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Italy's strategic position paper

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General introduction

The package of regulatory proposals relating to [the Multiannual Financial Framework \(MFF\) 2028–2034](#), published by the European Commission on July 16, 2025, represents a first step in launching the debate on the strategic and implementation approach for the next programming cycle.

Regarding European Territorial Cooperation (ETC/INTERREG), Italy welcomes with interest the ambition of the proposed framework in terms of its integrated vision, its efforts to build on lessons learned in terms of procedural simplification, its greater operational flexibility, and its strategic and operational coherence between funds and instruments.

In particular, the following are viewed positively:

- the **strengthening of the principle of complementarity and synergy** between policies, instruments, and intervention frameworks;
- the centrality of **sustainable development** as a guiding, cross-cutting, and multi-level criterion for the selection of investments;
- the explicit reference to the importance of effective **cooperation between the authorities responsible for implementation and control** (at European, national, and regional level);
- the emphasis on governance inspired by the principle of **shared ownership**, which confirms the active role of national and subnational administrations and of economic, social and territorial partnerships and civil society.

This approach appears to be entirely consistent with the vision already developed within INTERREG and, specifically, with the approach pursued by the Italian system—the state, regions, local authorities, and partnerships—which in recent cycles has consolidated advanced experience in terms of integration between Interreg and mainstream, multilevel cooperation, and capitalization of good practices¹.

However, if the ambition outlined in the regulatory proposals is to be implemented in practice, it is necessary to ensure that the objectives of sustainable development and synergies between funds and instruments do not remain anchored to abstract principles or formal approaches but are effectively pursued in both the programming and implementation phases. In this sense, Italy believes that cohesion policy investments – and particularly those of the ETC – must be virtuously anchored to the Sustainable Development Goals.

¹ In this regard, the [SINERGIE project guidelines](#), developed by the Department for Cohesion Policies and the South as part of a process that actively involved five pilot regions, provide a useful methodological reference for demonstrating how synergies can be planned, monitored, and reused strategically, avoiding overlaps or dispersion. Numerous analyses at EU level, including the Report of the High Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy (February 2024), the European Court of Auditors' annual report on the EU budget (July 2024) and the Interact Harvesting Report (January 2025), recognize the added value of INTERREG in contributing to the growth of administrative capacity, the co-creation of policies, and the construction of multilevel networks.

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Sustainable (SDGs) of the **UN 2030 Agenda** and channelled to support the embedding of **macro-regional and sea basin strategies**, understood as frameworks for territorial and supranational strategic coherence. Only by strengthening the capacity to **capitalize on the value already generated** will it be possible to translate the principle of *better value for money* into a systemic logic of collective learning, resource optimization, and greater policy effectiveness.

In the absence of such methodological assumptions, there is a real risk that the ambition of the regulatory framework will result in a disorderly proliferation of projects, fragmentation of territorial strategies, and a weakening of the strategic dimension of investments and cooperation, with losses in efficiency and opportunities in terms of economies of scale, a unified vision, and measurable impact in the territories.

In the new context, **INTERREG** remains a **structural and essential component of the** European Union's **cohesion policy**, aimed at promoting territorial integration, multilevel governance in all its forms, and solidarity between territories. As part of the reflection on the post-2027 programming period, Italy reaffirms the need to safeguard planning and strategic autonomy to ensure an adequate impact on the territories concerned and to nurture the CTE's own identity.

The CTE must continue to act as a **bridge between territories, policies, and levels of governance**, leveraging its potential as a European space for institutional, administrative, and territorial experimentation, which aims to resolve concrete issues common to various territories, both European and non-European, using a "bottom-up" approach that is extremely useful for European cohesion in a historical period characterized by great instability and geopolitical uncertainty.

This document is the result of a sharing process carried out, in continuity with previous programming cycles, within the highest CTE governance body (Strategic Coordination Group), which represents the highest expression of the principle of extended partnership. It constitutes Italy's position on the new regulatory proposals and is also designed as a functional tool for the ongoing negotiations.

1. Italy's strategic position

For the period 2028-2034, Italy proposes a strategic vision focused on strengthening the distinctive and innovative role of the CTE as a multilevel instrument of cohesion policy with a supranational vocation to address shared challenges, promote territorial convergence, and experiment with innovative, transferable, and replicable approaches. In particular, the main elements of detail are highlighted below:

- **Establishing the correlation between the SDGs and the Fund's General and Specific Objectives**

The SDGs provide a universal framework that encompasses environmental, economic, and social challenges. Linking cohesion programs to the SDGs avoids fragmentation, focuses resources on shared priorities, and creates synergies between European, national, and regional funds. The use of the SDGs offers an integrated vision for directing investment towards sustainable and inclusive development, to be aligned with the National Strategy and relevant regional strategies for sustainable development, as well as with macro-regional and sea basin strategies. In addition, the SDG targets and indicators provide a common language for assessing and communicating results, showing with concrete data the contribution of cohesion to the objectives set out in the regulation (ref. Art. 2-3 NRPP Reg.).

- **Strengthening the embedding of macro-regional and sea basin strategies**

To put into practice the ambition of integration between funds outlined in the regulatory proposals, Italy considers it appropriate for the period 2028–2034 to be a genuine experimental phase, focusing on the SDGs as objectives to which macro-regional and sea basin strategies can also be anchored. This phase should not be limited to a formal coordination exercise but should include a dedicated share of cohesion program resources—not only CTE—to support the SDGs and the implementation of strategic priorities. Specific attention should be paid to the empowerment of central and regional administrations and all the bodies involved. To this end, it is considered essential that transnational programs continue to support the strategies with a dedicated share of resources and that the template for the chapters of the INTERREG plan be supplemented with a specific reference to the expected contribution to the strategies valid for all programs. On the other hand, the NRPP template should be supplemented with a reference to cooperation actions (additional cooperation) and the contribution to macro-regional and sea basin strategies.

- **Promoting complementarity with the mainstream**

In this context of new operational, cultural, and regulatory challenges, a more structured transfer of knowledge and project results from the CTE to the mainstream and vice versa takes on added value, with the aim of making the capitalization of INTERREG experiences systemic. This requires greater support and involvement from state and European authorities, including through the strengthening of administrative capacity, particularly in mountainous and/or marginal territories.

It is therefore necessary for the proposed regulations to clarify how integration between the chapters of the NRPP and the chapters of the INTERREG plan will be ensured.

It is proposed that mainstream programs be made more aware of cooperation, including through nationally directed support actions and the provision of dedicated funds, with minimum and maximum quotas (e.g., between 2% and 5% for each objective)².

Furthermore, it is considered appropriate to further harmonize the objectives, strategies, and governance mechanisms of the various programs to ensure greater consistency and complementarity between sectoral policies and the various intervention instruments. This need is particularly evident in areas such as research, innovation, and technological development, which, due to their inherently transnational nature, require a coordinated approach capable of overcoming the fragmentation of initiatives and promoting synergies at European and international level.

Closer alignment between policy priorities and operational instruments would optimize the use of available resources, avoid duplication and dispersion, and create a more integrated knowledge ecosystem. In this perspective, strengthening cooperation between public institutions, businesses, universities, and research centers appears essential to build an adequate critical mass in terms of both investment and skills.

² Inter-program coordination mechanisms and networks between coordinators of flagship projects of macro-regional strategies and the managing authorities of ETC programs and mainstream programs are also inspiring in this direction. This objective could also be supported by reward mechanisms tested in ETC calls for proposals (e.g., ESPON).

- **Clarify the methodology for allocating resources among Interreg components**

The confirmation of the Interreg components and the substantial continuity of the programs are positive elements, as they promote the commitment and stability of already established partnership networks. The recognition of maritime and island cross-border cooperation, which represents a unique and strategic segment of the ETC with still underutilized potential, is considered very positive.

However, further analysis is needed on the methodology for allocating resources among the various components, which should also consider the data recorded in the 2021-2027 cycle relating to the ratio between projects submitted and projects funded (success rate), financial performance, and implementation. The need for and demand for cooperation differ between programs, and continuity in the level of funding for components and programs should be examined in depth and justified based on evidence from the 2021-2027 cycle and emerging priorities.

- **Confirm, in principle, the continuity of programs**

Italy supports the value of continuity as a strategic element for the enhancement and actions of the programs. Any need for revision and opportunities to strengthen areas of cooperation will be assessed and discussed on a case-by-case basis with the regions concerned, with a view to establishing a shared position. This approach will strengthen the territorial roots of the programs and, at the same time, support INTERREG's ability to adapt to developments in the European and international context.

- **Enhancing the specificity and complementarity of programs**

It is necessary to enhance the specificity and complementarity of INTERREG programs that focus on the same areas of cooperation, to maximize territorial impact and ensure greater consistency of interventions. Cross-border programs must retain their role of proximity and border cohesion, promoting small-scale interventions and pilot projects, as well as small cross-border infrastructure interventions, without prejudice to the potential to generate models that can be scaled up from small to a wider territorial level. At the same time, strengthening transnational programs is crucial to promoting the transfer of results through structured peer review processes capable of disseminating good practices and innovation in different contexts. Interregional programs should confirm their respective specificities in support of the ETC, the entire cohesion system, and the implementation of policies—including sectoral ones—in different territories, including through additional cooperation.

- **Strengthening external cooperation**

For the period 2028-2034, it is considered essential to ensure adequate overall funding for external cooperation, recognizing the strategic value of relations with the IPA countries of the Balkans and the Southern Mediterranean. The distribution of resources should be weighted, compared to previous programming, with a strengthening of the cross-border and transnational components with the Global Europe contribution, given the growing complexity of the challenges at the external borders. In this context, the European Commission's ongoing oversight of the entire program implementation process appears to be essential. It seems appropriate to strengthen the coherence between the external dimension of European Territorial Cooperation and the European Union's initiatives within the Global Gateway, as a strategic reference framework for sustainable and inclusive cooperation with partner countries.

The Global Gateway offers opportunities for synergy with INTERREG programs operating on external borders,

particularly in the Mediterranean Basin, through investments in green and digital infrastructure, energy transition, innovation, training, and multilevel governance. Greater strategic and operational collaboration is needed with development cooperation instruments³. It is also hoped that Interreg will continue to be promoted as a tool for soft diplomacy and as a "school of accession" for IPA countries. In this regard, reference is made to the new 'Pact for the Mediterranean – One Sea, One Pact, One Future', presented by the European Commission and the High Representative on October 16, 2025, which aims – on the basis of co-ownership and shared responsibility – to build a Common Mediterranean Area based on three pillars (people and mobility/connections; more sustainable and integrated economies; security, preparedness, and migration management) and an Action Plan starting in 2026: the ETC, particularly in transnational and cross-border maritime programs, can be the operational vehicle for translating the Pact into concrete initiatives consistent with the priorities of the basins.

- **Promoting the CTE as a laboratory for experimentation and innovation**

The CTE is an institutional space where innovative solutions can be tested to address challenges on complex issues such as collaboration in R&D, the removal of obstacles arising from internal and external European borders, cross-border mobility, *brain drain* and *brain gain*, and the marginalization of internal and border territories. This experimental dimension makes it a "strategic niche" that has proven capable of generating solutions that can be transferred to national, regional, and European policies, particularly in the areas of climate resilience and multilevel governance.

In this perspective, particular attention should be paid to cross-border and transnational research and innovation infrastructures – broadly understood as integrated networks of laboratories, digital open innovation platforms, and technology transfer services – which the CTE has already demonstrated its ability to activate and make accessible to scientific communities, businesses, and territories, including in the context of activities financed by PNRR funds. The experience gained in INTERREG programs highlights the potential of 'networked' infrastructures – rather than individual large-scale projects – in promoting the sharing of advanced equipment, specialist skills, and high value-added services, particularly for the benefit of SMEs and peripheral territories.

In the post-2027 framework, Italy considers it strategic to strengthen the role of the CTE as a platform for networking, opening up and joint experimentation of R&I infrastructures, including through: i) open and transparent access schemes (vouchers or other dedicated support instruments) for public and private actors, in particular SMEs and start-ups, ii) joint services to support the use of infrastructure in order to benefit from advanced services offered by laboratories and research centers located in INTERREG areas, iii) pilot test-before-invest schemes for emerging technologies, in line with regional priorities and macro-regional and sea basin strategies; iv) pathways that promote the capitalization of solutions tested in CTE – e.g., networked infrastructure models, digital platforms, collaboration protocols – through mainstream calls for proposals dedicated to the scalability and replication of such experiments in other regional contexts. Such infrastructures can strengthen territorial innovation ecosystems, in which to test solutions that can be replicated in mainstream programs and other EU instruments.

³ also at the governance level: for Italy, for example, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation – Directorate General for Development Cooperation and the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), and similar entities and instruments in other EU countries

- **Supporting partnership and networking**

The added value of ETC also lies in its ability to activate multi-level networks and cross-border, transnational, and horizontal partnerships that strengthen interregional and international cooperation. Networking – both formal and informal – contributes to increasing administrative capacity and defining shared strategies and joint solutions, including through the activation of common networks and services, particularly in border areas, which are even capable of creating genuine movements that generate European positions at international level⁴. Finally, Italy considers it essential to ensure that the ETC is fully accessible to all territorial actors, including people with disabilities, both in the planning and implementation phases, also by ensuring the involvement and active participation of associations of people with disabilities in partnership tables.

- **Enhancing marginal territories (internal areas) and border areas**

The CTE gives a voice and opportunities to marginal (inland), rural, mountain, and island areas, including at the cross-border level. INTERREG programs offer opportunities for collaboration that are useful for reducing territorial disparities, including those caused by administrative boundaries, and for improving access to services, for example by promoting cooperation and coordination between locations and between different levels of government, systematizing the findings of the various listening initiatives launched as part of INTERREG projects.

- **Strengthening administrative capacity**

Joint work between administrations and foreign partners makes it possible to strengthen the technical and strategic skills of staff, improve planning, and promote integrated approaches. However, there is a clear need to improve continuity and enhance the value of the human capital involved. In this regard, it is important to recognize the contribution of universities and research centers to innovation processes and the strengthening of administrative capacity, particularly in the service of local authorities, organizations, and businesses with limited access to skilled human capital and financial resources.

There is a need to strengthen not only administrative skills in the strict sense, but also management skills and/or soft skills (in terms of governance, strategy definition, economic and financial sustainability, impact assessment, data management, intellectual property, communication with businesses and citizens) of transnational partnerships and R&I infrastructures. The ETC can play a key role in learning and sharing pathways for infrastructure managers, technology transfer managers, and technical and administrative staff at universities, research centers, and local authorities, through capacity building, peer exchanges, mentoring, and joint experimentation with innovative organizational models. Such intangible investments in human and organizational capital are essential to ensure the full exploitation of infrastructure investments and to reduce capacity gaps between more and less developed regions and/or promote the dissemination of good practices.

Crucial for our country's economy is the training of staff dedicated to Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs), a key element in promoting the exploitation of research results and strengthening the link between academia and the productive system. Investing in the development of the skills of these professionals means enhancing the capacity of universities, research institutions, and businesses to

⁴ See, for example, the [Mediterranean Charter for climate adaptation](#)

translating scientific knowledge into concrete applications, innovative products, and high value-added services.

Targeted and continuous training, focused on both legal and administrative aspects (intellectual property, contracts, patents) and technical and economic aspects (market analysis, economic exploitation of technologies, management of public-private partnerships), is an essential condition for the full functioning of innovation ecosystems.

In this context, it is appropriate to continue promoting integrated training courses, developed in collaboration between universities, research centers, public institutions, and industrial actors, in order to build a national network of expertise in the field of technology transfer. This approach would make it possible to standardize operating standards, disseminate best practices, and strengthen the country's ability to compete effectively in the global research and innovation landscape.

- **Strengthening the role of young people in cooperation**

It is considered crucial to strengthen the involvement of young people in ETC, both as beneficiaries and as actors in cooperation, also in order to renew the sense of European citizenship. In this regard, it is important to ensure greater support for the Interreg Volunteer Youth initiative. On the issue of young people and social inclusion, it is also desirable to promote greater synergies with the ESF+ and directly managed programs.

In this perspective, it is considered strategic to systematically enhance the contribution of young researchers, recognizing them as a fundamental resource for innovation and competitive growth in the territories. They represent a wealth of technical, scientific, and methodological skills that can have a significant impact on territorial cooperation processes, promoting the circulation of knowledge, the adoption of innovative solutions, and the dissemination of good practices among different institutional and productive contexts.

Their active involvement in applied research projects, public-private partnerships, and local development initiatives can help to create a stable bridge between the higher education system, public administrations, and the economic and entrepreneurial fabric. With this in mind, it is appropriate to promote professional integration and interdisciplinary collaboration pathways that enable young researchers to put their skills to good use in a context of continuous learning and engagement with the real needs of the territory.

Furthermore, the promotion of mobility and exchange programs, both nationally and internationally, aimed at fostering interconnection between research centers, local authorities, and innovative companies is particularly important. These programs not only strengthen the European and transnational dimension of cooperation, but also contribute to the training of a new generation of researchers capable of operating in complex, open, and multidisciplinary contexts.

In this way, the development of young human capital becomes a strategic lever for consolidating a dynamic, inclusive, and sustainable competitiveness-oriented knowledge ecosystem.

- **Strengthening multilevel governance**

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In the context of fund integration that informs the proposed NRPP Regulation, Italy is convinced of the opportunity to functionally strengthen the multilevel governance of cooperation. To this end, it is considered essential to enhance the role and contribution of state, regional, and local authorities, and to involve economic and social partners and civil society in a structured manner, as well as to establish mechanisms to balance the effectiveness of contributions, the efficiency of participation, and the absence of conflicts of interest.

Consistently, Italy also recommends establishing forms of regular and structured dialogue between national authorities, central and regional administrations, INTERREG programs, and the European Commission, aimed at supporting the integration process. In this regard, it is hoped that the role of DG REGIO will be strengthened in liaising with all other DGs whose remit covers investments planned under cohesion and other EU funds: this refers, for example, to DG RTD (for synergies with Horizon Europe and the research- innovation ecosystem), DG MARE (for initiatives related to the maritime dimension, such as WestMED), DG MENA and DG ENEST (for cooperation with the Southern Shore and the IPA area, a representative of the relevant DG could be included in the NEXT and IPA Monitoring Committees, respectively), DG ENER, DG MOVE, DG BUDG, and other DGs relevant to the strategic content of the programs.

Similar structured liaison arrangements within DG REGIO⁵ are desirable in order to facilitate the monitoring and effective enhancement of cooperation for the benefit of mainstream programming and implementation, as well as the monitoring of the embedding process of macro-regional and sea basin strategies.

2. Thematic insights and operating methods

- **Performance-based approach**

The introduction of *the performance-based approach* (PBA), of the Draft Budget type, appears to be an interesting simplification tool. However, Italy considers it necessary to examine all its possible implications to assess how it works in the CTE context, with specific reference to the impact on the first and second level control system and the need for adaptation for a decentralized system such as the Italian one.

At the same time, enhancing the post-2027 CTE from a PBA perspective will require the strengthening of all common digital, analytical, and methodological tools to promote the effectiveness, transparency, simplification, and impact of programs and projects. It will therefore be necessary to enhance the KEEP.eu platform, ensuring better interoperability with JeMS and national monitoring systems. It is also recommended that a multilingual system be introduced on KEEP.eu to allow for wider use of data by beneficiaries and administrations, including external cooperation partners.

Finally, Italy believes that the PBA system should also consider, through appropriate indicators, aspects related to the quality of projects and innovative activities, with the aim of maximizing the impact on the territories involved.

⁵ between the Italy Unit and the Interreg Unit and macro-regional strategies.

- **Revision of the automatic decommitment proposal with N+10 (months)**

Italy requests confirmation of the N+3 rule for programs involving internal borders and N+5 for those involving external borders (ref. Art. 15 of the NRPP Regulation proposal). The proposed revision of the N+10 (months) automatic decommitment rule is considered unacceptable, as it does not consider the specific characteristics of INTERREG programs, which historically have low levels of expenditure in the initial phase because they focus on the negotiated definition of calls for proposals and the selection of operations. Only after the contracts have been signed and the projects have started is there a sharp acceleration in payments. Evaluating programs solely based on expenditure at a time very close to the start of programming risks providing a distorted picture, penalizing the most productive phase of the programs.

- **Inclusion of the ERDF allocation in 2028 also for INTERREG programs**

The section dedicated to the chapters of the financial framework of the NRPP regulation proposal (page 15, EN version) does not indicate the allocation for INTERREG for the first year of 2028. This provision discourages the rapid preparation and launch of programs with a timeline that allows for the disbursement of funding to projects and continuity between the two programming cycles. Consultation with the program managing authorities could facilitate a more accurate assessment of the implications of this choice.

- **Pre-financing quotas and methods**

A summary position is being prepared about the changes made to the pre-financing rates and methods for internal cooperation programs (ref. Art. 17 of the NRPP Regulation proposal). However, it is considered that projects funded under programs involving non-EU countries require higher pre-financing to avoid delays in the start-up phase. It is therefore requested that the same level of pre-financing as in 2021- 2027 be maintained to continue to guarantee adequate advance funding for projects and to speed up start-up operations.

- **Additional cooperation, mainstreaming, and embedding of strategies**

At present, only the proposal for the ERDF/CF Regulation, in recital 17, refers to cooperation additional to INTERREG, cooperation measures and actions, and mentions macro-regional and sea basin strategies. In this regard, it is considered useful to contribute to the strategic framework of the NRPP regulation proposal, which aims at integration and synergies between EU funds, ensuring consistent follow-up to investment in cooperation actions that can be developed from mainstream programs, already launched in the two previous programming cycles, strengthening the role of INTERACT and capitalizing on INTERREG's heritage of cooperation. Given the thematic and geographical coverage of the CTE programs and the potential for innovation and replicability of its projects⁶, it is considered that the NRPPs could usefully provide for a total reserve of between 2% and 5% of funds to be allocated to international cooperation actions for capitalizing on CTE results and strengthening the priorities of macro-regional and sea basin strategies, where relevant. It is therefore recommended that recital 17 be consistently reflected in the ERDF provisions and referred to in the NRPP.

⁶ already tested by Italy with the coordinated selection and promotion of "flagship" projects

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As part of the cooperation actions that can be developed by mainstream programs, specific attention should be paid to capitalizing on the research and innovation infrastructures activated or strengthened by the ETC. In this sense, the reserve of funds between 2% and 5%, as desired by Italy for international cooperation actions, could explicitly include: i) additional cooperation initiatives aimed at integrating R&I infrastructures into national and regional research systems, ii) joint projects for the use and upgrading of infrastructures located in cooperation areas, iii) coordination actions with national and European roadmaps for research infrastructures, as well as with the platforms and ecosystems of the European Research Area (ERA). This would make INTERREG's role as a link between cohesion policies, research policies, and macro-regional and sea basin strategies more structural.

- **Exemption from state aid rules**

Considering the experience gained in previous programming cycles, it is considered that exemption from state aid checks for territorial cooperation programs could represent an important step forward for their effective implementation. The checks currently required are highly complex in terms of procedure, requiring considerable administrative resources from both the managing authorities and the beneficiaries, without producing proportionate added value in terms of the regularity of expenditure. Experience shows that cases of irregularities related to state aid are extremely rare and statistically marginal compared to the total volume of INTERREG expenditure. Furthermore, the very nature of the projects funded—characterized by their cooperative, and therefore non-competitive, dimension and public interest objectives—makes such interventions fundamentally irrelevant in terms of potential market distortions.

- **Proposal for simplification of SEA, EIA, and DNSH**

Italy considers it essential to reconsider, in accordance with the principle of proportionality, the methods for assessing the contribution of INTERREG program interventions to sustainability objectives and their related impacts, as currently governed by the SEA and EIA Directives, also with regard to the provisions of the DNSH principle, taking into account the opportunity to simplify procedures where useful.

The verification obligations introduced in accordance with Article 9 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 have often proved disproportionate to the nature of INTERREG projects, which are predominantly intangible in nature.

In fact, almost all of the interventions financed do not have a significant environmental impact: it is therefore suggested that a proportionate verification system be introduced, which would allow, after a simplified preliminary investigation, the exclusion of those programs or interventions that do not actually have a significant environmental impact, while preserving the alignment of national regulations and implementation procedures with EU law.

The proposal is also considered significant in view of the extreme simplification contained in the proposed ERDF Regulation 28-24 about the programs, each of which will constitute a chapter of a few pages within a single INTERREG Plan.

- **Simplification of project financial management**

In the INTERREG context, it is recommended to maintain and strengthen administrative simplification tools, in particular the use of simplified cost options (SCOs), which have proven to be effective, flexible, and low-risk, and which guarantee extremely low margins of error compared to other cohesion instruments. With this in mind, and to promote their correct application at program level, greater coordination and harmonization is also desirable in the definition of rules and procedures relating to management controls and audits between the authorities responsible at European, national, and regional level.

- **Technical assistance and management flexibility**

The 2021–2027 cycle highlighted some critical issues related to the absence, in the CTE regulation, of an axis dedicated to technical assistance (TA). This made it necessary to finance TA through project progress, with effects on timelines and administrative pressure for managing authorities. At the same time, some implementation approaches proved advantageous in terms of simplification, for example in terms of controls. The result is a mixed picture, highlighting the opportunity to maintain flexibility in the choice of implementation solutions and to review procedures with a view to simplification and effectiveness, while ensuring a minimum level of TA for all programs.

The independence of the joint secretariat must also be guaranteed. However, in the proposed ERDF/CF Regulation (Article 10.4), while remaining consistent in its support for the managing authority, it would have "staff representing the participating states in the Interreg chapter," a change that would distort its function.

- **Artificial Intelligence and Territorial Cooperation**

In the context of the evolutionary prospects of European Territorial Cooperation post-2027, there is a strategic opportunity to leverage the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) across the various stages of the Interreg program life cycle. The integration of AI tools for the preliminary assessment of project proposals and for monitoring implementation, as well as in management systems, could also strengthen the interoperability between JeMS, KEEP.eu, and other platforms, in line with the guidelines of the European AI Act (EU Regulation 2024/1684) and recent Commission strategy documents, such as the 2023–2024 Work Program of Cluster 4 Horizon Europe and Communication COM(2023) 102 final – European Strategy for Ethical and Innovative Use of AI in the Public Sector.

In the field of research and innovation, the use of AI tools also offers the opportunity to map and enhance more effectively the research infrastructures and related services available in cooperation areas, facilitating the matching of the needs of businesses and territories with the capabilities available in various laboratories and centers of expertise, even across borders. Recommendation algorithms, semantic analysis systems, and data analytics tools could support, in a transparent manner and in compliance with the European regulatory framework, the selection of projects, the capitalization of good practices, and the identification of complementarities between infrastructures, strengthening the role of the ETC as a driver of interoperability and intelligent integration of European R&I systems.