

Interreg and the Right to Stay

Evidence in a more Social Europe

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The right to stay is a territorial promise — and Interreg delivers it

The right to stay, as set out by Enrico Letta and in Executive Vice-President Fitto's mission, is the principle that leaving one's region should be a **free choice — never a necessity** forced by the absence of jobs, services or prospects. It is, by its nature, a **territorial** idea: whether a person can stay depends on the conditions in one specific place. And the places where that choice is most under threat — internal border areas, rural and remote regions, peripheries far from national capitals — are precisely the territories Interreg was created to serve.

This submission looks at the right to stay through a **social lens**. It draws on the dimension of cohesion captured by Policy Objective 4 — a more social and inclusive Europe, implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights — and, in 2014–2020, by the employment, social-inclusion and education objectives (TO8–TO9–TO10). Whether people can stay is, at heart, a social question: they remain when there are **jobs to be had, skills to be gained, care to rely on, and a community to belong to**.

European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg) is the EU's **place-based** answer to exactly this challenge. For more than three decades it has worked to make border and peripheral regions liveable — building the cross-border labour markets, shared services and joint skills systems that let people earn a living, train and access care without leaving home. Where a national programme stops at the frontier, Interreg reaches across it, turning the border from a reason to leave into a reason to stay.

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|---------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 2 062 | €2.12 bn | €2.85 bn | 44 | 257 |
| cooperation projects (two periods) | EU funding invested | total investment mobilised | countries reached (2021–27) | NUTS-2 regions involved (2021–27) |

A longstanding contribution: the facts

A LONGSTANDING, PLACE-BASED CONTRIBUTION —
EVIDENCE FROM KEEP.EU, 2014–2020 AND 2021–2027

Across two programming periods, Interreg has backed **2,062 cooperation projects** on employment, skills, education and social inclusion, mobilising **€2.12 billion in EU funding** and **€2.85 billion** in total investment. This is no one-off. Under the 2014–2020 thematic objectives for employment (TO8), social inclusion (TO9) and education (TO10), Interreg supported **1,169**

projects with €1.05 billion; under the 2021–2027 Policy Objective 4 — a more social and inclusive Europe, implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights — it has so far supported **893 projects with €1.07 billion**. EU investment has been carried at a stable level straight across the reform of the cohesion architecture.

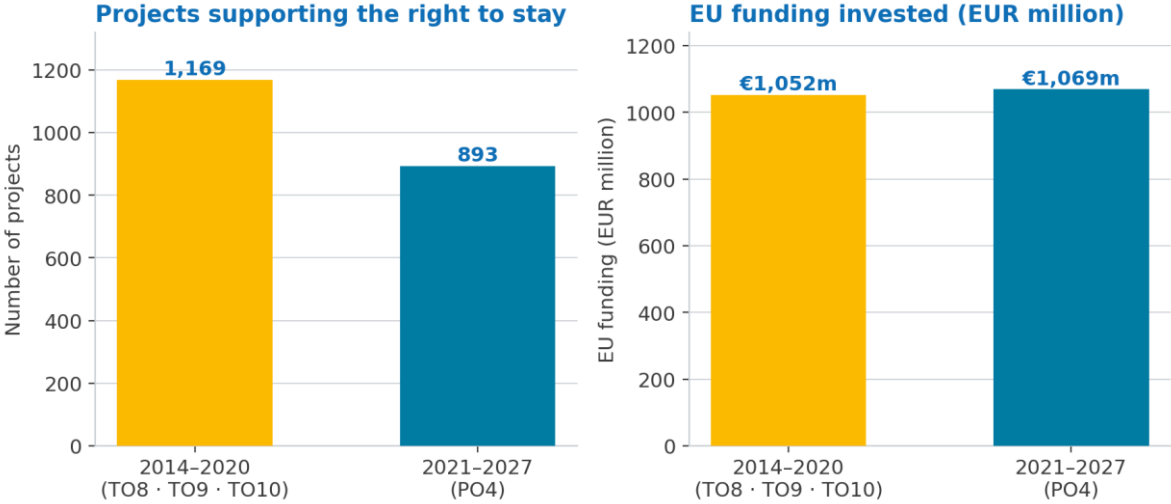


Figure 1 — Interreg projects and EU funding on employment, skills and inclusion, by programming period. Source: Keep.eu.

A consistent thematic backbone: jobs, skills and inclusion

The mix of what these projects do is remarkably stable. Education and training, labour market and employment, and social inclusion run as a constant thread through both periods. These are exactly the conditions the Right to Stay strategy sets out to secure — **quality jobs, relevant skills and inclusive local services** — giving people genuine opportunities to stay in their hometown if they choose to.

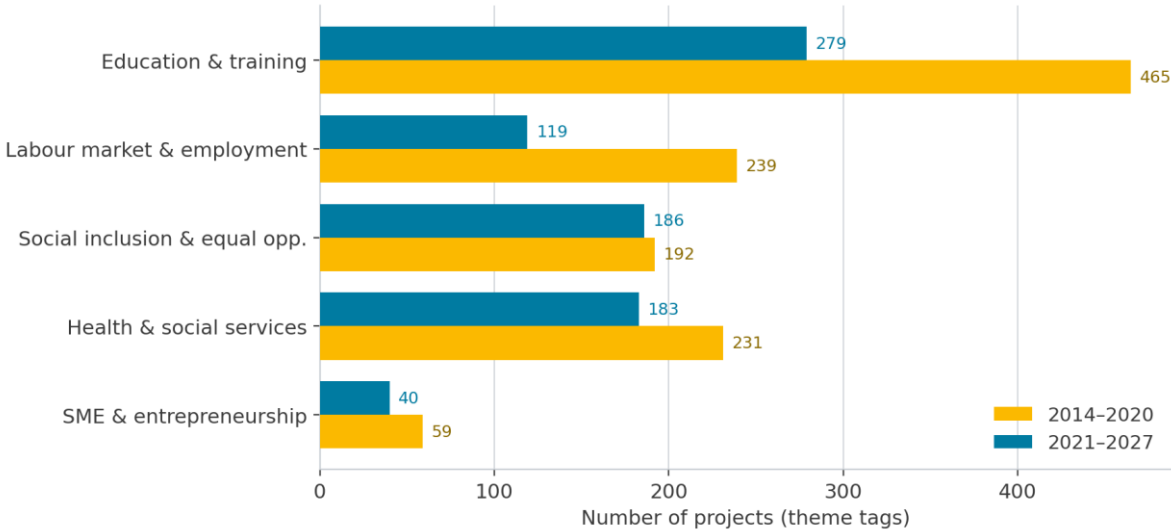


Figure 2 — Leading themes across both periods (project theme tags). Employment- and skills-related themes shown first. Source: Keep.eu.

A geographical perspective: where the right to stay is delivered

Interreg's contribution is overwhelmingly **place-based**. Behind the headline figures sit **8,285 project partners** anchored in real communities. Mapping every one of them shows the support clustering precisely where the strategy is most needed: along the EU's internal borders and in rural, peripheral and mountain areas facing demographic decline — from the Baltic and the Romania–Moldova frontier to the Pyrenees, the Adriatic and the island of Ireland.

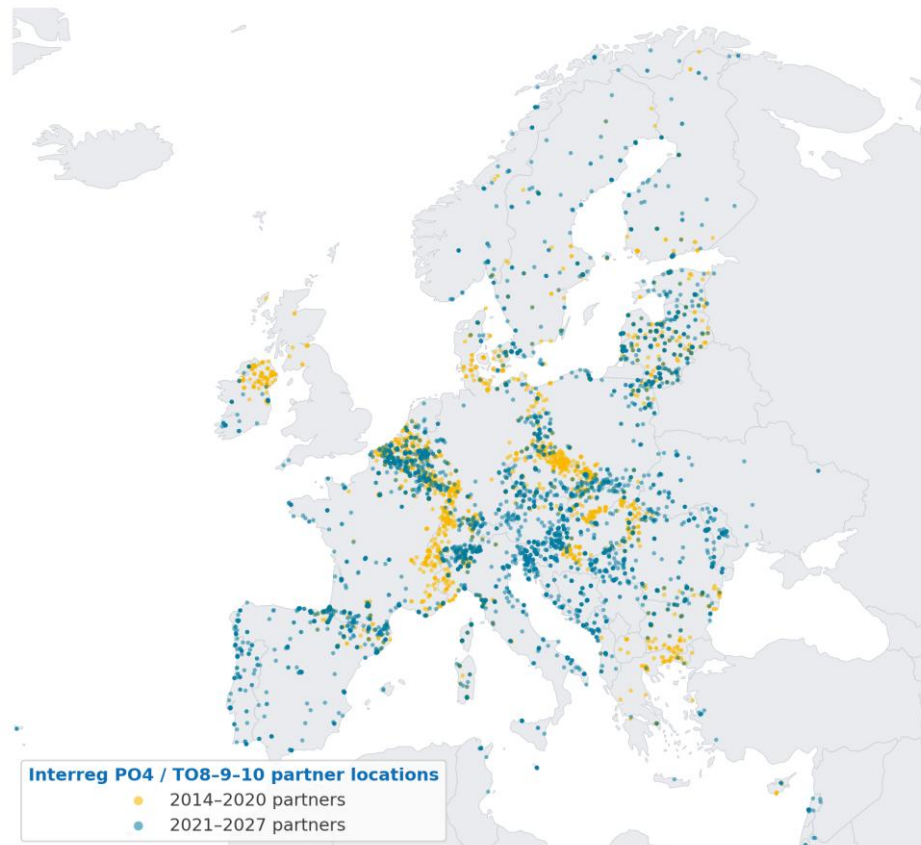
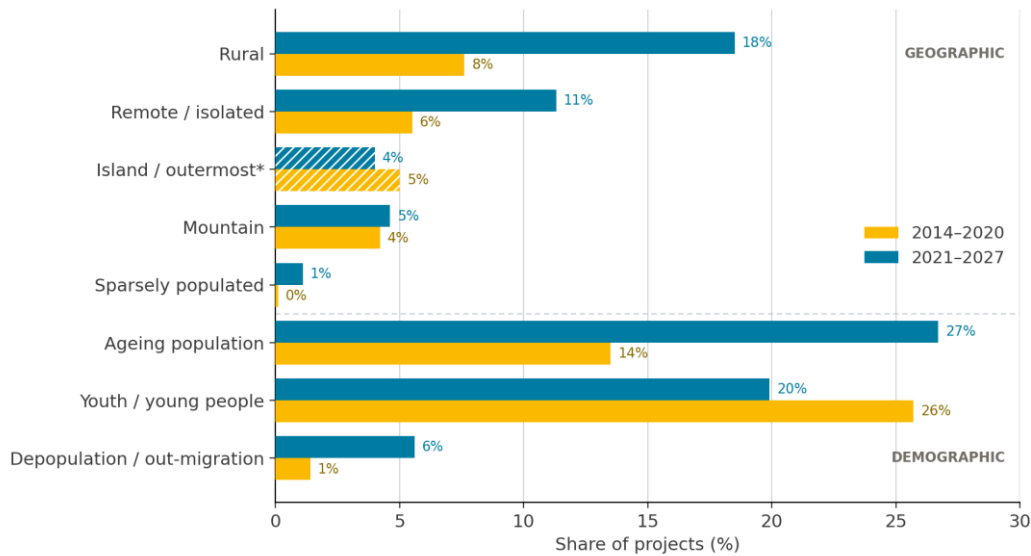


Figure 3 — Geolocated Interreg PO4 / TO8–9–10 project partners, both periods. Gold: 2014–2020; teal: 2021–2027.
Source: Keep.eu.

Crucially, the reach has **widened, not narrowed**: partner countries rose from 34 to 44 and the NUTS-2 regions involved grew from 174 to 257 between the two periods — including the EU's most exposed edges, among them eastern border regions now facing heightened security concerns. Because Interreg works **across borders**, it tackles what no single national programme can deliver alone: cross-border labour markets, joint vocational training and mutual recognition of qualifications, and shared health, care and education services — turning a frontier from a barrier into a reason to stay.

Reaching the most exposed places — and people

The data also confirms that this social investment is directed where the right to stay is most at risk. The cooperation logic is itself territorial: **66% of 2014–2020 projects and 81% of 2021–2027 projects explicitly address borders**. Beyond that structural reach, a rising share target the specific geographic and demographic challenges the strategy names — rural, remote, island and mountain areas, depopulation, ageing and the retention of young people.



* Island / outermost measured by partner location (NUTS region) — text-search misses islands, which are named, not labelled; other rows are text mentions. By text, islands register only –1%.

Figure 4 — Share of projects addressing each geographic and demographic challenge, by period. Rows are text mentions in the project name/description, except Island / outermost, shown by partner location (NUTS region) because text-search misses islands. 2021–27 partner records cover 769 of 893 projects, so that bar is a floor. Source: Keep.eu; author’s analysis.

The focus has deepened markedly between periods. Projects referencing **rural** areas rose from 8% to 18%, **remote or isolated** areas from 6% to 11%, and **depopulation or out-migration** from roughly 1% to 6%; attention to **ageing populations** almost doubled, from 14% to 27%, while **youth and young people** remain a major concern (26% and 20%). **Islands show how conservative text alone can be**: barely 1% of projects use the word, yet by partner location around 5% (2014–2020) and 4% (2021–2027) involve an island or outermost region — four to five times higher, and itself a floor while 2021–2027 partner records are still loading. As these counts rest on project wording they are a conservative floor — many projects serve rural or island communities without naming them — yet even so the share addressing a **core territorial challenge roughly doubled, from 16% to 30%**. Interreg’s social agenda is, increasingly, an agenda for Europe’s left-behind places and the people most likely to leave them.

Ten examples from across Interreg among more than 2000 projects

Spanning cross-border, transnational, outermost-regions and interregional cooperation — and both programming periods — these projects show the social perspective in practice: jobs, skills, care and the social economy that give people reasons to stay.

Cross-border cooperation – internal and maritime borders (Interreg A)

- **MA.R.E.** (Italy–France Maritime, 2014–20 · €5.69m EU · 14 partners) — built a joint cross-border labour market and a shared network of employment services to counter job losses across the maritime area.
- **Cross-border Talent Bridge** (Sweden–Denmark–Norway, Öresund–Kattegat–Skagerrak, 2021–27 · €3.15m EU) — tackles life-science and tech skills shortages on both sides of the strait, building and retaining talent and the region’s attractiveness.
- **JEDI_2** (Romania–Hungary, 2014–20 · €5.55m EU · 6 partners) — improved vocational training and matched labour-market supply and demand to raise cross-border employment and worker mobility.

- **EduSTEM** (*Austria–Czechia, 2014–20 · €3.94m EU · 8 partners*) — developed bilingual STEM skills so people could train for, and take up, jobs with the many cross-border employers in the region.
- **APTITUDE-PROXI** (*POCTEFA, 2021–2027 · €1.36m EU · 4 partners*) — Tackles demographic ageing by improving seniors' access to medico-social services across the Pyrenees so older people can stay in their communities — the "care to rely on" dimension.

Transnational cooperation (Interreg B)

- **ATLAS** (*South West Europe – SUDOE, 2021–27 · €1.42m EU · 9 partners*) — supports rural, inland SUDOE areas in demographic decline that struggle to keep jobs and services in place.
- **Recruit & Retain / Attract & Retain** (*Northern Periphery & Arctic*) — developed and tested practical solutions to recruit and keep health professionals, skilled workers and young people in sparsely populated remote and Arctic communities.
- **Terremplo – Territories for Employment** (*North West Europe, 2021–27 · €0.48m EU*) — strengthens inter-agency cooperation between public and private bodies to close the skills gap and respond to an ageing workforce.

Outermost-regions cooperation (Interreg D) – Madeira–Azores–Canary Islands (MAC)

- **MAC Skilling** (*Interreg MAC, 2021–27*) — delivers workforce training and skilling across the Macaronesian outermost regions, where distance and insularity limit access to opportunity.

Interregional cooperation (Interreg Europe)

- **RaiSE** (*Interreg Europe, 7 partner regions*) — improved regional business-support policies for social enterprises, harnessing the social economy for inclusion and more and better local jobs.

What this means for the strategy

The Right to Stay strategy can build directly on a proven, place-based delivery machinery rather than start from scratch. Three suggestions follow from the evidence:

- 1. Foreground cross-border employment and skills cooperation** as a flagship line of action.
- 2. Use Interreg as the connective tissue** linking EU, national, regional and local action in declining regions.
- 3. Capture and transfer the lessons** already generated by these 2,000+ projects so that other regions can adapt what works.

Source: Keep.eu (Interreg project database), data extracted 5 June 2026. Scope: 2021–2027 Policy Objective 4 and 2014–2020 Thematic Objectives 8, 9 and 10. Funding refers to EU contribution; totals include co-financing. Figures are the author's own calculations. Representativeness of keep.eu data: 100% 2014–2020 period and 77% 2021–2027 period.

Project examples drawn from Keep.eu and the respective programmes' project databases: Interreg Maritime Italy–France, Öresund–Kattegat–Skagerrak, Romania–Hungary and Austria–Czechia (cross-border); South West Europe / SUDOE, Northern Periphery and Arctic, and North West Europe (transnational); Madeira–Azores–Canary Islands / MAC (outermost regions); and Interreg Europe (interregional).