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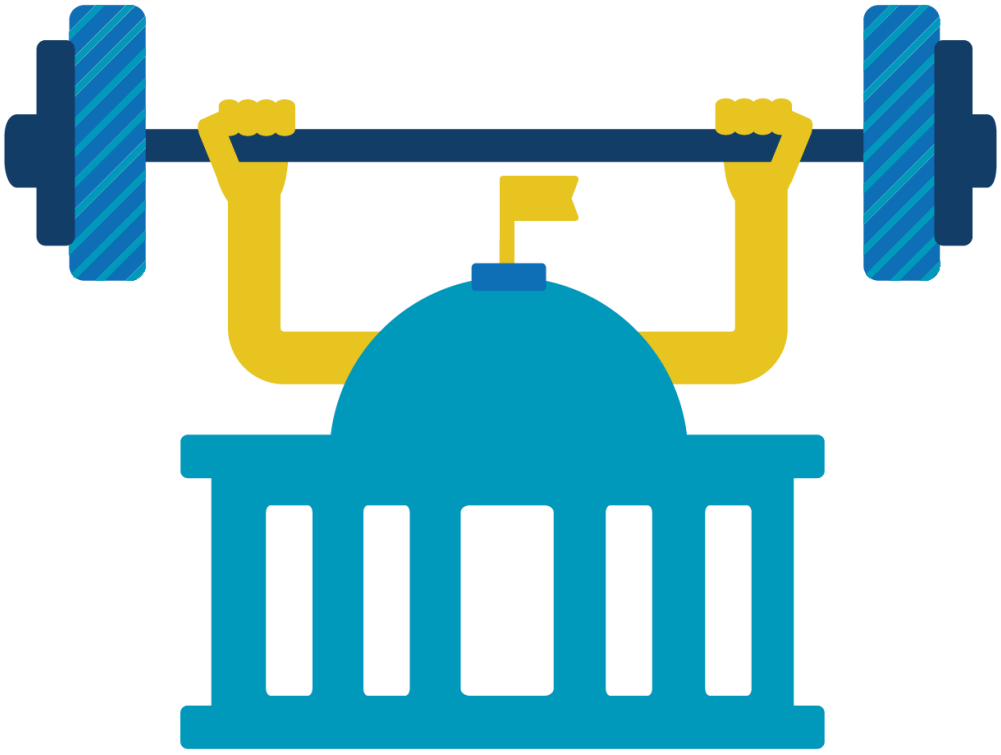
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Interreg

ISO1 across Interreg

A collection of practices and approaches

A publication that shows the wide range of opportunities ISO1 offers and the added value it brings to territorial cooperation.

NOVEMBER 2026



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01

Introduction

How can cooperation be strengthened not only through projects, but through the institutions, relationships, and governance systems that make it possible? This question persists because the challenges at borders evolve constantly. New policy agendas, new crises, changing administrative frameworks and actors continuously reshape how regions collaborate across national frontiers.

In this context, the introduction of **Interreg Specific Objective 1 (ISO1) "A better cooperation governance"** offered Interreg programmes a dedicated space to focus on governance itself: the capacity, structures, trust, and shared frameworks that underpin successful territorial cooperation. This Interreg specific objective is a flexible tool, allowing programmes to focus on the *how* of cooperation with as much intention as the *what*.

A large majority of Interreg programmes have chosen to integrate ISO1 into their priorities, giving governance a place alongside their thematic objectives.

Nevertheless, while many programmes selected this specific objective, their interpretations diverged widely. Some use it to prepare major investments, build joint strategies, or modernise public administration. Others use it to address legal and administrative obstacles, to reinforce the capacities of cross-border institutions, or to build trust among citizens who share a territory. Others, still, selected ISO1 to support macro-regional governance frameworks, thus contributing to broader territorial strategies that extend beyond any single border. This diversity is a defining feature of ISO1. Indeed, what emerges from the extensive landscape of ISO1-funded initiatives is not a single model of how cooperation governance should work, but a range of approaches, each shaped by local realities, administrative cultures, and territorial histories.

This publication aims to make that diversity visible. It seeks to translate the possibilities opened by the regulation into concrete practices, to show how programmes have interpreted ISO1 in different contexts, and to illustrate through selected examples how cooperation governance comes to life across Europe. Governance is often perceived as administrative and distant, but in truth, the approaches and practices described here involve people (e.g. civil servants, mayors, local operators, community leaders) who work within complex systems to shape cooperation on the ground. Their efforts, and the structures they help to build, form an essential part of the Interreg story.

In doing so, this publication has three aims: to show the range of what ISO1 makes possible across Interreg programmes; to make explicit the added value it brings to territorial cooperation, alongside the projects and people who create it; and to draw out lessons that can inform how cooperation governance can be designed and supported in the future. Examples cover different territories, scales and governance mechanisms, and focus on cross-border and transnational cooperation, where ISO1 is one priority among several. They are illustrative rather than exhaustive: not every type of action listed in the Regulation, or every Interreg strand, is represented.

02

How does ISO1 take shape across Europe?

02.1. From regulatory framework to governance practice

ISO1 is rooted in Article 14(4)[1] of Regulation (EU) 2021/1059, which defines the scope for actions that may be supported under the objective of "a better cooperation governance". The Regulation sets out a broad, open-ended list of actions, including a catch-all for "other actions to support better cooperation governance". This flexibility suits the reality that governance challenges differ widely across borders and cooperation areas: what constitutes a barrier in one region may be irrelevant in another; what strengthens cooperation in one context may require entirely different tools elsewhere.

> **INTERREG REGULATION, ARTICLE 14(4)**
>
> *Under Interreg programmes, the ERDF and, where applicable, the external financing instruments of the Union, may also support the Interreg-specific objective of 'a better cooperation governance', by one or more of the following actions:*
>
> *(a) enhance the institutional capacity of public authorities, in particular those mandated to manage a specific territory, and of stakeholders (all strands);*
>
> *(b) enhance efficient public administration by promoting legal and administrative cooperation and cooperation between citizens, civil society actors and institutions, in particular with a view to resolving legal and other obstacles in border regions (strands A, C, D and, where appropriate, strand B);*
>
> *(c) build up mutual trust, in particular by encouraging people-to-people actions (strands A, D and, where appropriate, strand B);*
>
> *(d) enhance institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders to implement macro-regional strategies and sea-basin strategies, as well as other territorial strategies (all strands);*
>
> *(e) enhance sustainable democracy and support civil society actors and their role in reforming processes and democratic transitions (all strands with involvement of third countries, partner countries or OCTs); and*
>
> *(f) other actions to support better cooperation governance (all strands).*

Programmes select the relevant actions and translate them into priorities, calls and project formats. In some cases, ISO1 supports studies, diagnostic analyses, or planning processes that prepare territories for future investments. In others, it strengthens administrative capacity through joint training programmes, institutional dialogue, or staff exchanges. Elsewhere, it helps resolve deeply embedded legal mismatches that make cross-border service delivery complex. And in still other cases, it is used to build social trust and citizen involvement, recognising that cooperation is not merely an institutional exercise, but also a lived experience.

Because this specific objective is flexible, it has become a common feature in the priorities of 2021–2027 Interreg programmes.

[1] *Regulation (EU) 2021/1059 (Interreg Regulation), available on EUR-Lex.*

46	1,198	4,086
programmes with ISO1 projects under way	projects: 678 ongoing, 520 completed	partners across 5,704 partnerships

ISO1 in figures, September 2026 (source: keep.eu)

These figures reveal not only the scale of ISO1, but the appetite for governance-focused interventions across the Interreg community. Yet numbers alone do not capture the full picture. Behind them lies a wide range of governance stories: administrations learning to work together more effectively, regions building shared strategies, institutions removing long-standing obstacles, and communities finding new ways to cooperate across borders. Together, these experiences show how a flexible regulatory framework has been translated into highly diverse governance practices across Europe.

02.2. One objective, many approaches: how Interreg programmes put ISO1 to work

When ISO1 was introduced across the Interreg landscape, programmes were not merely implementing an objective but interpreting it. Each programme approached the objective in a way that reflected its territorial realities, administrative cultures, governance traditions, and strategic aspirations. In practice, this has meant using ISO1 for purposes as varied as resolving legal and administrative obstacles, strengthening institutional capacity, building trust between citizens through people-to-people exchanges, and preparing the strategic frameworks that guide long-term cooperation. Out of this diversity, several distinctive approaches emerge, illustrating the richness and adaptability of ISO1 in practice.

02.2.1. Planning today for tomorrow's investments

In some programmes, ISO1 is used to prepare territories for future investments. Rather than funding infrastructure directly, these programmes support the analyses, data, joint planning and institutional partnerships that need to be in place before major investment decisions are made.

PROGRAMME SPOTLIGHT **INTERREG ROMANIA–HUNGARY**

The Romania–Hungary programme offers an interesting example of a preparatory governance approach, one that builds the institutional groundwork for investment well before it happens. Before defining its ISO1 priorities, the programme engaged in extensive stakeholder consultations involving local authorities, regional institutions, civil society actors, and national representatives. The territorial analysis that emerged from these conversations did not merely summarise trends; it offered **a diagnosis rooted in lived experience**. Statistical indicators were complemented by stories of administrative bottlenecks, gaps in institutional knowledge, and practical difficulties in coordinating public services across a border marked by differing capacities and legal systems.

One of the clearest needs identified was the absence of reliable data to support decision-making. Municipalities and regional authorities often lacked access to shared, comparable, or up-to-date information. Another recurring theme was the fragility of cooperation capacity on both sides of the border, especially among smaller authorities that struggled with staff turnover, a lack of specialised skills, or insufficient resources. In response, the programme chose to use ISO1 for large strategic preparatory initiatives designed to strengthen governance foundations before investment decisions are made (see the DREAM project story, p. 10). In this approach, ISO1 supports the groundwork that makes future infrastructure and development projects possible: shared evidence, coordinated planning, and stronger institutional partnerships.

What distinguishes this approach is its long-term horizon. Governance becomes the first phase of investment itself, enabling territories to prepare jointly for projects whose impacts will extend far beyond a single programming period.

02.2.2. Building territorial cooperation ecosystems

In some programmes, ISO1 is used not simply to fund cooperation activities, but to help territories organise themselves around shared long-term governance frameworks. In these cases, governance is built through place-based processes that allow local actors to jointly define priorities, strategies, and implementation mechanisms adapted to their own territorial realities.

PROGRAMME SPOTLIGHT **INTERREG FRANCE–SWITZERLAND**

In the mountainous cross-border region between France and Switzerland, cooperation is shaped by cultural ties but also by complex administrative systems, fiscal differences, and divergent planning traditions. Recognising these dynamics, the Interreg France–Switzerland programme created Integrated Territorial Cooperation Plans (PTICs), a two-phase governance approach that embeds cooperation directly into the way local development is planned and implemented. Rather than beginning with predefined thematic priorities, the PTIC approach begins with places: their identities, governance cultures, and capacity to articulate a shared vision. In this approach, governance is not built around a single project, but around a territorial ecosystem in which municipalities, regional actors, and local stakeholders collectively shape long-term cooperation frameworks.

The first phase, known as "Emergence", provides simplified flat-rate support to enable local actors to come together, conduct a shared territorial diagnosis, and develop a cross-border multi-thematic strategy linked to programme priorities. This phase is designed as a collaborative reflection process, allowing stakeholders to better understand each other's constraints, strengths, and ambitions before moving into implementation. **The second phase, "Deployment"**, supports the implementation of that strategy, the coordination of governance structures, and the development of the projects identified during the first phase.

The use of flat-rate mechanisms helps reduce administrative burden and allows actors to focus more on strategic coordination than on financial reporting. Rather than requiring exhaustive justification of every expenditure, the programme assesses whether the agreed-upon objectives and governance structures have been achieved.

What makes this approach particularly valuable is its emphasis on cross-cutting governance and territorial ownership. Cooperation becomes embedded in the way territories plan and govern themselves, rather than remaining limited to isolated projects. ISO1 here functions as a framework for building lasting cooperation ecosystems, where strategies, actors, and institutions are aligned around a shared territorial future.

02.2.3. Removing legal and administrative obstacles

In many border regions, cooperation does not fail because of lack of willingness, but because systems on either side of the border simply do not align. Differences in legislation, administrative procedures, professional standards, taxation rules, or service delivery frameworks can create barriers that make cross-border interaction unnecessarily difficult for citizens, businesses, and public authorities alike.

In this context, ISO1 becomes a tool for structured problem-solving. Programmes use it to identify where obstacles persist, analyse their underlying causes, and create mechanisms for resolving them through legal comparison, administrative dialogue, pilot actions, and coordinated recommendations. These obstacles may affect areas as varied as labour mobility, healthcare access, qualification recognition, transport coordination, emergency

response, or access to public services. This approach is particularly important because such barriers are rarely resolved quickly. Removing them requires sustained cooperation between institutions that operate under different legal systems and administrative cultures. It often involves long-term dialogue, gradual alignment, and trust-building between actors who must first understand each other's frameworks before proposing workable solutions.

PROGRAMME SPOTLIGHT **INTERREG SPAIN–FRANCE–ANDORRA (POCTEFA)**

The POCTEFA programme (Spain–France–Andorra) illustrates this approach through **a sequenced process: diagnose first, then fund.** Between July and November 2024, the programme ran a public survey inviting citizens, administrations, and civil society across the cross-border area to identify the obstacles they face in daily cross-border life. The results were published together with a synthesis of existing studies on cross-border obstacles along the Spain–France–Andorra border, giving future applicants a shared evidence base.

The findings then shaped a dedicated call for projects under the programme's governance priority, the "Objetivo INTERREG" call, open from June to November 2025 with **€11.6 million in ERDF**. The call was organised in three blocks that mirror the diagnosis: collecting data to improve knowledge of the cross-border territory; identifying and resolving legal, administrative and other border obstacles; and structuring and consolidating cooperation by strengthening the institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders. Open to both classic and small projects, it received 32 applications.

This sequencing (i.e. structured, participatory diagnosis before targeted funding) ensures that governance investments respond directly to obstacles as experienced on the ground, rather than to assumptions about where they lie.

Rather than responding only to isolated cases, some Interreg programmes such as POCTEFA seek to create durable mechanisms for identifying and addressing recurring cross-border barriers (see the project stories on #ACCESS, p. 11, Schakelpunt Grensbelemmeringen, p. 12, and ALCOTRAITÉ, p. 12). ISO1 provides both the mandate and the resources for this often invisible but essential governance work, turning administrative friction into opportunities for structural improvement.

02.2.4. Modernising administrations through cooperation

In some cooperation areas, governance challenges extend beyond coordination between institutions and touch on the broader capacity of public administrations to function effectively in a changing environment. This approach is particularly valuable where public administrations are seeking to modernise their structures, improve digital capacity, and strengthen the way institutions work together across borders.

In this approach, ISO1 is used not only to improve cooperation between institutions, but also to **strengthen the way those institutions operate internally**. Programmes support actions such as administrative simplification, digital tools for public service delivery, staff training, joint operational planning, and the creation of more efficient coordination mechanisms between authorities. Cooperation thus becomes both a practical objective and a driver of institutional improvement.

PROGRAMME SPOTLIGHT **INTERREG IPA SOUTH ADRIATIC**

The South Adriatic programme (Italy–Albania–Montenegro) provides a concrete example of this approach. Rather than opening its governance priority to its call for standard projects, the programme channels it into **a strategic project** (see the GOVERNANCE project story, p. 13), built with the administrations responsible for EU funds in the three countries: the Puglia Region as lead partner, the Molise Region, Albania's State

Agency for Strategic Programming and Aid Coordination (SASPAC), and Montenegro's Ministry of Finance and Ministry of European Affairs.

With around **€4.5 million for 2023–2027**, the project focuses on digitalising and simplifying administrative processes and on strengthening staff skills in digital transformation and the management of EU funds. Its concrete outputs include a **Multifunctional Hub** for institutional exchange and networking, **a joint strategic model for administrative transformation**, **a set of IT tools** for more efficient digital public services, and training for civil servants.

What makes this approach distinctive is that it treats cooperation not only as an external relationship between partners, but also as an opportunity for internal transformation. ISO1 becomes a catalyst for administrative learning, helping institutions adapt to new governance expectations while strengthening their ability to cooperate in more effective and sustainable ways.

02.2.5. Coordinating cooperation across large territories

At transnational and macro-regional scale, governance takes on a different dimension. Here, the challenge is also about **coordinating multiple countries, governance levels, and policy sectors** around shared territorial priorities that extend across large geographic areas. In this approach, ISO1 supports the architecture that allows complex cooperation systems to function over time. Interreg transnational programmes use it to finance coordination platforms, stakeholder networks, thematic governance structures, strategic monitoring systems, and policy dialogue mechanisms that keep large-scale cooperation frameworks operational.

Compared with cross-border programmes, which often work at a more immediate territorial scale, transnational programmes organise cooperation across wider systems involving many actors with different mandates and policy responsibilities. The emphasis is therefore on alignment: connecting institutions, facilitating coordination between projects and policymakers, and ensuring that shared strategies remain active beyond individual initiatives.

PROGRAMME SPOTLIGHT **INTERREG EURO-MED**

The Euro-MED programme offers a particularly structured example. Its thematic funding is organised around **four missions**: strengthening an innovative sustainable economy; protecting, restoring and valorising the natural environment and heritage; promoting green living areas; and enhancing sustainable tourism. ISO1, through the programme's Mediterranean Governance priority, provides the architecture that holds these missions together.

For each mission, the programme funds **two governance projects for the whole programming period**. **A Thematic Community project** animates the community of thematic projects, creates synergies between them and supports the transfer of their results. **An Institutional Dialogue project** connects this work with policymakers and stakeholders, so that results can be taken up in public policies within and beyond the programme area. Thematic projects are expected to cooperate closely with these governance projects.

The approach builds on the 2014–2020 Interreg MED experience, including the PANORAMED governance project and the programme's horizontal and strategic projects, and was labelled by the 42 Member States of the Union for the Mediterranean in December 2021. These governance projects do not implement isolated actions themselves; rather, they create the structures through which knowledge is exchanged, synergies are built, and policy uptake becomes possible across countries (see the Green Living Areas Thematic Community project story, p. 17).

Here, ISO1 acts as a backbone for large-scale cooperation systems. It funds **the invisible but essential machinery of coordination**: meetings, strategic support, stakeholder engagement, alignment between

institutions, and long-term planning across policy domains. This approach shows how governance itself can be a field of action in its own right, alongside the programme's thematic priorities.

Together, these approaches show that ISO1 does not impose a single pathway. Its flexibility allows programmes to tailor governance responses to territorial needs, administrative realities, and strategic choices. The next section turns from these programme-level approaches to specific project-level experiences.

03

ISO1 on the ground: A few project stories

To understand the practical impact of ISO1, it is useful to move from programme architecture to concrete project experiences. The examples below, drawn from different geographical and thematic contexts, show how ISO1 becomes action on the ground. Together, they illustrate the versatility of the objective.

DREAM

Preparing a cross-border railway future

INTERREG ROMANIA–HUNGARY

WEBSITE interreg-rohu.eu

Although trains do not yet run between Szeged and Timișoara, the DREAM project is laying the groundwork for **a direct rail line** that could one day connect the two cities. The absence of this connection has long been recognised as a missing link in the regional mobility system, affecting not only the movement of **people and goods**, but also the **economic and social life** of the border region.

DREAM's role is not to build the railway itself, but to turn ambition into institutional and technical readiness. Through the feasibility study, a climate resilience test, a Natura 2000 impact assessment, a DNSH assessment and a wildlife survey, the project is assembling the documentation and governance conditions needed for future construction. Equally important, it is creating a framework for dialogue between technical experts, local authorities, and national administrations. A major output of the project is the development of a **Joint Strategy**, which includes the technical description of railway investment, along with elements and data on biodiversity and environmental protection derived from the project's environmental studies. This shared planning document marks an important shift: it transforms the idea of a railway connection from a political aspiration into a jointly structured investment pathway.

The significance of DREAM lies not only in its technical outputs, but in the coalition it has created. By aligning institutions around a long-term shared objective, the project demonstrates how ISO1 can support governance that prepares territories for investments whose benefits will only materialise years later, but whose foundations must be built now.

North Sea Hydrogen Valley Ports

Aligning ports, producers, and regulators before hydrogen investment

INTERREG NORTH SEA

WEBSITE interregnorthsea.eu/ns-h2v-ports

North Sea Hydrogen Valley Ports illustrates the strategic preparation approach described earlier in a very different sector. Ports across the North Sea are expected to become central hubs in Europe's hydrogen economy, yet by 2024 fewer than 5% of planned hydrogen production capacity in the region had reached a final investment decision. The obstacle was rarely technical: it was governance. Different legal frameworks, uncoordinated permitting processes, and the absence of common standards for hydrogen storage, transport, and bunkering made it difficult for ports, producers, and public authorities to plan investments with confidence.

Through ISO1, the project brought together ten partners (i.e. port authorities, research institutes, local governments, and industry) to prepare the governance groundwork for four Hydrogen Valley Master Plans, in Brest, Bremen, Den Helder, and Esbjerg. Rather than funding hydrogen infrastructure directly, the project financed the analysis of legal and regulatory barriers, a joint methodology for port planning, and structured dialogue between public authorities, producers, and end-users through newly formed local partnerships. It also tackled shared technical governance challenges, such as agreeing common standards for vessel bunkering, so that hydrogen carriers could move between ports without facing incompatible rules at each stop.

The project's early results show how this preparatory governance work can translate into investment. Building on the partnerships it developed, the port of Bremen secured approval for a dedicated Hydrogen Valley funding proposal, a concrete step from joint planning to deployment. As the four Master Plans are finalised, the project aims to leave behind not only individual port strategies, but the transnational governance structures, shared methodologies, and stakeholder networks needed to keep coordination across ports active well beyond the project's lifetime.

#ACCESS

Tackling everyday cross-border obstacles

INTERREG HUNGARY–SLOVAKIA

WEBSITE hu-sk.eu/en

Along the Hungarian–Slovak border, cross-border life is routine: residents commute to work, study, access healthcare and run businesses on the other side. Yet legal and administrative mismatches persist, from difficulties in recognising professional qualifications to incompatible procedures and divergent labour or transport rules.

Funded under the Interreg Hungary–Slovakia programme, #ACCESS establishes a structured mechanism for identifying and addressing these obstacles. Through a dedicated online platform, **residents and stakeholders can report concrete administrative problems encountered in practice**. Expert working groups of public authorities, legal specialists and cross-border practitioners analyse each case and identify possible solutions, while a comparative analysis of relevant Hungarian and Slovak legislation feeds a cross-border legal obstacle database.

Local experiences reported by citizens are then discussed with regional and national authorities, so that obstacles are addressed at the level where decisions can be taken. By turning citizen feedback into legal analysis and policy proposals, #ACCESS bridges the gap between lived experience and institutional reform.

Schakelpunt Grensbelemmeringen

A single entry point for border obstacles

INTERREG FLANDERS–THE NETHERLANDS

WEBSITE www.schakelpunt.eu/en/

Like #ACCESS, the Schakelpunt Grensbelemmeringen project tackles the legal and administrative obstacles that persist even in highly integrated border regions. Along the Flanders–The Netherlands border, where citizens live, work and do business across the border with relative ease, these "invisible" obstacles still emerge in specific cases and reflect deeper mismatches between systems.

Where #ACCESS starts from reports by residents and stakeholders, the Schakelpunt takes an institutional route: **it acts as a dedicated coordination point for cross-border obstacles,** set up jointly by national, regional and local governments and knowledge institutions. Public authorities submit concrete cases, which are documented in a shared database, analysed with the relevant administrations and experts, and turned into recommendations. **Where needed, obstacles are escalated to the appropriate political level, up to ministers.**

This multi-level approach ensures that each obstacle is handled at the level where decisions can actually be taken and gives stakeholders a clear entry point in a complex administrative landscape. As a three-year pilot, the Schakelpunt is not only solving individual cases but also testing a replicable model for managing border obstacles, showing how ISO1 can support governance mechanisms that go beyond one-off interventions.

ALCOTRAITÉ

From mapping obstacles to administrative solutions

INTERREG ALCOTRA (FRANCE–ITALY)

WEBSITE interreg-alcotra.eu/fr/alcotraite

In the Alpine arc between southeastern France and northwestern Italy, ALCOTRAITÉ addresses the same kind of legal and administrative obstacles as #ACCESS and the Schakelpunt, focusing on cross-border healthcare cooperation, public transport and mobility, biodiversity protection and the improvement of cross-border governance, thereby contributing to the implementation of the spirit of the Quirinal Treaty, which calls for stronger Franco-Italian cooperation and greater territorial integration in border regions.

The project began by **mapping and classifying the main obstacles** faced by individuals and organisations in the border area, analysing each one through legal review, stakeholder dialogue and comparison with practices from other European border regions. Its distinctive feature is what comes next: **cross-border working groups** bringing together local authorities, professional chambers, civil society and regional representatives from both countries turn this analysis into targeted recommendations and practical administrative pathways.

Mobility and transport, where administrative complexity most directly affects daily life, became a priority. The follow-up project, **ALCOTRAITÉ 2 – Transport**, now **takes this work from analysis to implementation**. Beyond

individual solutions, ALCOTRAITÉ leaves behind lasting cooperative mechanisms: networks of public officials who exchange information more systematically, joint tools for monitoring obstacles, and shared resources that can inform future initiatives in the ALCOTRA area and beyond.

Small Project Fund "Begegnung"

Turning small encounters into cross-border trust

INTERREG BAVARIA–CZECH REPUBLIC

In some cases, ISO1's most direct work happens at a much smaller scale: funding the everyday encounters (i.e. a town-twinning celebration, a joint kindergarten, a shared cultural festival) that build trust between people living on either side of a border.

The Small Project Fund "Begegnung" (Encounter), managed by EUREGIO EGRENSIS and Euregio Bayerischer Wald-Böhmerwald-Unterer Inn under the Interreg Bavaria–Czech Republic 2021–2027 programme, exists to fund exactly this. Rather than a handful of large strategic projects, **the fund runs regular open calls** through which citizens, municipalities, schools, associations, and even fire and rescue services can apply for small grants **to run joint Bavarian–Czech activities**. A Regional Steering Committee with representatives from both sides of the border reviews and approves each round of applications: recent projects funded include a town-twinning festival in Neustadt, a "Painters without Borders" cultural exchange in Tirschenreuth, and a joint feasibility study for a shared ski lift.

The scale is what makes it distinctive. By mid-2026, the fund had approved well **over 400 small projects** and recorded **more than 15,000 participations in joint cross-border activities**, alongside 32 jointly organised public events. No single project moves the needle on its own, but together they put ISO1's ambition of building mutual trust directly into the hands of the people living the cross-border reality every day, rather than leaving it to institutions alone.

GOVERNANCE

Modernising public administration in the South Adriatic

IPA SOUTH ADRIATIC

WEBSITE sagovernance.southadriatic.eu

The GOVERNANCE project brings together partners from Italy, Albania and Montenegro to rethink how public administration operates in an increasingly digital environment. A central element is the **Multifunctional Hub**, a dynamic, platform-backed network for the exchange of tools aimed at fostering cooperation and administrative efficiency between local administrations in the South Adriatic area. As a baseline tool, the **DIGITS framework** maps the digital maturity of municipalities and provides evidence to guide innovation policies.

These tools are complemented by targeted capacity building: the **"Upskilling for Governance" advanced training programme** supports municipal employees in driving digitalisation, administrative simplification and EU funds management. Meanwhile, a **cross-border governance task force**, comprising academic experts and public administrators from Italy, Albania, and Montenegro, offers a permanent space for peer exchange and thematic support to foster national and European digital transition goals. Running in parallel to the Hub are **Pilot**

Actions, such as the digitalisation of public archives and the deployment of new fund-management software, which demonstrate how modern technologies can make administrative processes more efficient, transparent, and citizen-oriented.

For Albania and Montenegro, the project also supports the pre-accession process by strengthening the capacity of public institutions to manage EU funds and to modernise their administrations in line with the EU's digital agenda. In this way, ISO1 helps bring administrative practices closer together across the South Adriatic region.

CE-Spaces4All

Governance for accessible public spaces

INTERREG CENTRAL EUROPE

WEBSITE interreg-central.eu/projects/ce-spaces4all

Accessibility in public spaces and tourism is often addressed through technical standards or isolated initiatives. Yet inclusive access requires coordination between public authorities, planners, tourism operators and civil society, and this coordination is often fragmented across Central Europe.

CE-Spaces4All places accessibility within a governance framework. Municipalities, regional authorities, NGOs and experts **co-develop strategies and tools** to integrate accessibility into spatial planning, with the **active involvement of persons with disabilities** so that planning is informed by lived experience rather than assumptions.

Its main governance tool is the **Web Accessibility Viewer (WAV)**, a digital platform that maps accessibility barriers across pilot regions (covering transport, public spaces and tourism facilities) and allows policymakers and planners to collect, analyse and share data. Combined with local action plans, pilot activities and transnational exchange, it gives decision-makers **a stronger evidence base** and helps institutions treat accessibility as part of everyday decision-making rather than an add-on.

Arctic STEM Communities

Empowering northern rural governance through community-driven learning ecosystems

INTERREG NPA (NORTHERN PERIPHERY AND ARCTIC)

WEBSITE Arctic STEM Communities

In the remote and sparsely populated Northern Periphery and Arctic regions, rural communities face demographic pressures and rapid socio-economic change. Arctic STEM Communities strengthens local capacities to develop and sustain community-based STEM learning ecosystems by fostering cross-sector collaboration between education providers, local authorities, industry, and civil society, with particular attention to young people and under-represented groups such as girls and women for their future challenges.

The project adapts the evidence-based STEM Learning Ecosystems model, originally developed in the United States, which mobilises **cross-sector partnerships** of education providers, local authorities, civil society, families and industry. Three community ecosystems were set up in Húsavík (Iceland), Galway (Ireland) and Rovaniemi (Finland), where partners mapped local assets, engaged stakeholders and co-designed pilots: after-school digital STEM clubs for children in Lapland, evaluation toolkits in Galway and school-level STEM councils in Húsavík.

A key output is the **STEM Ecosystem Community Manual**, a practical guide that turns these local experiences into **a transferable governance framework for rural and remote regions across Europe**, covering stakeholder engagement, governance structures and long-term sustainability. Rather than relying on top-down prescriptions, the project shows how ISO1 can help communities define their own priorities and build lasting partnerships.

SAFE

Strengthening border management cooperation

INTERREG ROMANIA–SERBIA

The SAFE project, implemented under the Romania–Serbia programme, shows another side of ISO1: its ability to support capacity building in border management cooperation. Differences in national legislation, procedures, and equipment standards can make cooperation between authorities on both sides of the border more complex. SAFE responds with a coordinated approach. It provides **joint training programmes for hundreds of border officers**, supports the development of **a revised Joint Operational Plan** to harmonise response strategies, and strengthens structured dialogue mechanisms between Romanian and Serbian authorities. These activities help build a shared operational culture and improve coordination in situations where rapid and aligned responses are essential.

A key feature of the project is its focus on **operational readiness in real conditions**. Border officers work in demanding environments, from harsh winter temperatures to extreme summer heat, where effective cooperation depends not only on procedures but also on reliable tools and shared practices. SAFE therefore also supports the provision of **modern, interoperable equipment and infrastructure**, enabling authorities on both sides of the border to act more efficiently and cohesively in the field.

The project acknowledged that investments in modern border management infrastructure and specialised equipment are essential not only to strengthen security but also to support EU integration, promoting the harmonisation of standards and procedures between EU Member States and candidate countries.

While the project identified the cross-border obstacles, and the need for improving institutional coordination it also addressed the structural, operational and territorial challenges characterising the Romania–Serbia border area, where cooperation is influenced not only by differences in administrative systems, legislation and institutional responsibilities, but also by physical barriers, infrastructure deficiencies, limited operational capacities and the specific requirements associated with border management.

Therefore, the project did not limit itself to strategic planning but also focused on bridging the gap between strategic planning and operational delivery, through **integrated interventions** that link the development of joint governance solutions with targeted investments necessary for their implementation, ensuring the security of the supply chains, tackling cross border criminality and delivering lasting economic and social benefits to both countries and the wider region.

This integrated approach ensured that the project not only improved cooperation mechanisms but ensured also their practical application, producing tangible, measurable and sustainable benefits for the Romania–Serbia border territory.

The project builds on the experience of earlier initiatives implemented along EU external borders, ensuring continuity and the transfer of knowledge. By combining training, planning, equipment, and institutional dialogue, SAFE strengthens both the technical and organisational dimensions of border management. Beyond enhancing operational capacity, SAFE also supports the alignment of border management practices with European

standards. It demonstrates how ISO1 can support not only day-to-day cooperation, but also longer-term institutional transformation in policy areas where coordination is both complex and essential.

AidMIRE

Capitalization of best practices for the management of maxi emergencies in the cross-border area

INTERREG ITALY–SLOVENIA

WEBSITE www.ita-slo.eu/en/aidmire

In the Italy–Slovenia border region, major emergencies demand rapid medical intervention and effective cross-border coordination. Yet differences in healthcare systems, procedures and communication networks can delay responses. The devastating wildfires of 2022 exposed the need for shared protocols and better integrated emergency services.

Funded under the Interreg Italy–Slovenia programme, AidMIRE (Aid to Major Incident Response Evolvement) **builds on the achievements of NEX AID** to strengthen cross-border emergency healthcare. Hospitals and medical services from both countries work to **update joint emergency response protocols**, improve patient transfers and expand communication between ambulances, emergency units and hospitals.

Through joint training, practical exercises and large-scale emergency simulations, AidMIRE prepares healthcare professionals, responders and volunteers to act together in a crisis. The project also supports improvements to emergency equipment and **extends shared procedures to more healthcare facilities**. By turning earlier cooperation into **a coordinated cross-border emergency response network**, AidMIRE aims to deliver faster medical assistance and greater safety for residents and visitors on both sides of the border.

GRAAL

Turning project knowledge into policy across the Atlantic Area

INTERREG ATLANTIC AREA

WEBSITE graal-project.eu/en

Over successive programming periods, Interreg Atlantic Area projects have generated valuable knowledge, tools and solutions on issues such as climate change, environmental protection and sustainable development. Yet without systematic integration into public policies, their long-term impact can remain limited. GRAAL (Governance and Regional Atlantic Area Lighthouse) was conceived to close this gap.

Acting as a **strategic governance hub** for the Atlantic Area, the project does not develop new technical solutions but **capitalises on, structures and integrates existing knowledge** into policy frameworks at regional, national and European levels. Partners from France, Ireland, Portugal and Spain prepare roadmaps, action plans and flagship initiatives built on earlier results across five thematic areas (energy, ocean pollution, climate and risks, nature protection, and sustainable tourism), as well as proposals to improve coordination between the European programmes and funding instruments active in the region.

Concrete results include a **database of around 120 Atlantic Area projects**, giving a structured overview of their results, and **policy labs in countries such as Spain and Portugal**, where local and regional stakeholders test

how project knowledge can inform real policy decisions. In this way, GRAAL helps ensure that knowledge generated through Interreg feeds coherent strategies instead of remaining fragmented.

Green Living Areas Thematic Community

Turning years of Mediterranean climate projects into shared policy tools

INTERREG EURO-MED

WEBSITE green-living-areas.interreg-euro-med.eu

Across the Mediterranean, decades of Interreg-funded projects have generated a vast amount of knowledge on climate change adaptation and mitigation but results developed in one town or region often stay there, never reaching the institutions that could scale them up. The Green Living Areas Thematic Community was set up under ISO1 to close that gap.

Rather than funding new pilot projects, the initiative organises **a structured capitalisation process across the Mediterranean area**. Nineteen thematic projects have been welcomed into the community and grouped into five working groups, each producing a replicability study of their results. **A dedicated Ecosystemic Transition Unit (ETU) platform maps and catalogues the most transferable solutions**, while nine "territorial antennas" (launched in Slovenia, Spain, Greece, Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Bulgaria) work directly with local and regional authorities to adapt and adopt these solutions into their own policies.

The governance mechanism operates at three levels: within the thematic community itself, in coordination with the wider Interreg Euro-MED programme and its governance projects, and through outreach to external networks, strategic organisations, and decision-makers. The result is **a structured pipeline from local pilot to regional policy**, i.e. long-term mainstreaming agreements between organisations that ensure knowledge generated in one Mediterranean town does not remain a one-off experiment but becomes a shared reference point for others.

Support EUSALP

Providing the governance backbone for the Alpine macro-region

INTERREG ALPINE SPACE

WEBSITE alpine-space.eu/project/support-eusalp

The European Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) brings together seven countries and 48 regions around shared challenges in economic growth, mobility, and the environment. However, a strategy of this scale needs a stable institutional backbone to function day to day. That is precisely what the Support EUSALP project provides.

Funded under ISO1, the project finances the EUSALP Secretariat, **a Technical Support Structure (TSS)**, hosted jointly by the regions Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, and Lombardy. The Secretariat provides **continuous administrative and technical support to EUSALP's governance bodies**: the rotating Presidencies, the Executive Board, the General Assembly, and nine thematic Action Groups. Nineteen partners across the Alpine countries work together to keep the strategy's work plans on track, coordinate revisions to the EUSALP Action Plan, and support a Youth Council that runs its own "Pitch Your Project" competition to bring younger voices into macro-regional governance.

Support EUSALP is itself the product of a longer institutional lineage: it builds directly on lessons and tools developed under two earlier phases, AlpGov and AlpGov2, capitalising on nearly a decade of governance-building work. It also builds on the support provided by the European Commission in 2022 between the closure of the 2014–2020 programme and the approval of the 2021–2027 programme. This support contributed to the establishment of the Secretariat, which did not exist beforehand.

In doing so, it illustrates a distinct role for ISO1: not funding a single project's results, but keeping an entire macro-regional governance system, spanning presidencies, action groups, and thousands of stakeholders, coordinated and functioning from one year to the next. A **follow-up project, 4Support EUSALP,** is already under way and runs until June 2029.

RegenT

Turning seven tourism projects into one shared knowledge platform

INTERREG BALTIC SEA REGION

WEBSITE interreg-baltic.eu/project/regent

Tourism is both a contributor to, and a casualty of, climate change in the Baltic Sea Region, and over the years, Interreg funding has supported numerous individual projects testing ways to make the sector more resilient: off-season tourism strategies, climate resilience guidelines, local food networks. Each solved a piece of the puzzle; the challenge is to connect those pieces and bring their lessons into decisions across the sector.

RegenT was set up under ISO1 to meet that challenge. Rather than developing new pilot solutions, the project **consolidates the results of seven projects from four different Interreg programmes in the Baltic Sea Region into a single, accessible resource** for the people who can actually put them to use. These are regional and local public authorities responsible for strategic planning and resource allocation, alongside destination management organisations which shape and coordinate tourism at the destination level. It does this through two connected components: **a knowledge platform** bringing together the projects' tools and findings, and **a companion platform** for learning, exchange, and networking between the public officers who will apply them.

In doing so, RegenT illustrates a role for ISO1 that is easy to overlook: not generating new knowledge, but making existing knowledge usable. Six partners across Finland, Sweden, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Germany work together so that public authorities and tourism organisations in the Baltic Sea Region can access, in one place, what a decade of individual projects has already learned.

04

What ISO1 reveals about cooperation governance

04.1. Lessons from practice

Looking across the programme approaches and project stories in this publication, a few lessons stand out for anyone designing, managing or implementing ISO1 support. Together, they show what makes cooperation governance work in practice.

01

Consult early and widely

Territorial analyses and stakeholder engagement lead to ISO1 interventions that match real needs and build the trust and ownership that governance depends on. The Romania–Hungary programme built its ISO1 priorities on extensive consultations, and POCTEFA launched its governance call only after a public survey on border obstacles.

02

Keep it simple

Simplified procedures allow actors to focus on strategy, coordination and experimentation rather than on reporting. In France–Switzerland, the PTICs combine flat-rate support with an assessment of whether agreed objectives are met, instead of requiring justification of every expenditure.

03

Build for continuity

Governance improves when cooperation is anchored in durable arrangements instead of restarting with each funding cycle. Deciding early who will host, finance and use the results after the project ends helps them last. The technical support to EUSALP, which builds on AlpGov and AlpGov2, and is followed by 4Support EUSALP, as well as Euro-MED's governance projects, funded for the whole programming period, show how continuity can be planned.

04

Increase capacity step by step

Joint training, staff exchanges and pilot actions, such as the "Upskilling for Governance" programme in the South Adriatic or the joint training and large-scale emergency simulations of AidMIRE, build skills and working relationships across administrations. A shared governance culture grows over years, not within a single project.

05

Connect levels of government

Bringing local, regional, national and European actors to the same table helps align policies and reduce fragmentation. #ACCESS and the Schakelpunt both take obstacles identified locally to the level where decisions can be made, up to ministers where needed.

06

Embed digital tools

Digital platforms strengthen cooperation when they are combined with training, dialogue and organisational change: a means, not an end. In GOVERNANCE, digital tools for municipalities go hand in hand with training and a multifunctional hub; in CE-Spaces4All, the Web Accessibility Viewer is combined with local action plans and transnational exchange.

07

Build on what already exists

Before launching new pilots, programmes can fund projects that consolidate earlier results into databases, policy labs and networks that public authorities can use directly, as GRAAL, the Green Living Areas Thematic Community and RegenT do.

08

Invest in people, not only structures

Staff time, skills development, language training and opportunities to meet in person are what turn institutional agreements into working cooperation. Small project funds, such as “Begegnung” in Bavaria–Czech Republic, extend this to citizens themselves.

04.2. Persistent governance challenges

Some challenges recur across programmes. They do not diminish the value of ISO1; rather, they explain why cooperation governance requires persistent, long-term investment.

CHALLENGE	WHY IT MATTERS	WHAT HELPS
01 **Measuring results**	Governance outcomes such as trust, coordination and better-informed decisions are real, but largely qualitative and hard to capture in indicators.	Result indicators such as “solutions taken up or upscaled” capture part of the picture.
02 **Administrative complexity**	Several legal and institutional systems must be aligned, and some obstacles lie in national systems beyond the reach of projects.	ISO1 gives time and space for structured dialogue and gradual alignment.
03 **Sustainability**	When project funding ends, the networks, tools and coordination structures it created can lose staff, money and momentum.	Successive project phases, as with Support EUSALP, and approaches that embed continuity, such as the PTICs.
04 **Flexibility vs. strategic focus**	Because ISO1 is broad, programmes can fund very different initiatives; without a clear focus, these may remain scattered and have less impact.	Large strategic initiatives, as in the Atlantic Area, dedicated calls and phased cooperation schemes.
05 **Capacity gaps**	Smaller authorities with limited staff or expertise can struggle to take part in complex cooperation processes.	ISO1-funded training, coaching and institutional dialogue.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Governance is not a one-time intervention but a long-term investment: a continuous process of adaptation, relationship-building and shared learning, which needs sustained support and realistic expectations.

ANNEX

Annex 1: List of abbreviations

ISO1	Interreg Specific Objective 1 “A better cooperation governance”
ALCOTRA	Alpes Latines Coopération Transfrontalière (Interreg France–Italy programme)
DNSH	Do No Significant Harm
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ETU	Ecosystemic Transition Unit
EU	European Union
EUSALP	EU Strategy for the Alpine Region
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NPA	Northern Periphery and Arctic
OCT	Overseas Countries and Territories
POCTEFA	Programa Operativo de Cooperación Territorial España–Francia–Andorra (Interreg Spain–France–Andorra programme)
PTIC	Integrated Territorial Cooperation Plans (Plans de coopération territoriale intégrée)
SASPAC	State Agency for Strategic Programming and Aid Coordination (Albania)
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
TSS	Technical Support Structure
WAV	Web Accessibility Viewer

ANNEX

Annex 2: Programmes and projects mentioned

The programmes and projects referenced throughout this publication are listed below.

PROGRAMME	PROGRAMME WEBSITE	PROJECT OR APPROACH FEATURED
Interreg ALCOTRA (France–Italy)	interreg-alcotra.eu	**ALCOTRAITÉ**
Interreg Alpine Space	alpine-space.eu	**Support EUSALP**
Interreg Atlantic Area	atlanticarea.eu	**GRAAL**
Interreg Baltic Sea Region	interreg-baltic.eu	**RegenT**
Interreg Bavaria–Czech Republic	by-cz.eu	**Small Project Fund "Begegnung"**
Interreg Central Europe	interreg-central.eu	**CE-Spaces4All**
Interreg Euro-MED	interreg-euro-med.eu	**Green Living Areas Thematic Community** **Mission-based governance projects**
Interreg Flanders–The Netherlands	interregvlaned.eu	**Schakelpunt Grensbelemmeringen**
Interreg France–Switzerland	interreg-francesuisse.eu	**Integrated Territorial Cooperation Plans (PTICs)**
Interreg Hungary–Slovakia	skhu.eu	**#ACCESS**
Interreg Italy–Slovenia	ita-slo.eu	**AidMIRE**
Interreg North Sea	interregnorthsea.eu	**North Sea Hydrogen Valley Ports**
Interreg NPA (Northern Periphery and Arctic)	interreg-npa.eu	**Arctic STEM Communities**
Interreg Romania–Hungary	interreg-rohu.eu	**DREAM** **Programme approach (strategic preparation)**
Interreg Romania–Serbia	romania-serbia.net	**SAFE**
IPA South Adriatic	southadriatic.eu	**GOVERNANCE**
Interreg Spain–France–Andorra (POCTEFA)	poctefa.eu	**"Objetivo INTERREG" governance call**

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