

Stories of European cooperation

Interreg projects: reforming the territory



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Introduction

Interreg projects: transforming the territory through reform

For 35 years, Interreg has demonstrated how border regions can transform themselves and attract entrepreneurs, researchers, tourists and artists. Above all, however, it has shown that territorial cooperation is not only about building infrastructure or funding local initiatives. It is also about transforming the way public authorities work together, removing barriers, modernising public services and creating new governance solutions that improve everyday life for citizens.

Across Europe, Interreg projects increasingly act as laboratories for reform, testing innovative approaches that later influence policies, regulations and administrative practices far beyond the project partnership. The use of the word “reform” may be relatively new to describe such activities in an Interreg context, but the examples set out in this magazine demonstrate that Interreg and reform already have a long and effective history.

Inter-Connect (Interreg ADRION) showed how better coordination of transport services through integrated ticketing and harmonised timetables can improve mobility without major infrastructure investments. Schakelpunt (Interreg Flanders-Netherlands) helps identify cross-border barriers and promotes practical solutions that enable neighbouring regions to work more effectively together.

In healthcare, TELMED (Interreg Hungary-Serbia) established a structured telemedicine bridge between specialists in the two countries, demonstrating how digital solutions can improve access to cross-border public services. PRINCALB (Interreg POCTEFA) illustrates how projects can trigger lasting regulatory change. Its work contributed to the Malaga Agreements, which allow emergency services to cross borders rapidly and operate where they are needed most, regardless of administrative boundaries.

Interreg also supports reforms that advance European sustainability goals. LATI (Interreg Greater Region) promotes practical solutions to reduce land take and protect natural resources, while the Policy Learning Platform (Interreg Europe) enables administrations across 36 countries to exchange experiences and improve policies through peer learning.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our Interreg beneficiaries for the impressive results achieved. Our common success is not only the infrastructure itself, which is used by citizens, but also the significant progress made in the quality of public administration. The European Union not only provides funding but also promotes transparency in project selection and public procurement, environmental impact assessments with public consultations, and economic analyses demonstrating that supported projects contribute to regional development and strengthen Europe’s capacity to address common challenges – all within a clearly defined timeframe. This achievement belongs to all our Interreg beneficiaries who have been willing to implement valuable and often challenging projects.

By fostering cooperation, trust and policy innovation, Interreg continues to transform territories and improve the lives of citizens across and beyond Europe!



Moray Gilland

Head of D1 Unit: Macro-regions; transnational, interregional and external cooperation; enlargement (DG REGIO)

Strong Cohesion Policy is key to Europe's cross-border future

Cross-border cooperation is one of the most tangible success stories of European integration. It demonstrates how European cohesion policy delivers concrete benefits to citizens by addressing shared challenges and creating opportunities that no region could achieve alone.

This is particularly evident in border regions, where nearly 40 percent of EU citizens live. Here, European cooperation is not an abstract concept but a daily reality. Whether through integrated labour markets, transport infrastructure, healthcare services, emergency response systems or joint innovation projects, cross-border cooperation improves quality of life and strengthens regional competitiveness.

As the European Parliament's Co-Rapporteur for the future ERDF, Interreg and Cohesion Fund Regulation, I am convinced that cohesion policy must continue to play a central role in strengthening Europe's economic, social and territorial cohesion beyond 2027.

The upcoming programming period offers an opportunity to build on what has proven successful while adapting to new realities. Continuity should remain a guiding principle. Instruments such as ERDF and Interreg have demonstrated their value over decades and should continue to provide a stable framework for regional development and cross-border cooperation.

At the same time, cohesion policy must remain equipped to address both long-term structural challenges and emerging priorities across Europe's territories. To achieve this, it is essential that sufficient funding for cohesion policy remains ring-fenced within the future EU budget. Only a strong and adequately funded cohesion policy can continue to reduce disparities, strengthen competitiveness and promote balanced territorial development across the European Union.

Equally important is the role of regions and local authorities in shaping and implementing cohesion policy. While strategic coordination at European and national level is important, cohesion policy should avoid excessive centralisation of planning and decision-making. Regions, in partnership with local authorities and cities, are best placed to identify territorial challenges, define investment priorities and ensure that investments deliver the greatest possible impact in achieving agreed European and national objectives. Effective territorial development depends on a genuine partnership approach that recognises regional expertise and local knowledge and enables decisions to be taken as close as possible to citizens and communities.

Europe's regions are not merely beneficiaries of cohesion policy; they are essential partners in delivering its objectives. Strengthening their voices in the future governance framework will help ensure that investments reflect territorial needs, support long-term development strategies and generate lasting impact.

The future of cohesion policy will depend on our ability to combine continuity, partnership and flexibility. By doing so, we can ensure that European cooperation continues to deliver tangible results, strengthens resilience and promotes balanced development across all regions of the European Union.

Successful European cooperation starts locally. It is in our regions and communities that European cohesion becomes visible, meaningful and effective. I will continue to advocate for a strong cohesion policy that builds on the needs and strengths of Europe's regions, enhances their capacity to address shared challenges, especially in border regions, and ensures that their voices are fully reflected in the negotiations on the post-2027 framework.



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PRINCALB: preventing cross-border forest fires in the Spanish-French Pyrenees

From local firebreaks to a cross-border safety architecture, the French region of the Albères has pioneered a model where administrative borders no longer dictate emergency response

By *Loli Chibko*

Controlled forest burning in mountainous regions.

The Mediterranean landscapes of the Albères (France) and Cap de Creus (Spain) do not recognise administrative lines. For decades, however, emergency responses did. ‘Mega fires’ were fought by separate units, often hindered by technical gaps. PRINCALB, co-funded by the cooperation programme POCTEFA 2007-2013 and led by the regional government of Catalonia (Spain), broke this cycle. By uniting regional actors from both sides of the massif, it transformed a zone of risk into a territory of shared resilience, proving that when it comes to life-saving, the only ‘side’ that matters is the one facing the fire.

The legal reform: standardising success

The true breakthrough of PRINCALB was not just the physical infrastructure, but the administrative ‘reform’ it triggered. By identifying the legal hurdles that delayed help, the project served as the primary

laboratory for the 2017 Malaga Agreements. These bilateral treaties finally formalised the ‘Right of Pursuit’ for emergency services. Today, this legal framework allows firefighters to penetrate up to 25km into the neighbouring territory without bureaucratic delay, ensuring the nearest resource principle is a reality for local residents.

Technical interoperability: a shared language

Through PRINCALB and its successor COOPEREM, the regional services moved from assistance to integration. Beyond making their equipment compatible, they also fixed radio communication problems that used to occur at the border. This technical alignment allowed for the creation of Bilingual Liaison Officers and shared command protocols. Today, when an emergency occurs, a single unified command structure takes over, managing resources as one single European team.



The Somport Tunnel, an international road tunnel in the central Pyrenees connecting the Aragón (Spain) and Aspe (France) valleys.

The territorial spill-over: a growing corridor

What began in the Mediterranean corner of the Pyrenees has seen a remarkable ‘territorial spill-over’. The success of the PRINCALB model proved so effective that it was replicated across the entire 656 km frontier. Successive projects like ALERT and ALERT-PYR have extended these protocols westward, eventually involving the entire Pyrenean chain. This evolution has moved from simple land management to a sophisticated, data-driven ‘European Civil Protection Corridor’.

Innovation in the face of climate change: scaling up

As the region also faces increasing droughts, the cooperation has pivoted toward predictive mapping. The upcoming RiskRapid project represents the next frontier: using shared real-time data and university research to anticipate natural risks before they start. By treating the Pyrenees as a single bassin de risque (risk basin), the cooperation has moved beyond local assistance to become a European benchmark for climate resilience.

DID YOU KNOW... ?

Before this cooperation, fire trucks from one side of the border couldn’t share water with those on the other because their hose valves were different sizes.

PRINCALB at a glance

● Name	PRINCALB project
● Programme	POCTEFA 2007-2013
● Duration	2009-2011
● Partners	Generalitat de Catalunya, Conseil départemental des Pyrénées-Orientales (CD66), Service départemental d’incendie et de secours des Pyrénées-Orientales (SDIS 66)
● Territories	Albères and Cap de Creus
● Key output	Harmonization of cross-border civil protection and legal frameworks

INTERVIEW

Joseph Bonson - Firefighter at the SDIS 64, Lead partner

Interreg cross-border cooperation with firefighters in the Pyrenees started with the POCTEFA project PRINCALB. Today, SDIS 64, the Pyrénées-Atlantiques Fire and Rescue Service, leads the successor projects: ALERT, which is already completed, and the ongoing ALERT-PYR. In this interview, the firefighter Joseph Bonson explains how these initiatives are building a unified safety architecture for the region.

To begin, could you share why this cross-border cooperation is so vital, and how it is rooted in the history of the region?

It is a matter of human life. I often cite a tragic incident in the Dantxaria sector where a French national suffered a stroke on the Spanish side. Because there was no reflex to call the closest resources, precious time was lost waiting for a private doctor from Elizondo (Spain). By the time the SAMU (French emergency medical services) was finally alerted, too much time had passed. Despite being evacuated to Bordeaux (France), the individual passed away.

If the closest emergency resources, which were French in this case, had been called immediately, that person might still be alive today. This is particularly frustrating because, historically, cooperation was natural through 'customary rights'. Since the Basque Country shares a common language, people knew each other and disregarded borders. However, the French administrative landscape changed with the Law of May 3, 1996, which mandated the departmentalization of fire services. This reform merged local municipal corps into a single departmental public establishment (SDIS). While this improved internal French efficiency, it inadvertently created a legal distance from our Spanish partners. Our goal is to regain that common-sense efficiency within a modern legal framework.

You have used European programmes to structure this modernization. Can you explain the roles of the ALERT and ALERT-PYR Interreg projects?

Absolutely. These projects have been our technical and financial engine. The first project, ALERT,

focused on harmonizing our methodologies. For three years, we aligned our skills in firefighting, floods, and technological risks so that mixed teams could work together seamlessly. However, ALERT did not manage to finalize the official operational protocols due to administrative hurdles. We are now in the continuity phase with ALERT-PYR. This project has a broader scope, involving additional departments like Haute-Garonne (31) and Hautes-Pyrénées (65), in France, as well as the Val d'Aran (Spain) and universities (Zaragoza and Tarbes) for their expertise in modeling risks like floods or tunnel fires. ALERT-PYR allows us to acquire cutting-edge equipment for toxic smoke analysis, making us leaders in technological risk management.

Despite the technical success of ALERT-PYR, the administrative side seems more complex. Why is the border still an obstacle?

It is a paradox. Locally, everyone is in favor of the protocol. However, crossing the border remains a state-level competency that neither France nor Spain delegates to local authorities. Furthermore, there is a legal vacuum: in older treaties, like the Treaty of Bayonne (1995), the 'SDIS' (our current departmental administrative structure) is not mentioned because it didn't exist yet. We are essentially an administrative entity that 'does not exist' in the eyes of these old texts. We are working to evolve these laws so that we can finally sign official protocols for 2027-2028.

Will this cooperation eventually cover all emergency services?

We are proceeding step-by-step. We started with 'sovereign' missions (firefighting and road rescue) where we have common monopolies. Medical assistance (Person Rescue) is more complex because it involves the SAMU and state-level regulation. Once the ALERT-PYR protocols are signed for fire and rescue, we will look to integrate health services and organizations like the Red Cross or DYA. Our priority remains the 'current risk': the daily emergencies where minutes saved mean lives saved.



Firefighters from Gipuzkoa, Spain.

Impact in figures

- 656 km of border now covered by integrated safety protocols.
- 25 km of legal 'penetration depth' allowed for emergency units in the neighbouring country.
- 10+ successor projects (COOPEREM, ALERT, ALERT-PYR, RiskRapid, etc.) directly born from the PRINCALB pilot.
- 50 km wide shared digital cartography strip now used by all Pyrenean firefighters.
- 15.000 hectares saved: a direct comparison between two major fires of similar scale and intensity (1986 vs 2012) shows that modern cross-border protocols and infrastructure helped reduce the destroyed surface area from 28,000 ha to 13,000 ha.

More information about this project:



Key achievements

- **Standardisation:** 100% interoperability of water valves and radio frequencies in the pilot zone.
- **Policy influence:** led to the 2017 French-Spanish Civil Protection Accords allowing firefighters to penetrate 25 km into the neighbouring country.
- **Climate resilience:** created the first joint cartography for high-risk zones.
- **Technical synchronization:** standardised water couplings and radio frequencies across the border.



Loli Chibko

- **Age:** 27
- **Nationality:** French
- **Region where you are deployed:** Aragon, Spain.
- **Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:** kinship; unknottling; 'chino-chano'.



Clinical expertise beyond borders

How the CBC-TELMED project is transforming specialist access at the Hungarian - Serbian border through telemedicine innovation

By Federica Attianese

In a region affected by shortages of medical professionals and uneven quality of healthcare services, the CBC-TELMED project, led by the Hospital of Senta in partnership with the University of Szeged, demonstrates how telemedicine can become a practical tool for addressing systemic inequalities in access to specialist care, particularly in the fields of metabolic syndrome and otorhinolaryngology.

The challenges to healthcare access

The Hungarian-Serbian border is one of the busiest in the Western Balkans. Despite the continuous flow of trade, family ties and daily commuters, it still represents a barrier in the field of healthcare. The two countries operate on entirely different health systems, with no shared protocol or agreed pathway, preventing doctors from consulting colleagues across the border.

This fragmentation is particularly problematic for patients with chronic or complex conditions: the region faces significant public health concerns, including a high prevalence of metabolic syndrome, ENT (ear, nose and throat) disorders, and heart failure, a leading cause of mortality, especially among ageing populations.

Above that, access to quality healthcare is uneven, particularly in smaller towns and rural areas where facilities often lack adequate equipment, specialist staff, and capacity. Without cross-border connections, patients have to travel long distances independently, navigating different health administrations and languages.

As a result, they face long waiting times and delayed diagnoses, while hospitals deal with unnecessary pressure, even in cases that could be managed locally.



Equipment purchased and project promotional materials displayed at the General Hospital Senta.

“ Two years ago, a lesion on my vocal cords meant regular check-ups in Újvidék, involving appointments, referrals, and a lot of travel. Now, with the new video endoscopy in Senta, I can have my follow-ups done locally, which has made things much easier for me.” - Szilveszter, 74.

Establishment of the first structured telemedicine bridge

The CBC-TELMED project has been created to tackle the existing gaps in the region by establishing the first structured telemedicine bridge connecting specialists in Hungary and Serbia, being a concrete example of EU ambitions for accessible, digitally integrated and cross-border public services in action.

For the first time, clinical expertise can cross borders, even when patients cannot. The importance of the project goes beyond the equipment purchased or the platform installed: cross-border care is now system-provided, meaning that patients will no longer have to arrange it by themselves.

Enabling basic treatments and specialized screenings closer to patients' homes not only can reduce hospital congestion and ensure more efficient care, but also improve health outcomes and life expectancy, ultimately supporting broader social and economic development in the region.

“ The programme was a lifesaver for me because I was suffering from quite severe metabolic syndrome. Thanks to CBC-TELMED and the dedicated work of the staff, I am now able to live a full life” - Imre, 41

INTERVIEW

Beáta Csáki - Director of General Hospital Senta

How does the project align with EU healthcare reforms?

CBC-TELMED directly addresses a core ambition of EU health policy: equitable access to specialist care, regardless of a patient's place of residence. European policy envisions the gradual establishment of a highly structured, hierarchical cross-border framework, with national entry and exit points integrated into the future European Health Data Space (EHDS).

CBC-TELMED takes a complementary, pragmatic approach by establishing a clinically operational, legally compliant pilot connection between two healthcare providers that have long shared patient populations but operated in isolation, and delivering immediate, measurable clinical benefit through real consultations in real hospital settings, while remaining fully compatible with future integration into the EHDS.

What is the added value of cross-border cooperation in this project?

It is simple but fundamental: neither institution could achieve this alone. The University of Szeged has deep specialist expertise in ear, nose, and throat (ENT) and cardiometabolic medicine, but it cannot physically reach patients in Serbia. General Hospital Senta has direct access to patients in the border region, but it does not have the same depth of specialist resource available on-site.

Cross-border cooperation turns these realities into a strength: local access on one side, specialist depth on the other, connected by a shared platform. The result is a service that improves upon what either country could offer independently. Beyond the clinical dimension, the project also builds institutional trust and shared working practices that will outlast the funding period, creating a foundation for enduring cooperation.

How will you ensure the sustainability of the project after the funding period ends?

Sustainability is built into the project's design rather than added as an afterthought. The telemedicine infrastructure has installed at both institutions will remain in place after the funding period ends, and the clinical protocols, staff training, and cross-border workflows established during the project will continue to operate as part of the normal practice of both hospitals.

The University of Szeged's established role as a regional centre of specialist expertise provides the institutional anchor for continued cooperation, and the General Hospital Senta has the patient population and clinical motivation to sustain demand. What the project provides is the infrastructure and the habits of collaboration that make ongoing cross-border care routine.

Do you see any possibility for scaling this model to other hospitals or expanding it to other medical specialties in the future?

Yes, and this is one of the most important dimensions of the project. The technical platform and the operational model developed by CBC-TELMED are not specific to ENT or cardiometabolic medicine. Any clinical area where local examination can generate data that is reviewable remotely (dermatology, wound care, radiology review) is a potential candidate for the same approach. The cross-border legal and data governance framework established by the project could similarly serve as a template for other pairs of institutions along the Hungarian-Serbian border, or more broadly across the Interreg IPA programme area. Scaling would require investment in training and platform access, but the architectural work has already been done. The project is explicitly designed to demonstrate a model, not just to deliver a service.

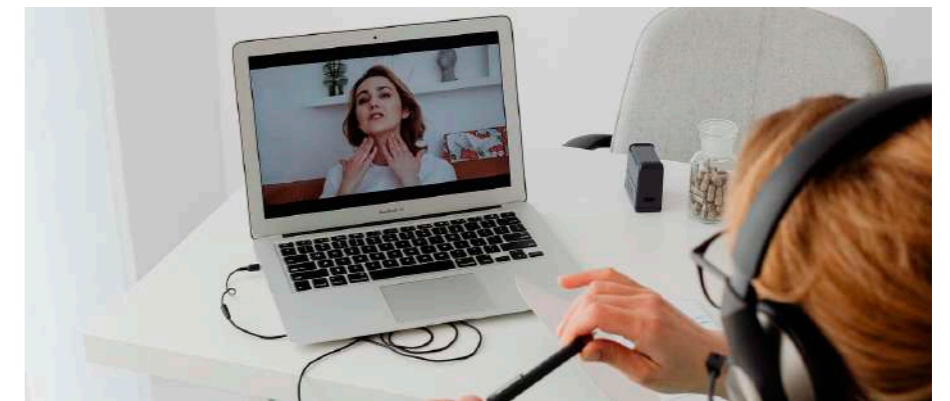
Project at a glance

● Name	CBC-TELMED
● Programme	Interreg VI-A IPA Hungary-Serbia
● Duration	July 2024 - April 2027
● Partners	General Hospital Senta (RS), University of Szeged (HU)
● Main goal	Improve healthcare quality and enhance the treatment of metabolic syndrome, and ear, nose, and throat (ENT) problems
● Key output	A fully operational, expanded telemedicine system dedicated to diagnosing and managing metabolic syndrome and ENT conditions

Impact

- First structured telemedicine link between the Hungarian and Serbian healthcare systems in this region
- ENT teleconsultations: endoscopic examinations in Senta reviewed remotely by specialists in Szeged
- Cardiometabolic monitoring: home-based patient follow-up using connected health devices
- Fully GDPR-compliant platform meeting both Hungarian and Serbian data protection requirements
- Clinical staff trained on both sides of the border
- Both hospitals modernised with compatible professional telemedicine equipment

More information about this project:



A patient participating in a telemedicine consultation.



Federica Attianese

- Age: 28
- Nationality: Italian
- Region where you are deployed: Budapest, Hungary
- Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you: synergy, innovation, localism.



Rethinking spatial planning across the Greater Region: how LATI supports the EU policy goal ‘No net land take’

This objective aims to ensure that any new land you build on is balanced by restoring land elsewhere

By Yolène Le Bras

From ambitious European targets to local realities, rethinking how we use land has become a key challenge for the future of our territories. LATI, Laboratory for Territorial Intelligence, is an Interreg project that supports cities, regions and stakeholders across the Greater Region (including Luxembourg and the regions of Belgium, Germany, and France that border it) in developing more sustainable approaches to spatial planning. By fostering cooperation between public authorities, researchers and citizens, the project promotes knowledge exchange, encourages experimentation and helps co-create concrete solutions to shared territorial challenges.

As a cross-border initiative, LATI addresses key issues such as climate change adaptation, land use management, mobility and multilingual cooperation. Through its activities, it contributes to aligning local practices with broader European priorities and

strengthening coordination between different planning systems.

Among these priorities is the European Union’s objective of achieving ‘No net land take’ by 2050: a key goal to reduce soil sealing, protect natural resources and ensure sustainable territorial development. Reaching this target requires not only policy frameworks, but also practical actions that actively engage stakeholders on the ground. This is where ‘Soil Walks’ play a key role.

Soil Walks: planning on the ground

One of the project’s innovative actions is the organisation of Soil Walks, which LATI defines as follows: a guided group walk through a specific area (neighbourhood, village or site), designed as a participatory approach to exploring land use and

Students mapping out their Soil Walk.



Students presenting their results.

spatial transformations. It is neither a traditional technical tour nor a simple guided walk, but a structured opportunity to generate knowledge based on direct experience of the site.

Soil Walks provide a tangible way to understand issues such as land consumption, urban sprawl or the reuse of vacant sites. By walking through specific locations, participants can better identify opportunities for more sustainable land use and reflect on existing planning practices.

Beyond their local impact, Soil Walks illustrate how European objectives can be translated into concrete practices. By encouraging dialogue between stakeholders and promoting a shared understanding of land use, they help bridge the gap between policy ambitions and on-the-ground realities. In this sense, they contribute to embedding the EU ‘No net land take’ objective into everyday planning processes.

The case study of Montigny-lès-Metz (France)

“Cross-border cooperation allows us to compare different approaches, learn from each other and develop more coherent solutions”. This is the point of view of Tobias Parks, an urban planning student currently in his second year of the Master’s programme in Territorial Intelligence at the Université de Lorraine, on the Metz campus (France). He has been involved in the LATI project through the Soil Walks workshop, alongside his classmates and students from the Urban Engineering programme in Nancy (France).

After an introductory session held by LATI in late October 2025, the students had a mission: organise Soil Walks in Montigny-lès-Metz to raise awareness among elected officials about the issues mentioned above. They were divided into three groups, each assigned a theme: nature in the city, historic buildings, and vacant sites. Tobias has been working in this third group.

INTERVIEW

Tobias Parks - Urban planning student at the 'Université de Lorraine'

How did you organise your Soil Walk?

Our tour focused on the theme 'vacant sites as testing grounds' and was structured around three types of sites in Montigny-lès-Metz. We looked at redeveloped sites, such as a former chocolate factory turned into housing or a quarry converted into public gardens, as well as sites in transition, like former barracks or industrial areas currently being transformed. Finally, we identified sites with strong future potential, including projects such as an eco-neighbourhood or preserved natural areas. This approach helped us show how existing spaces can be reused instead of expanding into new land.

Do you think initiatives like Soil Walks can be effective in engaging citizens and local stakeholders?

Yes, definitely. But Soil Walks are even more effective when combined with participatory planning approaches. Field experience provides a concrete understanding of the territory and helps identify opportunities. The idea would be, following this practical experience, to establish a kind of 'living laboratory' that brings together technical knowledge and real-world experience. This can foster more informed decision-making and lead to projects that are better integrated into their local context and more aligned with the 'No net land take' objective.

Speaking of 'No net land take', do you think this objective is realistic by 2050?

It depends largely on political will, but I do believe it is achievable. In fact, I would go further and say it is essential. In Montigny, for example, there is already a significant amount of vacant land, while new developments are still planned on natural areas. This shows that alternative solutions exist, but they need to be prioritised.

How do you picture the ideal city of 2050?

I think we need to significantly reduce the presence of cars in city centres, or even eliminate them in some areas. Streets could then be transformed into green spaces or housing. In the context of climate change, cities will have to become much greener in order to remain livable, especially to regulate temperature. A city that does not move in this direction risks becoming difficult to live in within a few decades.

In your opinion, why are cross-border projects like LATI important?

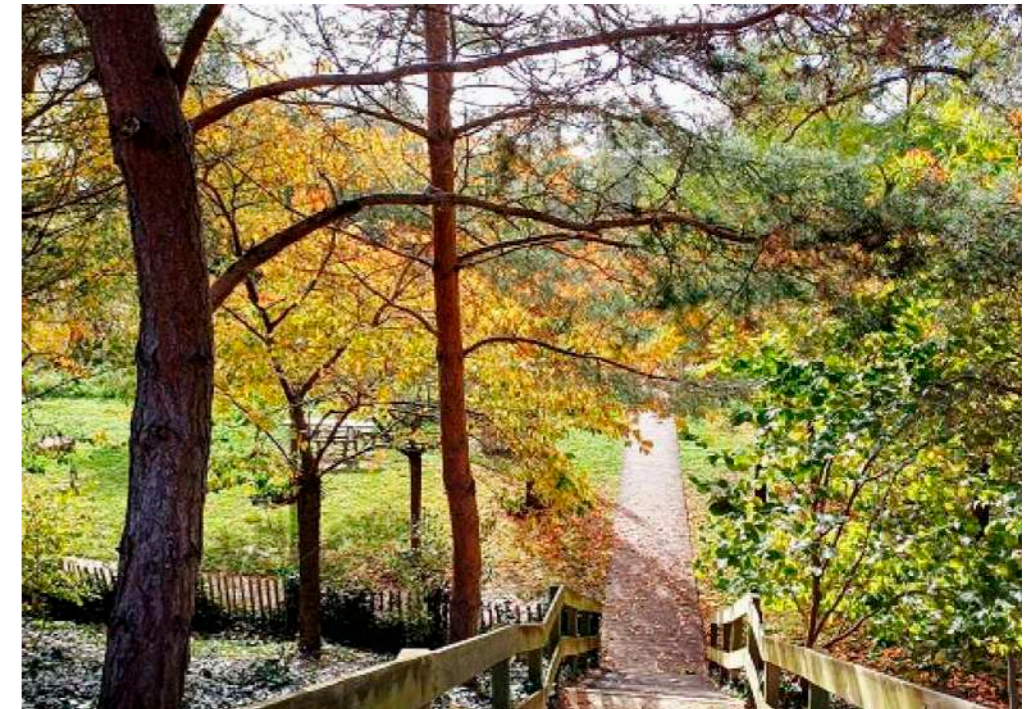
Because challenges such as climate change do not stop at national borders! For example, it is great to have a bike path in a border town, but if it stops at the border... it will hardly be used. Cross-border cooperation allows us to compare different approaches, learn from each other and develop more coherent solutions. It would be interesting to organise Soil Walks across borders to compare similar territories. This can be more complex to organise, particularly because of language differences, but it is definitely possible and very valuable! From local initiatives like Soil Walks to broader cooperation across borders, projects like LATI show how European ambitions can be turned into meaningful change on the ground.

“ Field experience provides a concrete understanding of the territory and helps identify opportunities.

LATI at a glance

- **Programme** Interreg VI A Greater Region
- **Duration** April 2025 - March 2028
- **Impact** 5 territories from the Greater Region (Germany, France, Luxembourg, Belgium) connected
- **Partners** The network University of the Greater Region (UniGR) with its 6 partner universities as financial partners + 12 stakeholders as strategic partners
- **Activities** Soil Walks, living labs, surveys, expert panels, simulation games, glossary, MOOCs, workshops, podcasts, Planning Compendium...

More information about this project:



The gardens in front of Blory, as part of the walking tour organised by the student Tobias Parks.



Yolène Le Bras

- **Age:** 27
- **Nationality:** French
- **Region where you are deployed:** Saarbrücken, Germany
- **Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:** multilingualism, knowledge sharing, empowerment



Greener journeys start intermodal: the Inter-Connect experience in the Adriatic-Ionian Region

This project has strongly focused on improving public transportation for both residents and tourists

By *Beatrice Selice*

Railways have been the first mode of transportation in the modern era, bridging the distance between cities and people. The locomotive, a symbol of the Industrial Revolution, has never lost its potential: in fact, nowadays it is becoming the driving force behind the green transition, still connecting people but in a sustainable way.

For this reason, Inter-Connect project, funded by the cooperation programme Interreg ADRION 2014-2020, has focused on revitalizing the railway sector in the Adriatic-Ionian Region by strengthening intermodality. This is the project's main goal, aimed at increasing transport capacity and mobility options via buses or ships, in combination with rail. As an alternative to cars, this approach pursued the improvement of the region's accessibility while simultaneously stimulating the take up of smart

5th project meeting in Ljubljana (15-16 January 2020) hosted by the Regional Development Agency of the Ljubljana Urban Region.

solutions to enhance public transport connectivity at urban, regional, and transnational levels.

Identifying common opportunities at regional level

The Adriatic-Ionian Region is a vast area, in which different transport regulatory systems coexist. The seven countries participating in the Inter-Connect show significant differences in terms of infrastructure capacity, mobility policies, as well as user bases, and passengers' needs. However, the challenges are usually the same: fragmentation of transport networks, and low level of transnational connectivity and intermodal options, which can cause a limitation in public transport provision.

The desired growth of the region cannot therefore overlook the considerable differentiation between

local contexts facing the same complexities. For this reason, Inter-Connect has launched 8 case studies designed to address intermodal needs at regional level. These studies place great emphasis on tackling common challenges while identifying opportunities and local resources with the aim of increasing the number of people using public transport, reducing the negative effects related to cars' use.

Enhancing car-free tourism through public transport: The Rail Smart Pass

According to an EU report, the total number of cars exceeds 260 million and, in response to these figures, the European Commission has therefore set a target for reducing greenhouse emissions by 90% by 2040. The issue is even more severe for the Adriatic-Ionian region, where car dependency has always been high, slowing the transition towards sustainable mobility.

Consequently, the project has strongly focused on improving public transportation for both residents and tourists. In order to ease and improve the low-carbon travel experience in the Adriatic-Ionian region, Inter-Connect has defined a set of guidelines addressing intermodality and the revitalization of railways, building on best practices already tested in the area. Inter-Connect's strategy has focused primarily on soft mobility measures, such as integrated ticketing, harmonized timetables and procedures, aimed at increasing the efficiency of existing services while reducing the difficulties experienced without major infrastructural investments.

Each region has developed soft solutions based on intermodality to reduce travel time and improve the performance of the main interchange hubs to achieve a better offer for public transport.

Pilot action in Emilia-Romagna

As part of these soft solutions, the Emilia-Romagna region (Italy), with the support ITL (Institute for Transport and Logistics), has implemented a pilot action to test a multimodal solution toward tourists. The initiative has designed and commercialized

an integrated ticket targeting the Romagna area, combining buses and trains.

The Rail Smart Pass has introduced fixed-rate multimodal bus-train tickets valid for 3 or 7 days, integrating the bus services provided by Start Romagna, the local transport company, associated partner of the project, and trains by Trenitalia, the national transport company. The pass has involved 75 municipalities, mainly located in the coastal area called Riviera, where tourism is largely one of the Emilia-Romagna's main drivers, counting 6.3 million tourists (+5.25% in arrivals) in 2025.

The province of Rimini, in particular, ranks first with nearly 4 million tourists (+1.85% on arrival). The province of Ravenna is also establishing itself as a growing tourist destination, with a total of 1.75 million arrivals (+8.96%) while Forlì-Cesena province counted 1.23 million tourists (+2.77% on arrival). These improvements in the tourists' experience are therefore crucial for Emilia-Romagna, where, as confirmed by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2025 tourism continues to grow.

From the testing phase to adoption

Rail Smart Pass went beyond the scope of the feasibility study and became part of the transport options available today. The integrated ticket helped strengthen the reliability of public transportation, encouraging its use, as well as increasing Emilia-Romagna's appeal by facilitating travel, while reducing the seasonal increases in car traffic during summer. Indeed, Rail Smart Pass is not just an integrated ticket: it represents the integration of transport options among different operators, leading to the harmonization of payment methods and fares.

This solution established an important milestone: the overcoming of institutional barriers among public transport providers. Moreover, the definition of a common development strategy based on a multilevel governance did not require any infrastructure changes, allowed to foster dialogue among the various stakeholders.

Andrea Corsini. President of Start Romagna, associated partner of Inter-Connect



Could you tell us how did the idea for an integrated ticket like the Rail Smart Pass came about?

The Rail Smart Pass was built on the success of the Romagna Smart Pass, the flat-rate ticket for Start Romagna's bus fleet, and the initiative funded

under Inter-Connect has aimed to extend the same format to rail services connecting the major cities of Romagna. The underlying goal was simple yet ambitious: offering a single, extremely comfortable and affordable travel option that would allow anyone to discover the many sides of Romagna in an eco-friendly and safe way through integrated 3 or 7-day passes.

How did the collaboration between transport operators, regional authorities, and the Interreg ADRION programme shape the Rail Smart Pass pilot action? What strategic added value did it generate?

The support offered by the Interreg Adrion Programme proved to be essential, coming at a time when the

integration of mobility systems had not yet become the priority it is today. Inter-Connect supported us both in the preliminary phase, through a careful assessment of the needs of tourist target group, and in the operational phase when the integrated ticket was launched in late 2019 and then again with even greater strength in the post-pandemic period. It is precisely thanks to this support that we were able to make a significant leap forward, moving from a testing phase to a consolidated fare product that is now part of our permanent travel ticket offering.

How did your tourist user base respond to the initiative, and what are the future perspectives for the Rail Smart Pass?

The response from tourists has been extremely positive: we are seeing a growing interest in simplified travel solutions that reduce the number of transactions and are easy to use. We believe in the strategic value of this product and, with the aim of boosting its results, we are ready to relaunch it in partnership with Trenitalia Tper through a major marketing campaign ahead of the summer season.

Glykeria Myrovali. Engineer of CERTH Institute Technical support to the Lead Partner



What is the main achievement of Inter-Connect?

The main achievement of Inter-Connect lies in shaping a practical pathway towards intermodal and sustainable mobility in the Adriatic-Ionian region,

successfully connecting strategic vision with real-world implementation.

What makes this achievement particularly meaningful is that it was not limited to theory: through pilot actions, Inter-Connect demonstrated how relatively 'soft' measures, such as integrated ticketing, coordinated timetables and closer stakeholder collaboration, can lead to tangible improvements in mobility services for both

residents and tourists, strengthening connectivity and supporting a more sustainable mobility culture in the region.

Regarding the transferability and upscaling of results, have Inter-Connect's strategy and tools served as a foundation for other initiatives?

Inter-Connect did not end as a standalone project; instead, it naturally evolved into a reference point for new initiatives, proving the strength and transferability of its approach. Its methodology and tools were further developed in Inter-Connect PLUS, where the focus shifted to understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped mobility behaviors and what this means for future sustainable mobility planning. This step highlighted the flexibility of the Inter-Connect framework to respond to emerging challenges.

Strengthening EU mobility reforms through Interreg projects

Inter-Connect has provided the regions with an opportunity to bridge the gaps in cooperation mechanisms between key stakeholders and the various levels of decision-making (local, national, and transnational), adapting the European Green Deal principles and the associated Sustainable and Smart Mobility initiatives to the Adriatic-Ionian specificities.

In this regard, the project outcomes have established the Inter-Connect Transnational Cooperation Network, which facilitates the identification of key actors in mobility planning and encourages the exchange of best practices. In addition, it has developed an Action Plan on ADRION Intermodality, which, based on an analysis of actual needs, resources and traffic flows, has resulted in Memoranda of Understandings (MoUs), agreements that express common line of action, 8 national and 1 transnational to help implement the soft measures and increase the dialogue among the stakeholders.

As a result, the project has issued the Inter-Connect Strategy-Roadmap, which prioritizes interventions based on project need assessments. All knowledge gained within the Inter-Connect framework is accessible to everyone through the Inter-Connect Toolkit, designed as an open online platform tailored to specificities of the area to guarantee that outputs achieved are transferable and re-usable in the long-term.

Passenger transportation is, by definition, a concept that goes beyond local and regional borders as well as institutional barriers, especially in intermodal services. The tools and the soft measures developed have provided new capabilities to decision-makers, regional and municipal authorities, and technical task managers to help organizations plan intermodal passenger transport, overcoming borders.

Measures such as the Rail Smart Pass have required, not only technical knowledge on intermodality schemes, but creation of synergies among stakeholders, and a strong political commitment. These factors allow the alignment of goals and responsibilities among neighboring cities and transport operators in accordance with EU guidelines, with the aim of harmonizing travel solutions and simplifying tourists' travel experience to encourage a shift in their mobility habits toward sustainable solutions.

In the frame of the EU Cohesion Strategy, Inter-Connect has worked on multiple fronts in promoting sustainable mobility habits as well as digitizing and planning high-quality multimodal travel options, aligning its goals with the 2011 White Paper, regarding decarbonized and competitive transport services across Europe, and Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) policy, regarding a European multimodal transport network.

More information about this project:



Impact

The successful initiative brought to the commercialization of **5.000 contactless tickets**, out of **20 billion potential tourist users**. This testing phase paved the way for an improved sustainable mobility, allowing tourists to move easily within the area, shifting public transport without incurring multiple charges.



Beatrice Selice

- Age: 27
- Nationality: Italian
- Region where you are deployed: Emilia-Romagna, Italy
- Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you: **dialogue, engagement, representation.**



Sardinian administration conducts peer reviews to propose concrete actions to decision-makers

The Policy Learning Platform unites 36 countries to share challenges openly: Sardinia's 14,7% NEET rate and mobility problems are some examples

By Alem Eliass

When I began my mission as an IVY reporter in Sardinia, my objective was clear: to move beyond official speeches and understand how cooperation actually works. I came here to analyze the mechanisms that allow a region to transform itself. By diving into the reports and strategic documents of the Cagliari Peer Review, a process where experts from other European regions (the 'peers') evaluate local policies, I discovered a reality far more complex and fascinating than what is often imagined from the outside. It is not just a matter of international meetings; it is true political engineering playing out in the shadows of offices.

And the journey starts!

I went through an in-depth study of the Interreg Europe programme documents. This made me able to

deconstruct the role of the Policy Learning Platform. It is not just a simple database or a directory of contacts; it is the true engine of regional knowledge on a continental scale. As a reporter, I analyzed how this hub allows thirty-six countries to share their failures and successes transparently. What one discovers is a very humble approach to public management: it is not just about sharing funding, but about importing collective intelligence to avoid making the same programming errors. This represents a precious gain in time and efficiency for an administration that must respond to urgent needs.

While examining the agenda and expert summaries that marked the Cagliari sessions, a strategic concept caught my full attention: that of 'pre-reform'. We often have an image of reforms falling from above, imposed by distant political decisions. In reality, I

The peer review working group.



Peer review organized by Interreg Europe and the Sardinian Agency for Active Labor Policies.

observed in the reports that the Peer Review serves as a reassuring 'crash test'. It is a dialogue between equals: Sardinian technicians present their challenges to their European counterparts, who then share what worked (or failed) in their own countries. This stage is crucial because it begins with an unfiltered diagnosis. The documents show a courageous assessment of the situation, particularly regarding 2 Sardinian challenges: how to create new effective mobility schemes, or how to reduce the rate 14.7% of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEETs).

This process enables what experts call 'de-risking'. By relying on models that have already been validated elsewhere, political and financial risks are considerably reduced even before a law is voted on or a major action plan is launched. Finally, the contribution of legitimacy is striking. The recommendations co-written by European peers provide the Sardinian administration with an indisputable technical basis to propose concrete actions to decision-makers. It is a way of stating that the chosen strategy is not just a local intuition, but a solution that has proven itself within a European network of excellence.

A clear impact on the future

My reading of the technical presentations revealed very specific avenues for action that Sardinia is closely studying for its future programmes. For example, the 'Create Lithuania' programme manages to retain 80% of its young talents in the country after their international experience figure that is a dream for any island region fearing brain drain. In Malta, I noted that support for young people in mobility amounts to 80% of the minimum wage. This data is fundamental because it guarantees that the experience of international mobility is accessible to everyone, and not just to an elite who already has the financial means. This is where cooperation meets social policy.

Reporting on European cooperation ultimately means telling the story that no one is alone in facing their challenges, no matter how isolated an island may be. Seeing Sardinia draw inspiration from its neighbors to offer a future to its youth, through a meticulous reading of what works elsewhere, is the most beautiful proof of unity I have seen during my mission. If I had to summarize my report and all I have learned from these documents in three words, these would be: system, sharing, and future.

INTERVIEW - Massimiliano Melis - Project manager at ASPAL (Sardinian Agency for Active Labor Policies)

What is your role and what do you do within the agency?

I work within the regional and community projects sector. I am an EURES consultant for the region and I deal with transnational mobility, a topic that concerns both the young and the not-so-young.

What was your personal role in organizing the Peer Review with Interreg Europe?

I am the project manager for the project, which initially started from a meeting in Spain between colleagues and representatives of Interreg Europe. I was involved from the beginning and followed the entire process: from the planning of the themes partly predetermined during the joining phase to the final technical aspects, such as the location, the definition of the agenda, and the activities.

In what way does the exchange with European experts guarantee safer and more effective planning?

We had discussions with experts from all over Europe: Malta, Norway, Sweden, and Spain. This allowed us to view different topics through the contribution of experiences realized in their countries. It was not a matter of taking an experience and applying it 'as is'. We approached it in a critical and constructive way to understand if the proposals were applicable to our regional context, as a policy that works in one place does not necessarily have the same results in another territory. It was fundamental to present an analysis of our territory to make them understand our starting point.

What are the main themes that emerged during the discussion?

The importance of developing personalized programs based on the needs of specific targets emerged. A central theme is mobility, especially for countries like Italy that are very 'sending' (outgoing) rather than 'incoming'. We tried to

conceive mobility not as a path that is an end in itself, but as a process that requires support before, during, and especially after, through monitoring actions and individual tutoring. Comparing different realities is one of the keys to success for designing cooperation and re-entry strategies.

Was there a particular obstacle that Interreg Europe helped you overcome?

Rather than obstacles, it was a fluid process that led to asking questions even on topics not initially planned. The goal was not to solve a single specific problem, but to understand together the strategies and directions to take, given that there is no single answer to these themes. The exchange helped us to better focus on certain aspects and give more solidity to our ideas.

Can you give us a concrete example of an input received?

Let's take the example of Malta: they physically accompany young people abroad with tutors, but that is a reality applicable to small numbers. For us, managing significant numbers, this is not physically possible. However, that experience made us plan ways for monitoring and tutoring young people upon their return. We also used networks and ties in various countries to create support realities on-site, subsequently continuing to support the return process.

What is the weight of these experts' recommendations before political decision-makers?

The quality that comes from international experts carries weight. Those at the highest levels of decision-making, both technical and political, listen to this type of contribution. The fact that there is an organization that recruits international experts provides added value and a perception of superior quality, guaranteeing attention and a hearing.



Aerial view of Marina Castelsardo and the town, Sardinia, Italy

More information



The Policy Learning Platform by the numbers

- 36 countries connected
- 1 Europe-wide community of policymakers
- Free expert support for regional policy challenges
- Hundreds of transferable practices shared across regions
- Since 2016, accelerating policy learning across Europe



Alem Eliass

- Age: 23
- Nationality: Italian, French and Moroccan
- Region where you are deployed: Sardinia (Italy)
- Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you: resilience, impact, trust



A Cross-border Coordination Point is turning obstacles into practical solutions between Belgium and the Netherlands

The project Schakelpunt identifies border barriers and proposes flexible interpretations or targeted adjustments to existing rules, among others

Kick-off event of the Schakelpunt Grensbelemmeringen project, 9 September 2024.

By Brian Sebastian Pattikawa

The border region between the northern region of Belgium (Flanders), and the Netherlands is unique in Europe. Unlike many other border areas, it does not face a language barrier: people on both sides share Dutch as a common language. This creates strong potential for seamless cooperation and makes the region a promising example of how European cross-border collaboration could work in practice.

Yet, despite this shared linguistic foundation, cooperation is often more complicated than expected. Differences in national laws, administrative systems, and regulations continue to create obstacles for citizens, organisations, and businesses operating across the border. These barriers limit the region's full potential and show that even in favourable conditions, borders still matter.

One contact point

To address these challenges, the Interreg Flanders-Netherlands programme launched in 2024 the project Schakelpunt Grensbelemmeringen, or Cross-border Coordination Point in English. At its core, the project introduces a new approach: a central contact point, functioning as a professional secretariat, that helps identify cross-border obstacles and advises national authorities on how to overcome them. Rather than requiring major legal changes, the initiative focuses on practical solutions, such as flexible interpretations or targeted adjustments to existing rules.

While Interreg Flanders-Netherlands has long supported cross-border cooperation through various projects, this initiative marks a shift in approach. For

the first time, organisations in the border region have access to an official structure where they can directly report issues and seek solutions. Working closely with Dutch and Flemish authorities, as well as knowledge institutions, the project aims to reform how governance functions across borders, turning barriers into opportunities and helping the region move closer to its full potential as a model for European cooperation.

From ideas to realisation

The idea behind the Schakelpunt can be traced back to the Flemish-Dutch Summit in Ghent (Belgium) 2018, where cross-border cooperation became a key priority. At the time, particular attention was given to developments in and around Ghent, including the creation of North Sea Port, a unique port area spanning from Zeeland (the Netherlands) to Ghent. This cross-border initiative highlighted both the opportunities and the practical challenges of cooperation, offering valuable insight into the legal and administrative bottlenecks that persist in the region.

Building on these lessons, the Interreg project was officially launched in 2024, with a duration of three

years. During this period, the Schakelpunt aims to test in practice how cross-border obstacles can be addressed more effectively. Its core function is to identify, analyse, and prioritise border barriers, and to propose realistic solutions.

How does this Cross-border Coordination Point work?

In practical terms, governments, (public) institutions or cross-border cooperation associations can turn to the Schakelpunt when they encounter cross-border issues. Once a case is submitted, the Schakelpunt examines the problem in detail, working to identify possible ways forward. Based on this analysis, it provides tailored advice both to the relevant public authorities in the Flemish-Dutch border region and to the organisation that raised the issue.

In doing so, the Schakelpunt acts as a bridge between local challenges and policy-level solutions, helping to gradually reform how cross-border cooperation is managed. In other words: Schakelpunt is not only identifying problems, but actively contributing to practical reforms that directly affect people's daily lives.

Impact

As of March 2026, the Schakelpunt is working on **36 different cross-border barriers**. These range from practical regulatory issues, such as the sale of fireworks, to more urgent matters like cross-border ambulance services. Of these cases, **10 have already been concluded**. This means that either the issue has been resolved, or concrete solutions have been formulated and passed on to administrative coordinators in the border regions, who can then escalate them to ministers or other relevant authorities.

The project has also gained visibility at the European level. During the European Week of Regions and Cities 2025, organised by the European Commission and the European Committee of the

Regions, attention was drawn to the importance of governance closest to European citizens. At this event, Carina Van Cauter, governor of East Flanders, highlighted the early impact of the Schakelpunt, just one year after its launch.

She pointed in particular to progress in healthcare, noting that long-standing barriers are finally being addressed: "After 20 years, we have managed to ensure that ambulances in the border region will soon be able to transport patients to the nearest hospital, regardless of whether it is in Belgium or the Netherlands. That was not possible before. This is hard to imagine, especially when the Dutch hospital is sometimes closer than the Belgian one."

INTERVIEW - Sebastiaan Hupkes Coordinator of the Schakelpunt Grensbelemmeringen

Could you share a concrete example of a cross-border barrier that directly affects emergency services in the region?

For example, we have the ambulance case, actually, we have several of those. One of them was submitted by the municipality of Woensdrecht. Just across the border, in the Belgian town of Essen, there are several Belgian ambulances stationed. Under a Benelux agreement, those ambulances are allowed to cross the border into the Netherlands. However, what they are not allowed to do is transport patients to Dutch hospitals after an emergency or accident. I could go into detail about why that is the case, but honestly, it is quite absurd. There is a certain legal logic behind it, but it is a legal reasoning.

What we did was draft an advisory report showing that there is actually a relatively simple solution, although it does require political courage and decision-making. At the Benelux-level, it would be possible to create a formal arrangement without needing a full treaty, simply by introducing a piece of regulation signed by the relevant ministers. That would allow Dutch hospitals to be officially recognised for Belgian ambulances. In emergency situations, where every second counts, which is almost always the case, ambulances should simply be able to bring patients to the nearest hospital. Even if that hospital is on the other side of the border. Right now, that is often not possible, which is quite strange.

Are there also examples of cross-border barriers that affect residents in their everyday lives?

Other cases affect residents of border villages very directly. For example, in the Netherlands, consumer fireworks have now been banned. Belgium has not introduced the same ban, so you can already see the consequences coming. In places like Baarle, this is already an issue, but during the next New Year's period and even starting in August, many Dutch people will travel to Belgian border villages to buy fireworks that are prohibited in the Netherlands. People naturally want to do that, but the nuisance and disruption it causes locally can become very significant. From a safety perspective, Belgian mayors near the border would also prefer stricter

rules, but they are limited to ban selling fireworks. Besides this would create a "waterbed effect" whereby people just go to a nearby municipality. Stricter rules on fireworks requires decision making at the national level.

We have not solved that issue yet, but we did publish an advisory report about it. What Schakelpunt has done is place the issue on the political agenda and propose several possible solutions. Those proposals are now being discussed politically. That does not mean the problem is already solved, but it is already an important step that the issue is now officially recognised and debated in a constructive way. The ideal scenario would probably be a similar ban in Belgium, like in the Netherlands, although there are also intermediate solutions possible. This also shows the interaction between Schakelpunt and public authorities.

How do you think the project has evolved over the past years, and what lessons have emerged from that development?

It is often better to prevent problems than to solve them afterwards. What I mean by that is that whenever the Netherlands, Belgium or Flanders, depending on where the authority lies, introduce new regulations, new differences between the countries also arise. But when you create new rules, in any policy area, you can also try to think ahead and prevent those differences from emerging.

That is not necessarily something we at Schakelpunt do ourselves, but it does help. Prevention is always better than cure, especially by thinking in advance about specific cross-border situations. If policymakers change something in legislation or policy, they should also acknowledge: "We are doing this because we find it important in the Netherlands or Belgium." But at the same time, they should realise that in the border region this creates a new difference with the neighbouring country, and then already think about possible solutions for that.

That is still more of a theoretical concept, but you slowly start to see it being developed in practice, especially on the Dutch side. It could definitely be developed further. So it is really a combination of both prevention and administrative attention.

What is still needed to strengthen the project in the future?

That administrative attention does exist now, because it has become part of the broader governance structure, but it is still a growing process. The Schakelpunt project I work on is also only temporary. Personally, I strongly believe it should not remain a temporary project, but become permanent.

As I said earlier, these cross-border obstacles will always continue to exist. They would only completely disappear if Belgium and the Netherlands had exactly the same legal systems, laws and regulations, and that is simply not going to happen.

You mentioned the importance of long-term structures. What role could the Benelux framework play in the future of Schakelpunt?

That is also why I always say we should look more towards the Benelux. We already have an international organisation called the Benelux Union, which was established to improve cross-border

cooperation between the three countries. Once this project phase ends, and once all the ministers and other people responsible for deciding on the future of the project start looking ahead, I think they should also look at what already exists and see whether this could be linked more strongly to the Benelux framework. That is quite complicated, but the organisation already exists.

You have to realise that this Schakelpunt, of which I am part, is really just a group of people working together. We are not an organisation with legal authority. We cannot issue formal instructions or decisions. We are a network organisation.

But the Benelux is an actual institution. It has secretary-generals, treaties and formal agreements attached to it, legal authority, and the ability to issue mandates. It also has a great deal of expertise and experience in-house. So it is an organisation that, much like a ministry, municipality or province, can actually achieve things on a cross-border level, and importantly, it also has a mandate from governments to do so.

More information



The Schakelpunt at a glance

● Duration	3 years (01/02/2024 - 31/01/2027)
● Regions	Flanders (Belgium) & Netherlands
● Partners	5 different Flemish and Dutch authorities and knowledge institutions
● Budget	€ 2.182.459,34
● Focus area:	A Europe without borders



Brian Sebastian Pattikawa

- Age: 23
- Nationality: Belgian
- Region where you are deployed: Antwerp, Belgium
- Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you: CEE 7/16, roaming, Ryanair



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