

Creating the right project partnerships

EU Neighbours in action: Knowledge across borders | 19-20 May 2026

Overview

This parallel session explored how programmes can support the development of meaningful project partnerships in Interreg IPA, Interreg NEXT and IPA-IPA CBC programmes. While programmes have succeeded in creating cooperation opportunities, building partnerships based on genuine complementarity, shared ownership and trust remains difficult. Partnerships are frequently assembled under time pressure and driven by existing contacts or eligibility requirements rather than shared territorial challenges. The session invited participants to analyse partnership weaknesses, identify conditions for stronger cooperation, and propose ideas for change.

Methodology

The session was highly interactive and built around a series of structured group exercises. Participants first identified key weaknesses and challenges, then explored how these could be turned into strengths, before developing practical ideas for change. The session concluded with a prioritisation exercise, where participants assessed the proposed ideas based on their feasibility and potential impact, helping to identify the most promising actions for future improvement.

Key discussion points

- **Partnership weaknesses**

Participants clustered weaknesses into three areas.

- **Capacity:** limited institutional and administrative capacity, unclear workload distribution, different levels of experience, lack of long-term financing after closure, and co-financing as a barrier for smaller organisations.
- **Ownership:** project ideas developed by external experts rather than jointly, partners who do not know each other before joining, lack of shared ownership, and too many partners included for formal rather than substantive reasons.
- **Communication and coordination:** poor internal communication, unclear task distribution, lack of trust and mis implementation linked to insufficient shared understanding of objectives.

A separate cluster addressed the **missing cross-border element:** weak geographic balance, same partners appearing in every call, partnerships based on financial interest rather than genuine cooperation intent, and meaningless participation to tick a box.

- **Conditions for stronger partnerships**

Working from the clustered weaknesses, participants identified relevant expertise, similar financial capacity across the partnership, and management capacity distributed across the whole rather than concentrated in the lead partner as capacity strengths. Long-lasting partnerships, joint ownership of the project idea and local authorities' involvement were highlighted as essential for achieving lasting cross-border effects. Existing partner search platforms and transparent communication structures

were named as positive factors, alongside the importance of looking for complementary partners from across the border rather than duplicating competences.

- **Ideas for change**

Participants proposed a range of ideas and voted on feasibility and usefulness. The most supported were the following:

- A proactive matchmaking tool or platform supporting partner search before calls are launched.
- Regular JS-facilitated online meetings between project partners to strengthen coordination and support.
- Rewarding partners with proven post-project sustainability records.
- Systematic involvement of policy makers in partnerships.
- Involving national authorities to support lead partners in partner identification.
- Effective and efficient participation mechanisms based on a bottom-up approach.
- More partnership building events before and during calls.
- Continuation of mentorship schemes for less experienced partners.

Main takeaways

- Partnership quality cannot be guaranteed through eligibility requirements alone. Programmes need to invest in partnership development before and during project preparation.
- The missing cross-border element is a recognised problem. Partnerships assembled to fulfil participation requirements or driven by financial interest undermine the added value of cooperation.
- Genuine ownership requires that the project idea is developed jointly by partners who know each other and share a common challenge. Projects developed by external experts without strong partner involvement produce weaker cooperation.
- Matchmaking needs to be proactive and challenge driven. Structured, needs-based partner connection before calls are launched is more effective than general networking events.
- Policy makers are frequently absent from partnerships. Their systematic involvement was identified as both a gap and a priority for improving the strategic relevance and durability of results and cooperation.

Follow-up actions / next steps

The reflections, experiences, and ideas generated during the session will contribute to Interact's ongoing work on partnership quality, building on the synergies work already initiated with Interreg IPA and IPA-IPA programmes. They will help shape both broader guidance and more targeted support tools tailored to the specific needs of these programmes, supporting stronger and more effective cooperation partnerships.

Session team

Besiana Ninka, Ilze Ciganska

Report prepared by

Besiana Ninka, Ilze Ciganska