INTERREG EUROPE POST-2027 SURVEY

Report

May 2024

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Summary

To prepare the post-2027 period, the Commission has requested all European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes to carry out a consultation process in the course of 2024.

As part of this initiative, the Interreg Europe programme launched an online survey on 20 March 2024 inviting all interested stakeholders to contribute with their views on the programme. The survey was opened for five weeks and closed on 30 April 2024.

The survey integrated the 10 questions as defined in the Commission's toolkit (the formulation was just adapted to Interreg Europe when needed). It also included an additional question focusing more generally on recommendations for the future of ETC.

A total of 455 valid replies were received. At a time where many Interreg programmes launched similar surveys, this level of response can be considered as good. Another point of satisfaction is the geographical scope of the answers. Indeed, all Partner States are represented in the respondents plus 3 third countries. Moreover, the core target group of the programme is well represented with 52% of replies coming from public authorities (national, regional and local levels).

The responses provided under the different questions are rich and diverse. The analysis of this input can however be challenging for several reasons. First, the same kind of input was often provided under different questions. Second, some respondents were not familiar with Interreg Europe, and the relevance of their contribution was not always clear. Finally, contradictory suggestions were sometimes provided in different parts of the survey.

The main outcomes of the survey can be summarised as follows:

For most respondents (41%), the main added value of interregional cooperation lies in 'solving challenges in their region'. This confirms the relevance of the overall programme's objective (i.e., to improve regional development policies and as a result solving territorial challenges) and its strong result-oriented approach.

Concerning the topics with the biggest potential for interregional cooperation, the specific objectives covered under Greener and Smarter Europe are the most popular. This outcome reflects well the demand of the regions as experienced under the 2014-2020 period. Moreover, respondents have considered that all main topics of regional development have potential for interregional cooperation also supporting the choice of the current programme to go for one single priority on capacity building.

The results of the 3rd question are quite positive for the current programme since respondents considered that most of the core features of Interreg Europe work well (e.g., networking, exchange of experience and good practices; focus on policy improvements, project partnership composition, topics for cooperation, Platform services).

Questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 are interrelated focusing on areas of improvements and ideas for the future programme. Even if various ideas were expressed, the following areas of possible changes (mostly related to projects) can be identified:

- Administrative burden
Several respondents called for further simplification of the different procedures. For instance, the use of SCOs could be further developed in post 27. The application preparation is also often mentioned as a challenging step. Nevertheless some respondents with experience in projects also recognised that Interreg Europe is already quite advanced with simplification procedures compared to other programmes.

- Financial support

The need to provide additional financial support through higher co-financing rate or advance payment was also regularly mentioned.

- Nature of the activities

Many respondents called for more flexibility regarding pilot actions and small investments within projects.

- Partnership requirements and policy instruments

Some respondents considered the current partnership requirements as challenging. They would like more flexibility in the geographical coverage, in the size of partnerships or in the involvement of the policymakers.

For the policy instruments, a few respondents asked for more flexibility in relation to the focus on Investment for jobs and growth goal programmes. Additionally, some other found the selection of only one existing instrument per region as too restrictive.

- Participation of small public authorities

Some of the programme's constraints (e.g., financial support, administrative burden) make it difficult for small organisations to get involved in projects. In the future, the programme could think about measures to simplify their involvement.

- Communication & partner search

The volume of information available from the programme is sometimes considered as overwhelming. A more straightforward way to organise the information or summarise what is essential would be helpful. Moreover, several respondents highlighted the difficulty of finding the right partners.

- Language and cultural differences

The language and cultural differences were regularly mentioned as an obstacle for good cooperation. More translation services could for instance help to involve newcomers in the programme.

- Differences in national rules and legislations

Although this is an external constraint on which Interreg Europe cannot help, many respondents identified the differences in national rules and legislations as a significant barrier to effective cooperation.

The question 10 on the 'dream project' was approached by a majority of respondents from a thematic point of view. But many respondents also highlighted the importance of 'A clear European dimension' with a broad geographical coverage.

In relation to broader suggestions on ETC, several respondents highlighted the importance of harmonising the rules among the different Interreg programmes. A few respondents also suggested that Interreg Europe should be a source of inspiration to other programmes.
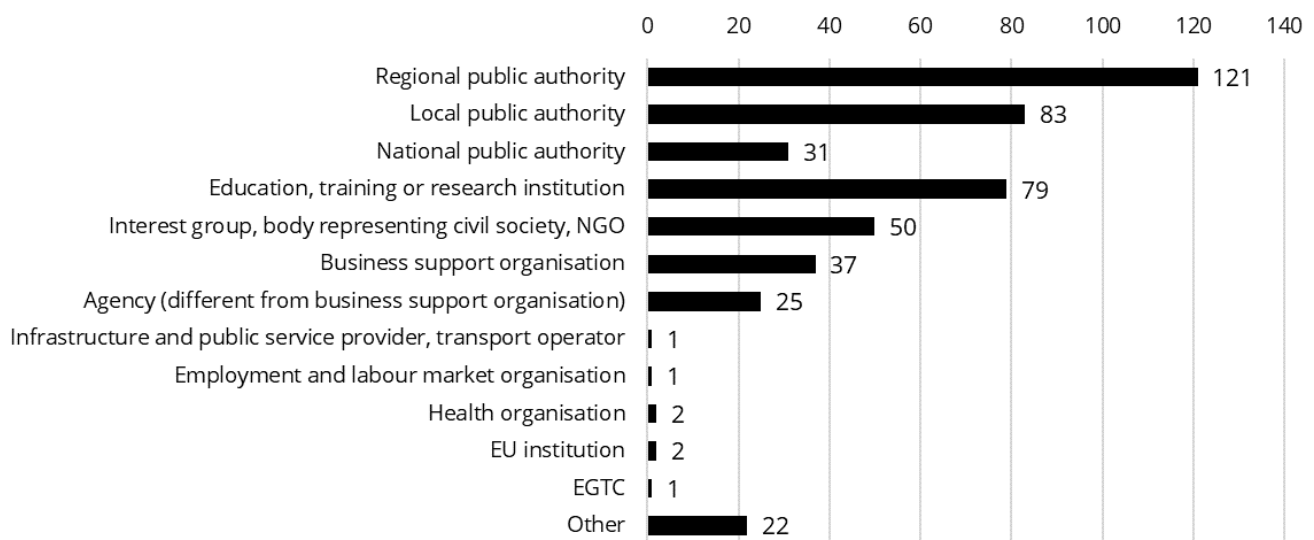
About respondents

455 valid responses were submitted to the survey. In addition to the open questions, the survey also included a few questions about the respondents: type of organisation represented, country, experience in project and Policy Learning Platform. Details about the respondents are provided below.

Types of organisations

The key programme's target group – public authorities (national, regional or local level) represents more than half of the respondents (52%). The second largest group comes from 'education, training or research institutions' with 17%. This is followed by the 'interest groups and bodies representing civil society or NGOs', which make up 11% of the responses. Both business support organisations and agencies other than for business support cumulates to 14% of the responses. Respondents selecting 'Other' were mainly from consultancies or for-profit companies.

Type of organisation

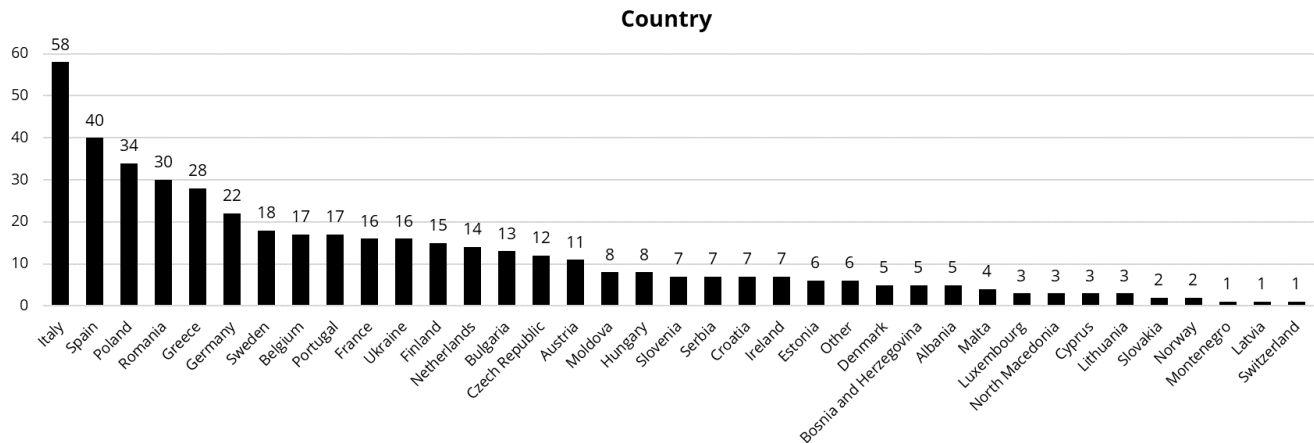| Type of organisation	Count
Regional public authority	121
Local public authority	83
National public authority	31
Education, training or research institution	79
Interest group, body representing civil society, NGO	50
Business support organisation	37
Agency (different from business support organisation)	25
Infrastructure and public service provider, transport operator	1
Employment and labour market organisation	1
Health organisation	2
EU institution	2
EGTC	1
Other	22

The distribution of the respondents by type of organisation also reflects well the composition of partnerships in the projects approved under the 2014-2020 programming period.

Countries

The 455 responses come from 39 countries. The results of the survey in terms of geographical coverage are therefore also positive since all 36 Partner States of the programme are represented. The respondents who selected 'Other' are from Iceland, Turkey, and the UK.

Country

Italy 58, Spain 40, Poland 34, Romania 30, Greece 28, Germany 22, Sweden 18, Belgium 17, Portugal 17, France 16, Ukraine 16, Finland 15, Netherlands 14, Bulgaria 13, Czech Republic 12, Austria 11, Moldova 8, Hungary 8, Slovenia 7, Serbia 7, Croatia 7, Ireland 7, Estonia 6, Other 6, Denmark 5, Bosnia and Herzegovina 5, Albania 5, Malta 4, Luxembourg 3, North Macedonia 3, Cyprus 3, Lithuania 3, Slovakia 2, Norway 2, Montenegro 1, Latvia 1, Switzerland 1
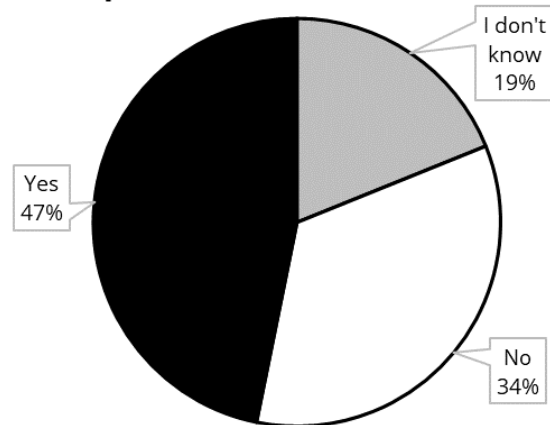
Experience in programme actions

The survey asked respondents whether they had experience working in the Interreg Europe projects and whether they took part in the Policy Learning Platform activities.

Experience in a project

No 36%
Yes 64%
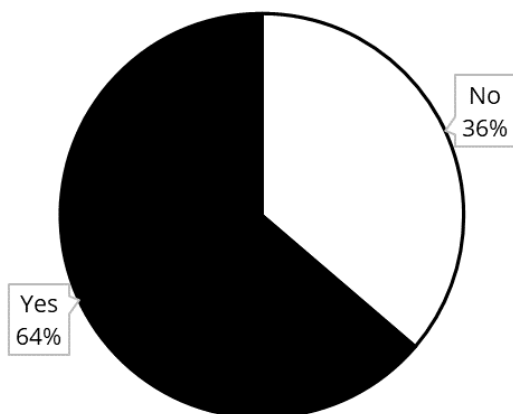
Experience with the Platform

I don't know 19%
Yes 47%
No 34%

Out of the 455 respondents, 64% had experience in a project and 47% of respondents took part in the Policy Learning Platform activities. Almost one quarter (107) of the respondents had neither experience in a project nor participated in the Platform activities. Here also the results are positive since the survey attracted contributions beyond the programme's beneficiaries.

Challenges

Several challenges were identified when analyzing the results of the survey.

First, the respondents approached in the same way most of the questions in the questionnaire. Indeed, it appeared that questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 are closely interrelated. What does not work well in the current programme (question 4) is often related to the obstacles identified for good cooperation (question 5). These obstacles are themselves linked to the things you cannot do in the current programme (question 6), to the novelties you would like to see in the future (question 7) and to the need to support other kinds of activities (question 8). The measures to facilitate cooperation (question 9) are also usually related to the obstacles you have identified. As a result, the outcomes of the survey are not as rich as they could have been with many repetitions in the different parts of the questionnaire. On the other hand, these repetitions can facilitate the identification of the main trends in the contributions of the respondents.

Second, like with any broad consultation, some participants were obviously not familiar with the Interreg Europe programme. Even if it remains positive that the survey reached out beyond the usual Interreg Europe community, it also led sometimes to contributions with little relevance. Several examples can be provided. Under question 5 (obstacles), comment 61 states that "*all policy instruments should have the same level of importance, indeed sometimes it is more possible to improve effectively a local PI than a regional one.*" This comment reflects a lack of knowledge of the programme where all policy instruments have the same importance regardless of the different territorial levels. Under question 6 (things you cannot do), comment 39 states that *'the universities aren't meant to be a lead at the moment',* although universities can be lead partners of projects in the current programme. Several respondents also refer to cross border or transnational instead of interregional cooperation (*e.g., comment 131 under question 1 on added value: "Interreg NWE has given CHA the opportunity to secure funding to pilot innovative approaches to make our work of developing and managing sustainable energy efficient and affordable more effective").*

Third, it occurs that contradictory suggestions were provided in different parts of the survey. For instance, under question 1 (added-value), comment 144 states that *'The involvement of regional policymakers in the real sense, is unique. It should be reinforced and regional authorities should commit to participate'* while, under question 4 on what does not work well, comment 134 mentions the "*need to involve policymakers in the project*". Similarly, under question 2 (what works well), comment 5 mentions 'the clear focus on policy instrument improvement' while, under question 4 (what do not work well), comment 29 states that "*Learning from others do not need formalities such as policy instruments and expected policy improvements which are not crucial for the exchange of experience.*" Even if these opposite contributions are somehow unavoidable in such consultation, they make the analysis of the results more complicated.

The above challenges show the importance of remaining very careful when exploiting the contributions from the survey.

Questions

The survey included 11 questions.

Question 1: Main added value of interregional cooperation[1]

Question 1 included the following five categories with the possibility to select only one choice:

- Solving challenge(s) in my region (local, regional, national context)
- Developing international/ pan-European network(s)
- Increasing professional capacity
- Accessing funding
- Creating European identity
- Other

The 'Other' category allows respondents to add another added value than those included in the list. In total, 239 people answered the question.

Added value of interregional cooperation

Category	Value
Solving challenge(s) in my region (local, regional, national context)	99
Developing international/ pan-European network(s)	61
Increasing professional capacity	39
Accessing funding	17
Creating European identity	13
Other	10
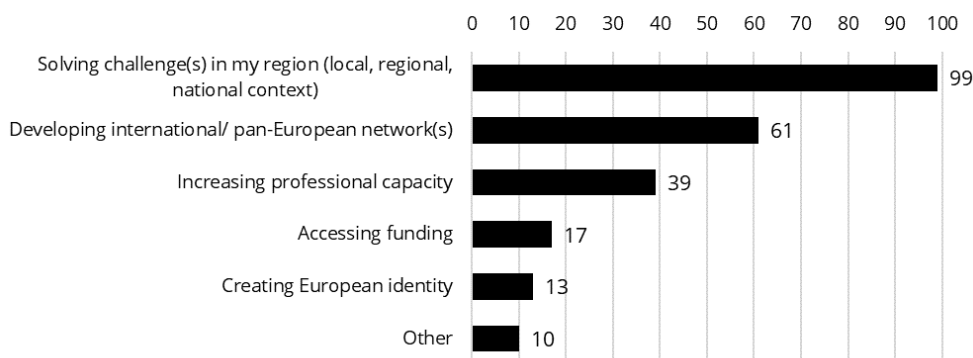
For the majority of the respondents (41%), the main added value of interregional cooperation is related to solving challenges in their territory at local, regional or national levels. The fact that most respondents selected an added value which goes much beyond networking and capacity building is interesting. It confirms the relevance of the overall programme's objective (i.e., to improve regional development policies and as a result solve territorial challenges) and its strong result-oriented approach.

The following quotes summarised well the Interreg Europe spirit:

"The challenges in my region are similar to other European regions not only because we face similar threats and impacts in regard to resource efficiency, climate change etc. but also because we have to implement the same policies, strategies and directives. Thus, the exchange of lessons learnt and good practices within the interregional cooperation are fundamental in order to accelerate our capacities to make changes and transformation happen."

"Interreg programs provide opportunities for Europe's regions to collectively address common challenges."

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[1] *Corresponding to question 7 in the survey*

"Learning about Best Practices is the best way to broaden your horizon and get inspiration to adapt policy instruments."

"The Interreg Europe program helps my region to solve problems in solidarity with other countries. Seeing other experiences in the same thematic area is very enriching. Also, sharing solutions to the same problem helps to improve the ways of solving them."

"There is no problem or solution alone in Europe. If we stand for a Europe of regions, we have to act together. Experience exchange between regions is more than key."

"Interreg Europe community enabled our Region to build on the experience of other regions in finding solutions to our challenges and attain major policy improvements."

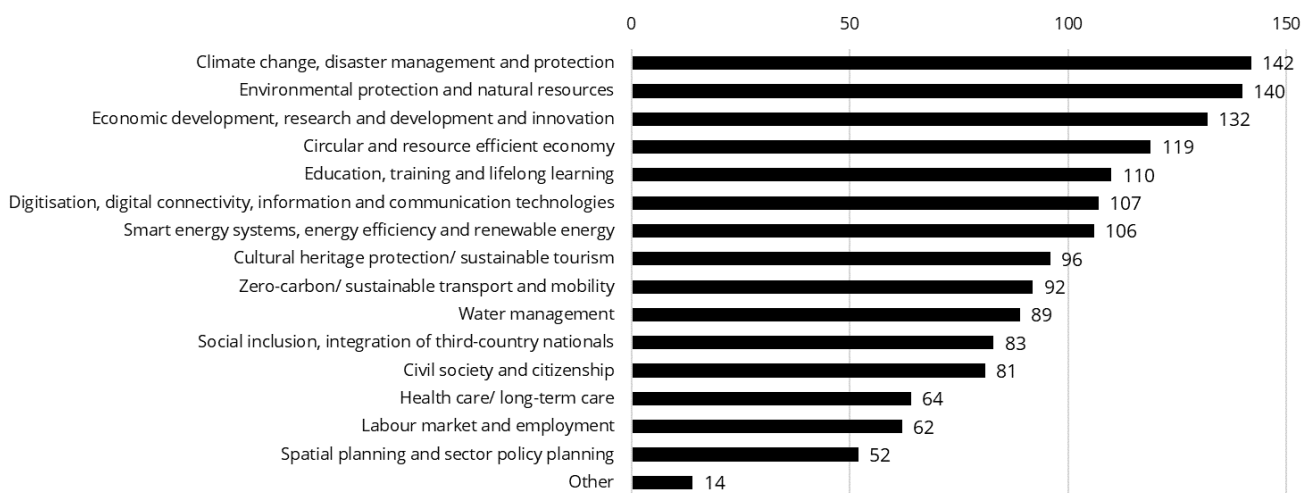*"Interreg Europe community enabled our Region to build on the experience of other regions in finding solutions to our challenges and attain major policy improvements."*

For one quarter of the respondents, the main added value of interregional cooperation is in 'developing international or pan-European networks'. 16% of respondents selected the 'increase of professional capacity' as the main added value of interregional cooperation. 'Access to funding' or 'creating European identity' was the main added value for respectively 7% and 5% of the respondents. Some of those who selected 'Other' wanted to select more than one of the five proposed categories. Others indicated a specific thematic issue such as health and safety, water-related issues, or active ageing and human rights. Some highlighted the characteristics of Interreg Europe: "the only programme focusing on improving policy" or "exchange of good practices and boosting regional policy innovation".

Question 2: Topics for interregional cooperation[2]

The second question of the survey looked at the topics with the highest potential for interregional cooperation. Respondents had the choice between 15 thematic areas and could select more than one topic. They also had the option 'Other' in case they wanted to propose other topics. In total, 239 people contributed to this question.

Topics for interregional cooperation

Topic	Value
Climate change, disaster management and protection	142
Environmental protection and natural resources	140
Economic development, research and development and innovation	132
Circular and resource efficient economy	119
Education, training and lifelong learning	110
Digitisation, digital connectivity, information and communication technologies	107
Smart energy systems, energy efficiency and renewable energy	106
Cultural heritage protection/ sustainable tourism	96
Zero-carbon/ sustainable transport and mobility	92
Water management	89
Social inclusion, integration of third-country nationals	83
Civil society and citizenship	81
Health care/ long-term care	64
Labour market and employment	62
Spatial planning and sector policy planning	52
Other	14

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[2] *Corresponding to question 9 in the survey*

Majority of the respondents (over 50%) selected four topics. The most frequently selected topics are those contributing to **Greener Europe**. The top 3 are climate change, disaster management and protection (56%); environmental protection and natural resources (55%); and circular and resource efficient economy (46%). Topics contributing to **Smarter Europe** also ranked high: economic development, research and development and innovation (52%); digitisation, digital connectivity, information and communication technologies (41%). The most popular topics related to the 'More **Social** Europe' are education, training and lifelong learning selected (46%) and cultural heritage protection and sustainable tourism (37%). This outcome reflects well the demand of the regions as experienced under the 2014-2020 period and as also reflected in the thematic scope of the 150 approved projects.

Another interesting result of this question is that there is no topic on which respondents do not see potential for interregional cooperation. This may be an argument for the current structure of Interreg Europe where only one single priority to capacity building is selected, opening the possibility for regions to exchange an any topic relevant to the Cohesion policy.

Among those whose selected 'Other', eight respondents indicated 'All of the above'. These eight responses were added to the totals per topic. Six respondents indicated 'Governance and/ or legal obstacles'. Some other topics mentioned were mental health, safety, green construction, eco-design, ICT infrastructure, or crisis management.

Question 3: What works well[3]

178 people answered this open question. The features that work well according to a majority of respondents are the following:

- Mutual learning / exchange of experiences and good practice /networking / capacity building (82)
- Focus on policy improvements/ changes/ innovations (17)
- Study/ site visits and exchange of experience meetings (17)
- Project partnership structure (with interregional partners and local stakeholders; presence of policy-relevant organisations mentioned as important) (15)
- Mix of more and less developed regions in partnerships (new countries mentioned) (11)
- Programme management/ structure and/or JS support (14)
- Policy Learning Platform services (19)
- Simplification and reporting (SCOs and online tools mentioned) (6)
- Communication (networking events, website, calls, partner search) (14)

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[3] *Corresponding to question 10 in the survey*

Question 4: What needs improvement[4]

166 respondents contributed to this open question. The features that that could be improved according to a majority of respondents are the following:

- Application (8) – calls for simplification; shortening approval time; more support for newcomers; use AI for proposal writing
- Partnership access (11) – diverse/ mixed points: help newcomers and small public authorities, limit restrictions on NGOs (LP status, co-financing) and policy non-relevant institutions, limit geographical restrictions, allow UK partners
- Policy relevant institutions (10) – mixed comments: some ask for more support to these institutions to take part in projects (instead of universities, for example), better check their relevance to change the policy instrument; others would like to relax the requirement talking about the lack of resources to take part in projects
- Partner search (3) – asking to improve, some information is in local languages
- Co-financing (3) – increase to 100% or provide national co-financing
- Multiple involvement (3) – limit to two organisations per call per region, encourage small less developed regions to take part
- Administration of projects (8) - reduce burden further, reference to admin differences among countries; Interreg Europe mentioned as better than other Interreg
- Project results (11) – diverse/ mixed comments: from asking for clear objectives in terms of policy improvements and budgets for pilots or implementation of lessons learned at a later stage of projects or even after projects' closure; to asking to eliminate the focus on policy improvements and accept projects as a knowledge exchange platform, a thematic network with no policy instruments improved
- Project follow-up (5) – suggestions to help partnerships stay together after projects' close, even provide post-closure benefits if the partnership continues working on delivering the results of the project
- Communication (8) – diverse elements linked to the JS (less information on web, better scheduling of webinars, more awareness raising in the right time) or projects' communication (slow or not frequent enough, restrictive visual identity rules)
- Nothing (7)

Question 5: Obstacles to cooperation[5]

184 respondents contributed to this open question. The following obstacles are mentioned by the majority of respondents:

- Diverse national rules (20)
- Partnership formation/ requirements (19) – SF programmes to cover, APAs to include, size of partnership, access to newcomers
- Cultural differences (17)
- Language (15)
- Diverse levels of development (12)

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[4] Corresponding to question 11 in the survey
[5] Corresponding to question 12 in the survey

- Administrative burden/ bureaucracy (11)
- Financing system/ cofinancing (9)
- Costs and frequency of travelling (8)
- Geographical distance/ coverage (6)
- Lack of staff for project work (5)
- Finding good/ relevant partners (5)

Question 6: What is not possible now but desirable in the future[6]

This question in the survey had two parts. First, respondents were asked whether there are elements in the programme which cannot be done. If yes, the respondents then had the possibility to suggest what they would like to see in the future. 203 respondents answered the first part of the question and 89 contributed to the second part.

Are there things you cannot do now?

Yes 46%

No 54%
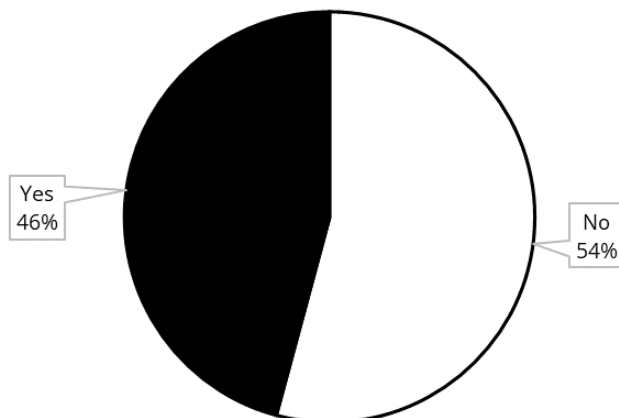
It is remarkable that more than half of the respondents answered 'no' to this question (54%). In other words, a majority of respondents already considered that the current programme allows them to do the things they would like to.

For the 89 people who answered yes and explained their position, the following ideas came up more frequently.

- Pilot activities (15) – with small investments, among more partners, infrastructure investments
- Work with others outside partnership/ Europe (5) – see good practices from neighboring countries, go for partners from outside Europe
- More flexibility in who is eligible (3) (comments from private companies not eligible now)
- Be the lead partner (3) – NGOs, universities
- Project continuation (3) – projects 2.0 version, replication of good projects in other regions, consolidation of project results

Few of the ideas expressed (e.g., work outside the partnership) may be worth reflecting on. However, in most cases, these ideas reflect a lack of knowledge on the programme either because they are already possible (e.g.,

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[6] Corresponding to question 13 in the survey

pilot actions, exchange of experience among projects, universities being lead partner) or because they are not fully relevant to the programme's rationale and objective (e.g., private companies' involvement).

Question 7: Suggested novelties[7]

130 respondents contributed to this open question. These contributions often overlap with those provided under the previous question on what is not possible. However, the following additional ideas can be mentioned:

- Use of AI and digital platforms for collaboration (5) – for project writing, reporting, networking, partner search
- More flexibility on requirements for partnership and/ or focus on policy instruments (6) – size, non-EU/ European, policy relevance
- More SCOs and less administrative burden (6)

Question 8: Activities beyond capacity building[8]

This question was divided into two parts. In the first part, respondents were asked if they believed that there is a need to go beyond the current capacity-building activities in Interreg Europe. If their answer was yes, then in the second part, they were given the opportunity to propose what other activities could be supported in the future. Out of all the respondents, 204 answered the first part of the question, and 76 to the second part.

Go beyond capacity building

Yes 39%

I don't know 40%

No 21%
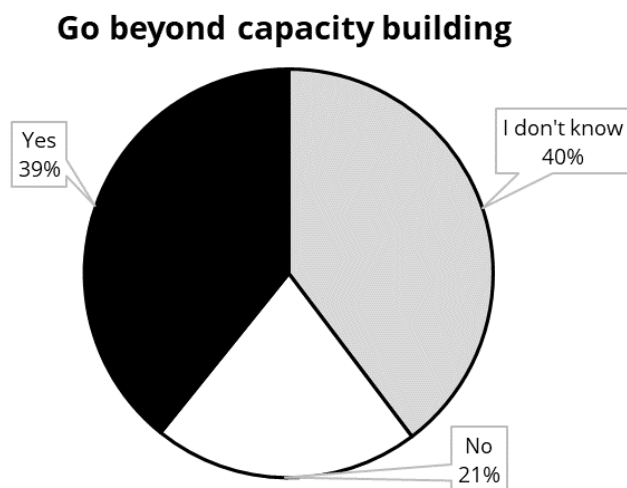
The fact that only 39% of respondents see a need to go beyond capacity building activities is an interesting outcome of the survey.

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[7] *Corresponding to question 14 in the survey*
[8] *Corresponding to question 15 in the survey*

For 76 people who answered 'yes' and explained their position, the following ideas were mentioned frequently:

- Pilots, small investments, infrastructure works
- Communication and advocacy activities
- Exchange of experience among projects, transfer of good practices beyond projects
- Study visits with PLP, small scale calls with PLP outside projects

Question 9: On governance facilitating partners' cooperation[9]

124 respondents contributed to this open question. Among them, 11 indicated that the present governance structure was good without the need for change. Among the comments, the following topics appeared the most frequently:

- Networking/ learning events (20)
- Matchmaking process to form partnerships (7)
- Point of contact role in partner search, in programme promotion (7)
- Online platform/ digital tool(s) to get/ stay in contact (5)
- Harmonisation of rules across countries (4)

Question 10: Dream project[10]

128 respondents contributed to this open question. Majority of respondents (71/ 55%) looked at this question from the thematic point of view and shared ideas for cooperation on climate change, biodiversity, disaster preparedness, SME support, citizens' involvement, digitalization, etc.

The others shared more general views on what constitutes a dream project:

- Mutual learning (12) (focus on results, pilots, some equipment)
- Results for participating regions (9) (some suggesting a third project phase for dissemination to other regions/ programmes/ EU level harmonisation)
- Low/ no administration (5)
- Good partners (5) (some asking for more open opportunities to newcomers)
- Need based (4)

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[9] *Corresponding to question 16 in the survey*
[10] *Corresponding to question 17 in the survey*

Question 11: General Interreg recommendations[11]

This question in the survey had two parts. First, respondents were asked whether they had experience with other Interreg programmes. If yes, the respondents then had the possibility to suggest general recommendations for the future of European Territorial Cooperation. 211 respondents answered the first part of the question and 91 the second part.

Experience with other Interregs
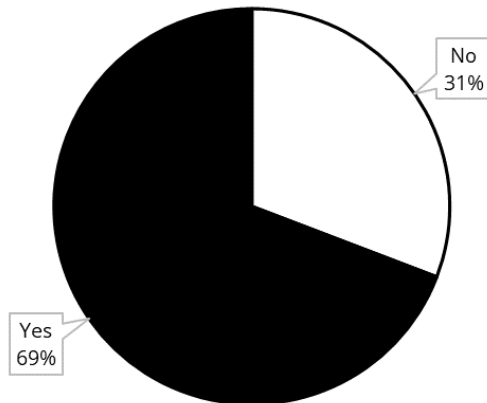
69% of the respondents had experience with other Interreg programmes. Among the 91 comments, some people just indicated the other Interreg programmes they are experienced with. These are:

- Euro Med
- Interreg Baltic
- Interreg Danube
- Interreg Italy-Croatia
- Interreg Central Europe
- Interreg Next MED
- POCTEP
- Atlantic Area

Regarding the general recommendations for Interreg programmes, the following ideas were mentioned more than once:

- Simplify/ harmonise administration and rules for all Interregs (9)
- Application and reporting – use similar/ unique tool across programmes (7) (JEMS not recommended)
- More synergies and cooperation among Interregs (5) (suggestion that Interreg Europe projects could be a precondition/ advantage for other Interreg project funding)
- Avoid overlaps/ redundancies among Interregs (5) (keep the programmes different, keep regional bias)
- Increase Interreg funding (3)
- Increase flexibility (eligibility of regions, policy improvements) (3)
- Focus on strengths and achievements (2)
- Link Interregs with other programmes (2) (Horizon, Life, Erasmus, IVY, etc.)

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[11] [11] *Corresponding to question 18 in the survey*

For Interreg Europe specifically, the following comments could be summarized:

- Not much to change (6) (keep the good work, no significant change needed)
- Keep focus on policy development/ policy innovation/ capacity building (3)
- Inspire the other Interreg programmes (3)

Conclusion

The results of the survey will certainly be useful for the preparation of the post-2027 period. On one hand, they suggest that there is no need for a revolution in case Interreg Europe is renewed in the future. Indeed, a majority of respondents recognised the importance of the core values which are already at the heart of Interreg Europe. Many respondents also highlighted the good functioning of the current programme. On the other hand, the survey still provides many interesting ideas for possible improvements in a future programme. Most of these ideas are related to the features of the projects while others address more generally the programme's assistance and communication.