from one country to another more easily than ever. Despite all the efforts made in this sense, there are still strong difficulties circulating in some areas, among them the Pyrenees. The natural border between Spain and France has proven to be a strong barrier between the two countries throughout the centuries, and today, many obstacles still remain: the restricted number of roads connecting both countries, and the even more restricted number of means of public transport between them. The different languages and identities existing across the Pyrenees also prove to be an obstacle between the two countries and even between the regions within these countries.

The situation gets even more complex when we include the Principality of Andorra in the conversation, a country that has 100% of its territory in the Pyrenees and is not part of the EU. The project Interreg Trampoline II tackles all these issues related to mobility in the Pyrenees, with a strong focus on youth employment. Indeed, the Pyrenean youth are among the most affected, facing very restricted job markets and often left with no choice but to move outside the Pyrenees to find a job aligned with their background and skills.

Trampoline I (2018-2021) and Trampoline II (2024-2026)

Trampoline II (2024-2026) follows the Trampoline project (2018-2021). The report made within the



framework of the first project, published in 2019, concluded that mobility and employment networks existed only at regional and local levels, with an evident lack of cross-border cooperation between the three Pyrenean countries. Trampoline II, therefore, decided to focus on youth mobility and employment, enhancing youth participation and consolidating the existing networks across the Pyrenees to build bridges between them. As an IVY volunteer, I was involved in organising one specific activity being consolidated: the Transpyrenean Youth Forum.

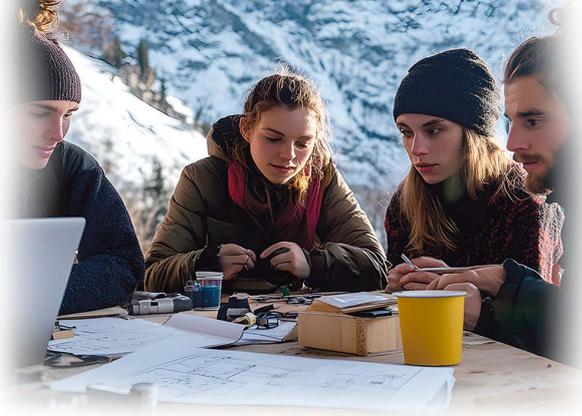
The Transpyrenean Youth Forum

The Transpyrenean Youth Forum gathers young people aged 18-30 from all the Pyrenean regions for a weekend to discuss five themes that have been identified as the most relevant ones. The first three editions of this Forum were organized by the Working Community of the Pyrenees, the institution in charge of enhancing cooperation between Spain, France and Andorra since 1983, the seat of the Joint Secretariat of the Interreg

Poctefa programme, and the host organisation where I am completing my IVY mission.

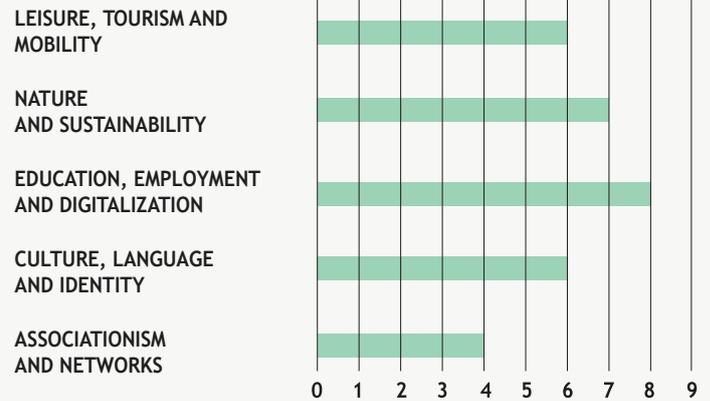
Perfectly aligned and a perfect fit for carrying out Trampoline II's goals forward, the Working Community of the Pyrenees became a project partner. Under the framework of the Trampoline II project, the fourth edition of the Forum was held from November 22nd to November 25th in Toulouse (Occitanie, France).

As a young Andorran, the existence of this Forum is one of the rare platforms allowing me to get in touch with my neighbours, and to raise my concerns regarding youth mobility in the Pyrenees. I advocate for implementing sustainable means of transport across all the Pyrenean regions to foster economic development and cooperation in all sectors. As it turns out, I also participated in the first edition of the Transpyrenean Youth Forum, held in 2021. I witnessed the way the Trampoline II project consolidates youth participation through the Transpyrenean Youth Forum. The '2030 Road Map on Transpyrenean Youth', which was approved



by the political representatives of all regions in the Pyrenees on November 25th, includes the previous analysis made on youth participation and youth's priorities and puts on paper the ideas put forward by youth all along the way. It puts forward five priority areas: Education, employment and digitalization; Leisure, tourism and mobility; Culture, language and identity; Nature and sustainability; Participation and cooperation. The main goal of the 4th Transpyrenean Youth Forum was for the participants to develop action plans focused on each one of the five priority areas. I took part in the 4th Forum as a project partner, but also as a young participant. It was a unique opportunity for me to exchange views with my neighbours.

DISTRIBUTION OF PROJECTS BY PRIORITY AREAS



'Distribution of projects by area' - extract from the '2030 Road Map on Transpyrenean Youth'. This table shows the number of projects aligned with the goals of the Trampoline II project and thus seen as the role models to follow. A close follow-up and outreach of these projects in the Pyrenees is one of the main conclusions of the roadmap (one word) instead of roadmap.



The 4th Transpyrenean Youth Forum family picture. Toulouse (Occitanie), Nov. 23th.

INTERVIEW with two young women who participated in the 4th Transpyrenean Youth Forum, Georgina Orero, from Catalonia, and Sandra Martín, from Aragon

What is the Transpyrenean Youth Forum's biggest added value according to you?

Georgina: For me, the added value of the Forum is the opportunity to connect with other young people, join forces to create projects, and turn them into something collective. I believe that cooperation among young people makes us stronger and braver when it comes to presenting problems and projects to solve them.

How has the Transpyrenean Youth Forum evolved from your perspective?

Georgina: The truth is that the evolution has been quite evident in how the project has progressed, from the creation of the roadmap based on the needs of young people to the development of projects aimed at improving the situation of youth in the five main themes of the Forum.

What is the main tool that the Trampoline II project should strengthen to achieve cross-Pyrenean mobility and Pyrenean youth's integration in the Pyrenean job markets?

Sandra: The tool that should be promoted is decent contracts. By this, I don't mean paid internships, which are obviously helpful for intergrading many young people and as a first contact with the labor market. I mean employment contracts with companies, foundations, associations, businesses, etc., where trained and prepared young people can work and build their lives without needing to migrate to another region. If young people have secure jobs, we wouldn't need to relocate.

My article focuses on a specific word: freedom. I decided to write on freedom of movement as it is related to the project I'm partnering on. Is there any aspect other than movement you think of when mentioning freedom for Pyrenean youth?

Sandra: Freedom encompasses many things. Sometimes it's not necessary to have 'freedom of movement' to feel free. This freedom is also linked to having a stable job, a decent salary and conditions, good social relationships, adequate services in the place where you live, and, in general, dignified living conditions.

More information:

<https://www.reseau-trampoline.eu>



Cezara Demetra

- **Age:** 24
- **Nationality:** Andorran
- **Region where you are deployed:** Aragon (Spain)
- **Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:** progress, sustainability, peace

Reconnecting Trieste and Rijeka after 50 years

Reviving freedom of movement: How Sustance connects communities across borders



The Trieste to Rijeka train. ©Nicole Corritore (OBC Transeuropa).

By Beatrice Tassotti

In Central Europe, cross-border mobility is crucial for connecting communities, fostering economic opportunities and enhancing cultural ties. For decades, residents along certain borders have faced challenges due to missing or inefficient transportation links. However, with the Sustance Interreg project, this is changing. By reconnecting critical rail links, Sustance is easing travel, reducing carbon footprints and rebuilding historical bonds that transcend national borders. This article shares the experience of Paolo Dileno, Project Manager at the Executive Secretariat of Central European Initiative, who highlights the significance of Sustance’s work in re-establishing a railway between Trieste (Italy) and Rijeka (Croatia), passing through Slovenia.

Reconnecting Trieste and Rijeka after 50 years

Trieste and Rijeka, two historically interconnected cities, were last directly linked by rail in 1970. Sustance changed that. After the project was launched in April 2024, a new, eco-friendly rail connection was inaugurated between these cities. In just five months, the experimental line drew over 8,000 passengers, underscoring the immense need and enthusiasm for cross-border transportation. As Dileno explains, “for many local residents, this train symbolizes a reconnection with history, culture and even family roots that had been difficult to access. Before Sustance, there was no viable public transport option between Trieste and Rijeka. Now, people can commute, visit and even explore these places with ease.”



Andrej Bergoc and Sonja Prosen's recently renovated 18th-century cottage in Belakapa, Slovenian town Ilirska Bistrica, home to 40 watermills. ©Nicole Corritore (OBC Transeuropa).

Data and impact of Sustance

The Sustance rail connection has demonstrated concrete results:

- From April to September 2024, over 8,000 passengers used the Trieste-Rijeka line, illustrating the demand for public transit options in the region. Additionally, 425 bicycles were transported, supporting eco-friendly tourism.
- By shifting thousands of trips from cars to trains, the project reduced CO₂ emissions, especially since Slovenian Railways uses 100% renewable energy for the route. This is a sustainable model, with the line operating at close to zero carbon impact.
- Stations along the route are seeing increased traffic, which has boosted local businesses, especially in smaller municipalities. The rail line's popularity among weekend tourists has led Sustance to consider optimizing schedules for tourist and commuter needs.

TESTIMONIAL

INTERVIEW with Paolo Dileno,
Project Manager at Central European Initiative (Sustance's Lead Partner)

What has been the most meaningful impact of Sustance for local communities?

Beyond the obvious convenience for commuters, the Trieste-Rijeka railway has a profound social and cultural value. This line brings communities closer, reawakening old connections that were disrupted long ago. People on both sides of the border were truly excited to see this connection revived. During the opening, we even had local mayors, musicians and community members on board to celebrate - a testament to the emotional and historical significance of the line.

Can you share any concrete outcomes from the project, like passenger numbers or other relevant data?

Of course. Our pilot service launched on April 24 and concluded on September 30, and we're pleased with the results. As of August 31, we had carried 6,211 passengers, and by September 30, this had increased to 8,273 passengers, along with 425 bicycles. This trial period was brief, due to the limited funding, but the response was very positive. Beyond transportation metrics, the project has significant cultural and social value. For example, the reestablished link between Trieste and Rijeka revives historical and cultural connections that had been cut off. This route has not seen a regular public rail service since the 1970s. Historically, the Simplon Orient Express connected Paris to Belgrade and Istanbul, stopping in Rijeka until 1992, but that was more of an international luxury service.

Were there any challenges in realizing the project?

The motto of the Interreg Central Europe programme is 'Cooperation is Central' and without collaboration among many involved entities, this service wouldn't have been possible. One major challenge was interoperability - ensuring that a single train could operate across Italian, Slovenian and Croatian infrastructure. Slovenian Railways

fortunately had a train that met the required standards for all three countries, so we could proceed. We also faced scheduling challenges, as the budget only allowed one round trip per day. This led to a morning departure from Trieste and an evening return from Rijeka, which wasn't ideal for Rijeka residents wanting to spend a day in Trieste. Another challenge was setting competitive ticket prices, as we needed to offer a 50% discount to attract passengers. We managed to reach an agreement with the rail companies, but it took time. Finally, ticketing and platform issues arose, as the route had to be published across multiple railway websites - Trenitalia, Slovenian Railways, Croatian Railways, etc. - which added complexity. We also allowed ticket purchases on board to make access easier.

What accomplishment makes you proudest in this project?

The opening event was incredibly moving. Mayors from every municipality along the route joined us, and the atmosphere was celebratory, with music, dancing and local treats shared on board. It wasn't just about a project milestone; it felt like a historic moment of reconnection. Even the media response was remarkable - a journalist from The Times wrote an article on the trip, describing the journey from Trieste to Rijeka. It's something we hope will endure, as it genuinely brings our communities together.

Could this service become permanent?

I hope so, and the project is indeed designed with that in mind. European projects often pilot solutions that, if successful, encourage policymakers to adopt them long-term. They allow policymakers to base decisions on real-world results. A project's funding, however, is only short-term. It's up to regional and national authorities to use this pilot's success as a foundation and potentially fund a permanent service. Through the Sustance project, we achieved our goal of establishing a service, making it accessible to the public and resolving technical challenges. But ultimately, the decision to continue is up to policy.



Photo credit: Miško Kranjec.

Sustance's lasting impact on Central European unity

The Sustance project, through re-establishing the Trieste-Rijeka railway, has not only made cross-border travel more accessible but has also renewed social and cultural connections between Italy and Croatia. This line stands as a symbol of cooperation, resilience and the power of shared heritage in Central Europe. With projects like Sustance, Interreg fosters a Europe that is not only connected by infrastructure but also by common values and shared experiences. In other words, the project is more than a route - it's a lifeline bridging past and future across borders.

More information:

<https://www.interreg-central.eu/projects/sustance>

<https://www.interreg-central.eu/news/first-direct-train-from-trieste-arrived-to-rijeka/>



Beatrice Tassotti

- **Age:** 27
- **Nationality:** Italian
- **Region where you are deployed:** Venice, Veneto (Italy)
- **Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:** unity, progress, peace-building



Human rights



The challenge of turning an idea into reality

Desafíos Jovens, a project that aims to boost youth employability in the regions of Galicia and northern Portugal

Photo with partners of Desafíos Jovens.

By Camila Pérez Senande

The other day, I listened to an actor describing the almost magical and serendipitous process of turning an idea into a film. Along the way, there are hundreds of people, roles, funding, expectations, and seemingly impossible hurdles. Project management is somewhat similar, with the key difference being that we start from a tangible reality in the territory in which we are immersed.

The relationship between Galicia and Portugal is innate, historical, and almost obvious. We share a very similar language, an idiosyncrasy, and even landscapes. If we look a bit deeper, we can also identify shared problems, and it's here that the need arises to build bridges of understanding and create solutions that benefit both territories.

The Desafíos Jovens project, which aims to boost youth employability in the regions of Galicia and northern Portugal, was established to bring a fresh perspective and potential solutions to an issue that affects both territories specifically but also extends across much of Europe and, if we look closely, the entire world: depopulation, the abandonment of rural areas, and the breakdown of upward social mobility as a driver of progress.

I spoke with Vitor Dias, director of the northern regional office of the IPDJ, one of the project's member organizations. He explained that the project arises from the need to combat youth unemployment and create more and better employment opportunities for young people, especially women. He emphasized the



Meeting to establish the Steering Committee for the European project Desafíos Jovens, led by the Dirección Xeral de Xuventude of the Xunta de Galicia.

importance of grounding these efforts in a social and digital economy, as well as valuing and leveraging the region's territory, with a particular focus on the opportunities provided by the Euroregion.

Vitor also highlighted the profile of the participating youth, noting that priority will be given to women and individuals living in rural areas, recognizing that these groups are often more vulnerable when it comes to employment opportunities. This perspective underscores the crucial role that Interreg projects play in fostering equal opportunities, positioning work as a fundamental human right essential for the dignified development of individuals. How will Desafíos Jovens tackle these objectives? Through creating spaces for non-formal education and the development of connections between businesses and young professional profiles.

Personally, I joined this project from its inception, and this, far from being a challenge,

represents an enormous opportunity. Even though it's still in its early stages, Desafíos Jovens is gradually becoming tangible. This allows us to create collaboratively, with community involvement, and with something crucial that public administrations like the Secretaría de Xuventude of the Xunta de Galicia (the project leader) often lack: a grassroots, community-driven approach, where it's the youth who contribute their time, ideas, and efforts to public policies that will directly impact our daily lives.

Just as it might seem magical for an idea to turn into a film, we need to work every day to ensure that public management transforms realities—not through magic, but through joint efforts, greater participation, and more democracy. Public management needs to embrace these elements, fostering a sense of ownership among the younger generations.

INTERVIEW with Vitor Dias, Northern Regional Director of the Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth (IPDJ)

To start, could you explain what *Desafio Jovens* is and what its main objectives are?

Thank you, Camila. The main objective of *Desafio Jovens* is to promote quality employment opportunities and future employability for young people, especially young women. The project seeks to create a more inclusive and gender-sensitive cross-border labor market. Additionally, in the area of non-formal education, we aim to improve digital, innovation, and entrepreneurial skills, focusing on critical sectors for the region, such as the bioeconomy and social economy.

That sounds impactful. What specific problem or challenge inspired the creation of this project?

The project emerged as a response to youth unemployment. It aims to provide better job opportunities for young people, particularly women while improving the inclusiveness and efficiency of the cross-border labor market. At its core, it's about promoting decent work and better working conditions for youth, leveraging the social and digital economy, and maximizing the region's potential within the Euroregion.

Collaboration between regions is key for projects like this. Why was the partnership between northern Portugal and Galicia chosen for *Desafio Jovens*?

The cooperation between northern Portugal and Galicia is rooted in their shared linguistic, cultural, and historical ties. Both regions belong to the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula and have built a strong collaborative relationship over the years. This partnership has resulted in a more competitive, connected, and socially inclusive region. For young people, it's opened doors to greater employment opportunities and fostered cohesion across the territory.

With those foundations in place, what specific outcomes are you hoping to achieve with this project?

The ultimate goal of *Desafio Jovens* is to empower young people who live, work, or study in the GNP Euroregion and help them integrate into the labor market from an inclusive and gender-sensitive perspective. We prioritize youth and women in rural areas, aiming to invigorate the cross-border labor market, rejuvenate the region's productive fabric, and retain a younger population that can add value to the territory.

You've been involved in many Interreg projects. How have these initiatives contributed to the development of IPDJ?

Based on my experience managing and coordinating cross-border cooperation projects, I can confidently say they have been instrumental in advancing IPDJ's mission and vision. These projects have significantly contributed to the institutional, personal, and technical growth of our staff.

Through these initiatives, IPDJ has expanded its network, enhanced its influence at national and European levels—especially in the youth sector—and has become more effective in addressing the needs of young people and youth associations. This allows us to take full advantage of the opportunities Europe provides.

A critical component of Interreg projects is the involvement of IVY volunteers. What role do they play in initiatives like this, in your opinion?

IVY volunteers are invaluable to the success of these projects. They act as drivers of change and creators of employment opportunities. For example, inviting young people to participate actively in meetings, monitoring committees, and cross-border dialogues can have a transformative impact.

These young entrepreneurs can also play a key role in communicating the project's goals and results, especially by leveraging their skills in digital tools and social media. Their involvement helps disseminate the outcomes to the target audience—other young people. Engaging youth in these projects aligns with Interreg's priority of enhancing skills and addressing youth unemployment.

It's inspiring to hear how youth engagement is at the core of this initiative.

Thank you so much for your time, Vitor. Any final thoughts?

Thank you, Camila. I'll just say that empowering young people isn't just about providing opportunities—it's about ensuring they feel part of the process. Projects like Desafío Jovens demonstrate that collaboration and inclusion are key to building a brighter future for all.



Camila Pérez Senande

- Age: 30
- Nationality: Galician-Argentinian
- Region where you are deployed: Galicia - North of Portugal
- Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you: bridges, diversity, cooperation



Improving accessibility in the Slovak-Ukrainian cross-border region

The Carpathian Mobility project works on the development of two different trails to enhance the region's accessibility and stimulate the growth of eco-tourism

Group photo of bike festival 'Uzhansky trail' attendees from the border region.

By Laura Meunier and Karolína Kolenková

The East Carpathians Biosphere Reserve, recognized as an area of global importance under UNESCO's Programme on Man and the Biosphere, encompasses three national parks, including Poloniny National Park in Slovakia and Uzhanskyi National Nature Park in Ukraine. Despite their breathtaking landscapes, these regions face significant challenges in terms of infrastructure and development that, if addressed, could boost the tourism sector.

One of the main obstacles to developing sustainable tourism in these areas is their peripheral location, coupled with limited infrastructure. Yet, there is a huge potential for initiatives such as creating cycling infrastructure. To make this happen, it is crucial to focus on improving accessibility for visitors while preserving the natural environment.

A key step towards achieving this goal is the creation of a comprehensive network of hiking and cycling paths. This would enhance the region's accessibility and stimulate the growth of eco-tourism, fostering long-term economic benefits for local communities.

In that context, the Carpathian Mobility project works on improving accessibility and mobility in the Slovak-Ukrainian cross-border region and supports eco-friendly transport. More concretely, it promotes openness and connection by enhancing travel opportunities in the area, and puts forward the participating regions' shared cultural and natural heritage. All this work contributes to strengthening regional linkages while highlighting the importance of unrestricted mobility in the frame of human rights as a cornerstone of human dignity and collaboration,



Start of cycling competition taking place during the two-day bike festival.

achieved through the creation of smooth pathways and inclusive infrastructure.

Thanks to the Carpathian Mobility Project, significant progress has been made. In the project's first phase, over 240 km of existing cycling routes were cleared and marked in Ukraine, and the first kilometres (6,5 km) of Poloniny trail and Uzanskyi trail were built on both sides of the border. The project has provided much-needed infrastructure, such as 14 new cycle rest areas, benefiting both local cyclists and tourists. Additionally, the installation of cycle counters on both sides has enabled the collection of real-time data.

The partnership also organised a series of events and conferences to raise awareness and engage local communities, stakeholders, and potential tourists. These initiatives promoted sustainable tourism practices and cross-border cooperation.

The Carpathian Mobility Project now has even higher aspirations. The Poloniny Trail, with an

estimated amount of 30 million euros, is expected to link the most significant natural and cultural landmarks within the Poloniny National Park. This ambitious bike route will connect three national parks from three different countries, establishing a cross-border network that will promote international cooperation and showcase the area's natural beauty.

The initiative laid the foundation for future investments by producing strategic documents for further and continued development. Through the project, the basis for the marketing communication of the Poloniny trail - a modern logo and design manual - has been created and is still used in all follow-up activities.

The Carpathian Mobility Project is not only about infrastructure development but also about fostering the fundamental value of freedom of movement. Freedom of movement empowers individuals to explore, connect, and access opportunities across borders. By creating safe, sustainable, and accessible pathways, this

project removes barriers, enabling people to experience the rich natural and cultural heritage of the East Carpathians.

In a region where borders have historically divided communities, this initiative serves as a symbol of unity, collaboration, and shared values. The newly established cycling routes

do not just connect landscapes—they connect people, fostering cross-border dialogue, mutual respect and environmental conservation. In doing so, the Carpathian Mobility Project underscores the importance of mobility as a tool for building inclusive, resilient, and cooperative societies.

INTERVIEW Soňa Kožárová and Matúš Goč, project managers at Prešov Self-Governing Region (Slovakia) - Lead partner

What does territorial cooperation mean for you?

Territorial cooperation is very important for us as a self-governing region bordering two countries. Especially in border areas, where historically the territory was a single entity (Ukraine-Slovakia), it is recognized as a region with similar geography and history. In line with our strategic plans, particularly in tourism, our long-term goal is to unlock the potential of the Slovakia-Poland-Ukraine border area. We have been working on this for five years, and thanks to the ‘Carpathian Mobility’ project, we have been able to bring our plans closer to reality.

What are the advantages for you of working with stakeholders across borders?

Connecting stakeholders is of great benefit to us. This was particularly evident in the ‘Carpathian Mobility’ project, where we had the opportunity to meet activists involved in cycling routes in western Ukraine. We continue to utilize these connections even after the project’s conclusion.

How did the project benefit you personally and professionally?

The project allowed us to meet inspiring stakeholders in Ukraine with whom I can envision

future collaboration for regional development. Personally, I am grateful for the chance to visit the areas where the project was implemented and to experience the stunning, untouched wilderness of Ukraine.

The project was completed one year ago; what has happened since, and what are your next goals?

As part of our overarching ambition to develop the Poloniny Trail cycling circuit and connect it with Poland and Ukraine, we have built an additional 27 km of the planned 74 km, in addition to the 4.6 km already completed. The remaining sections are in the planning phase, so we can confidently say the project is progressing. Currently, we also have project documentation prepared for the section that will connect through the village of Ubl'a to Ukraine.

How do you see the project’s contribution to EU Values such as Human Rights, and especially the Freedom of movement?

The Carpathian Mobility Project, in the context of the current geopolitical situation, including the war in Ukraine and restrictions on the Schengen border, plays a crucial role in fulfilling EU objectives despite the limitations on free movement. The war in Ukraine has highlighted the importance of

cooperation between EU member states and their neighbours. The project supports Ukraine in its integration with European standards and fosters cross-border solidarity, which is vital in times of crisis. Even though free movement is restricted, the project contributes to building lasting cross-border connections that will be ready to enhance mobility once the situation stabilizes. After the war, mobility between Ukraine and the EU will be critical for

Ukraine's reconstruction. The project lays the foundation for efficient infrastructure that will support post-war recovery while simultaneously strengthening Ukraine's integration into European structures. Despite current limitations, the project embodies EU values such as solidarity, inclusion, and cooperation. It facilitates cross-border contact, which is essential for sharing values, protecting human rights, and promoting peaceful coexistence.



A traditional wooden gazebo with a thatched roof, serves as spot for rest and relaxation near the cycling route.

More information:

[Improving accessibility and mobility in the SK-UA cross-border region | HUSKROUA ENI CBC](#)



Laura Meunier

- Age: 25
- Nationality: French
- Region where you are deployed: Budapest (Hungary)
- Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you: solidarity, links, diversity



Karolína Kolenková

- Age: 28
- Nationality: Slovak
- Region where you are deployed: Budapest (Hungary)
- Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you: unity, support, development

Interact Academy short stories



A story of storytelling in Interact Academy



Nebojsa Nikolic, Interact

Once upon a time, a hopeful project applicant filled out the application form and sent it in a box, along with 1000 pages of other documents. Many years have passed since that fateful deadline rush, but both the project and the programme officers are still using the same dry project description, as if bound to it by some ancient curse.

Sounds scary, right? It looks even worse when a communication expert takes that formal bureaucratic description from the application form and posts it on Facebook, illustrated with a bad photo from a boring meeting.

This is not how we are supposed to communicate with any of our target groups. Even if you are sending a report to the people in the European Commission, it is better if your project description is easy to read and understand. Don't just list the number of park benches you procured within the project. Leave the dry quantitative descriptions for the auditors. Instead, explain how the park benches have helped the local community to enjoy the park better, to get together and socialize. You can tell the whole story with two photos and three words - 'before and after'.

Storytelling doesn't mean that you need to sound like the Brothers Grimm. It doesn't even mean that you must be original or clever at all cost. Storytelling simply means that instead of writing a report about the important things we have done, we can tell a story. How do we do that? Simply put, we can use a few basic writing techniques to make our content relatable and easier to understand.

Within the Interact Academy we have created a thorough storytelling training that teaches exactly that. You can turn your project descriptions into engaging texts that people will actually want to read and, more importantly, retell. Here are three examples of such stories, each of them based on original content from Interreg colleagues but adapted by Nebojsa Nikolic, Interact. Enjoy the read!

More information about the Interact Academy:
<https://academy.interact.eu>

The Fight Against "Forever chemicals"

How Nordic researchers are tackling PFAS contamination?



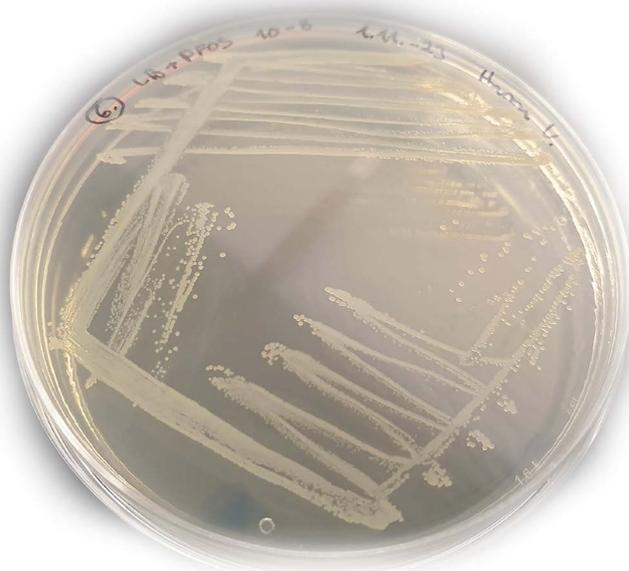
*By Anna-mari Ruisniemi, Communication Officer
at Interreg Aurora programme*

Everyday products, from non-stick cookware to waterproof fabrics, contain a group of synthetic chemicals called PFAS, or 'forever chemicals.' The nickname stems from their resistance to breaking down in nature. Unfortunately, this durability comes at a cost: PFAS accumulate in soil and water, sneaking into our food and drinking water. Over time, they pose serious health risks, including cancer.

Now, an inspiring international project, funded by the Interreg Aurora Programme, is stepping up to address this environmental and public health crisis. The NeTo-PFAS project unites researchers from Norway, Sweden, and Finland to tackle PFAS contamination right where it starts - in groundwater. Their goal? To create innovative, sustainable, and cost-effective solutions that can be deployed directly at polluted sites.

At the heart of this effort is a groundbreaking approach: enlisting nature itself in the fight against PFAS. The team is investigating how specialized bacteria can break down these

chemicals. Early results are promising, and if successful, this microbial method could revolutionize how contaminated sites are managed worldwide.



Isolation of microbial species on agar plate



Firefighting training in Joroinen, Finland - the sampling site for screening of PFAS degrading microbes

But technology alone isn't enough. The project also highlights the vital role of local municipalities. These communities are often on the front lines of contamination and responsible for land use planning. By collaborating closely with municipalities, the project ensures that solutions are not just theoretical but practical and impactful for the people who need them most.

The vision behind the project is clear and urgent: clean up polluted sites from this invisible enemy and protect public health. With innovative science and cross-border teamwork, NeTo-PFAS is proving that even 'forever chemicals' don't have to live up to their name.

Want to learn more about this pioneering initiative? Visit the [project's website](#).

Turning Europe's watermills into clean energy powerhouses

Equipping mill owners with the skills they need to do it



By Stephen Midgley, Project Manager at Syndicate Energy Haute Vienne (SEHV), France

European rivers, once bustling with water mills, now hold untapped potential for renewable electric energy. Recent research has identified around 27,000 water mills suitable for small-scale hydropower. Many mill owners are eager to convert their mills but don't know how to do it, how much it could cost, what the relevant laws are, and is it worth it?

Repurposing watermills for hydropower isn't as simple as flipping a switch. It requires technical knowledge, clear policies, and local buy-in. Mill owners need to learn how to adapt traditional hydraulic systems for modern energy generation, while national and local governments must simplify administrative processes to make projects feasible. Complex or unclear regulations often discourage mill owners from pursuing this transformation.

This is where the Renewat project steps in. Spanning eight European countries, Renewat tackles these challenges head-on. It works on multiple fronts: equipping mill owners with the

skills they need, advocating for streamlined administrative processes, and developing financial models to make small-scale hydropower viable.

The project doesn't just focus on making this transition possible—it's also about making it efficient and scalable. By bringing together experts, policymakers, and mill owners, Renewat aims to promote the idea across Europe and help as many communities as possible transform their historic watermills into sources of renewable energy.

With €1.6 million in funding and a timeline stretching to 2028, Renewat's mission is clear: to create a blueprint for repowering watermills that preserve their cultural heritage while turning them into modern-day assets for clean energy and sustainable development.

To learn more about how this innovative project is shaping Europe's energy future, visit the [Renemat website](#).

Powering the future

How the South Baltic Region is collaborating for a clean energy transition



By Kuba Gudzinowicz, Communication Manager for the BalticBeat project

The South Baltic region is at a crossroads. Transitioning from coal and fossil fuels to renewable energy is essential for sustainability and energy security. Yet, this shift is often hindered by a lack of local expertise, fragmented support, and limited resources. The region's diverse needs demand tailored solutions, making cross-border collaboration crucial.

The **BalticBeat** project, led by the University of Gdańsk, aims to address these challenges by bringing together partners from Poland, Denmark, Sweden, and Lithuania. This initiative focuses on equipping local governments, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and communities with the knowledge and tools they need to navigate the energy transition. By offering expert advice, creating a communication platform to connect stakeholders with specialists, and developing targeted training programs, BalticBeat is helping communities build local capacity for adopting renewable energy solutions.

“The transition to renewable energy requires more than technology; it demands informed decisions

and coordinated efforts,” says **Sylvia Mrozowska, PhD**, Vice-Rector for Cooperation and Development at the University of Gdańsk. “BalticBeat is designed to provide the tools and knowledge that local governments and businesses need to make this transition successful.”

What sets BalticBeat apart is its collaborative approach. While Denmark and Sweden contribute expertise in renewable energy systems and community-based energy models, Poland and Lithuania bring crucial insights into the challenges of transitioning from coal-based economies. This combination of knowledge ensures that the project's solutions are both innovative and tailored to local needs.

Through its practical and cooperative approach, BalticBeat offers a model for other regions to follow in tackling the complexities of the energy transition. You can find out more about this amazing initiative here: <https://czrug.ug.edu.pl/en/balticbeat-university-of-gdansk-project-with-interreg-southbaltic-funding/>



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Check out the Interreg portal!

<https://interreg.eu/interreg-by-youth>

