

Summary report from the session: Interreg IPA ADRION, Interreg Italy-Croatia and EUSAIR stakeholders' consultation: Shaping Cohesion post-2027

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Venue: Šibenik, Croatia

As discussions to shape the future of Cohesion Policy beyond 2027 intensify across Europe, different events and discussions are engaging experts, policymakers, stakeholders, and citizens to collect their views on the future of Cohesion Policy. This phase presents a significant opportunity for regional and local stakeholders to influence the positions of national governments and European institutions well before formalising the legislative process. In the post-2027 consultation process, stakeholder consultations are crucial in providing legitimacy of funding for the future. It is essential for the Interreg community to actively engage all relevant stakeholders and citizens in future discussions and bring forward ideas for bettering cooperation in Europe post-2027.

It is obvious that Europe has changed, and also the future Cohesion Policy has to change accordingly. Interreg and macro-regional strategies are crucial for fostering stronger cooperation and achieving a greater impact on regional development, as recognised in the [Report of the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy](#). The Cohesion Policy needs to be better integrated with other EU policies to ensure that all regions can benefit from broader European initiatives, particularly in terms of green and digital transitions, but also enlargement, integration, and institutional capacity building. This is where MRS can help Interreg results be better linked to regional initiatives and wider macro-regional processes. Linking future Cohesion Policy discussion with the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) contributes to better strategic alignment; contribution to achieving the common goals of the EU policies, MRS, national and regional/sub-regional strategies; stronger impact and change made in the territory; sustainability and complementarity of programme and project results; enhanced capacities, more exchanges, new perspectives and openness to other approaches; continuous multi-level dialogue and more inclusive processes; better use of existing resources and greater value for money.

Recent years have highlighted the complementary roles of both the Interreg and the EUSAIR, showing the benefits of close cooperation. Therefore, the objective of this session was to engage in in-person exchanges with the EUSAIR 9th Annual Forum participants to collect their further inputs to the post-2027 consultations and to explore some initial findings to shape the future direction of Interreg programmes post-2027 and benefit for the Adriatic and Ionian macro-region as whole.

Interreg is a crucial part of the Cohesion Policy and plays a vital role in supporting cooperation across Europe. It addresses territorial needs, bringing people closer to the regions and providing opportunities for joint projects. Interreg projects engage multiple types

of partners, combine expertise across borders and specialisations and come up with solutions that benefit citizens, communities, companies and public authorities. With a bottom-up approach, the programmes nurture new developments to overcome shared challenges.

The EUSAIR being a strategic framework endorsed by the European Council, is instrumental for the post-2027 Cohesion Policy discussion. The EUSAIR contributes to policy-making and coordination of efforts in the region. It pools resources and brings together relevant stakeholders to implement actions on the ground. Furthermore, it serves as a platform for strategic networking, cooperation, and collaboration to address joint challenges, with its Action Plan underlining emerging territorial needs.

Interreg Programmes and the EUSAIR are conducting stakeholder consultations during 2024, inviting stakeholders to have their say! The stakeholder consultation surveys are available here: [Interreg Italy-Croatia programme consultation](#) (open until 30 September 2024) and [Interreg IPA ADRION programme consultation](#) (open until 14 June 2024). The EUSAIR consultation process will be launched before the summer 2024, follow the news on the [EUSAIR website](#).

The stakeholders participating in the discussions were beneficiaries of Interreg projects; members of the Thematic Steering Groups of the EUSAIR; youth council and youth associations representatives.

The stakeholder consultation was organised around the five interconnected and complementary questions:

- What are the greatest opportunities for territorial cooperation within the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region?
- Which issues can be most effectively addressed from a cross border and which from a transnational perspective?
- What aspects of current cooperation are successful and should be maintained or strengthened?
- What are the major obstacles to effective cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region?
- How can the EUSAIR framework be optimally used to enhance coordination and cooperation in the region, ensuring better utilisation of Interreg project outcomes?

This summary report provides a descriptive overview of the key inputs to the predefined questions. The attachment to the report presents detailed and specific responses, but it should not be perceived as a complete report per question.

If more background information on each question is needed, the reader is invited to address the session organisers.

Empowering stakeholders and fostering cooperation

Effective engagement and inclusion of stakeholders are fundamental to the success of programmes within the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region. By fostering a bottom-up approach, programmes enable the active participation of end-users, marginalised stakeholders, and small institutions, ensuring diverse perspectives are considered in decision-making processes. This inclusive strategy expands the

range of beneficiaries and allows for the development of innovative, locally beneficial solutions. It also enables small institutions, regardless of field or governance level, to participate and benefit from EU funds. Cooperation with Western Balkan partners and other stakeholders enhances mutual understanding, promotes exchange, and strengthens the overall impact of the programmes, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued.

Engaging youth for inclusive regional development

Youth participation is crucial for inclusive policy-making, addressing regional challenges, and fostering inter-generational dialogue. Furthermore, engaging youth in consultations and decision-making processes promotes inter-generational dialogue and ensures that the needs and ideas of younger generations are incorporated. Engaging youth in Interreg programmes and EUSAIR brings innovative ideas and solutions to issues like brain drain, digitalisation, and sustainable tourism. However, a more strategic approach to youth engagement and simplification of procedures are needed to involve youth organisations more effectively, including mobilising funds, creating synergies with central programmes, and using initiatives like IVY.

Youth engagement and inclusion are essential for the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region. The involvement of young people in the consultation and decision-making processes ensures that their perspectives and needs are integrated into broader topics addressed by the Interreg programmes and the Strategy. This approach fosters inter-generational dialogue and enriches EU initiatives across various topics and sectors.

Addressing youth challenges and needs from both transnational and cross-border perspectives is essential. Effective youth participation requires simplifying rules for youth organisation involvement, encouraging the exchange of ideas between generations, and raising awareness about issues such as mobility, job opportunities, and social security.

Successful aspects are to be maintained or reinforced to engage youth in disseminating projects, programmes, and cohesion policy. However, significant obstacles remain, such as the lack of strategic investment in youth, insufficient political support, and reduced EU funds for youth-related initiatives.

To enhance coordination and cooperation, particularly within EUSAIR, it is necessary to involve youth in the decision-making process at the MRS level, bringing fresh ideas and futureproofing decisions. Utilising programmes like IVY to engage young volunteers further strengthens youth involvement, ensuring their active participation and contribution to regional development strategies.

Strengthening cooperation and integration with Western Balkan partners

Engaging Western Balkan partners through programmes and the EUSAIR strategy ensures equal and inclusive participation, bringing fresh perspectives and fostering effective cooperation. It also enhances mutual understanding and optimises the impact of good practices. To support EU enlargement, it is crucial to reinforce the involvement of IPA countries by promoting better communication and understanding of macro-regional strategies (MRS), integrating MRS into project implementation, and using MRS as a tool for cohesion policy promotion.

EUSAIR serves as a vital platform for exchanging good practices and mutual learning, especially between EU member states and candidate countries, which is essential for the enlargement process. Events and meetings within this framework provide significant opportunities for capacity building. Additionally, national programme cooperation and harmonisation at the EU level are necessary to ensure coordinated actions among regions. Better synchronisation among member states and harmonised strategies over longer periods will support effective cooperation and integration.

Building capacity through collaboration and knowledge exchange

Programmes and the EUSAIR provide opportunities for capacity building by facilitating the exchange of experiences and the transfer of effective solutions across territories. This collaboration fosters knowledge transfer.

Transnational programmes involve multilevel stakeholders to address complex challenges. They facilitate the transfer of best practices and knowledge to less experienced areas, enhancing overall capacity and fostering mutual understanding.

Capitalisation and inter-programme communication are crucial for capacity building. By sharing experiences, facilitating replication, and ensuring the sustainability of results. This exchange supports embedding territorial challenges and improving programme effectiveness, optimising resources and multiplying the impact of good practices. EUSAIR plays a role in these efforts. It serves as a crucial platform for exchanging good practices and mutual learning, particularly between EU member states and non-EU member states. It supports the EU enlargement process by offering significant capacity-building opportunities through events and meetings, promoting cooperation and mutual understanding among participating regions.

Emphasising mutual learning, capacity building, and exchanging good practices is essential for successful integration and regional development.

Enhancing project success: effective implementation formats and collaborative strategies

Programmes offer opportunities for developing local strategies and pilot tests through a bottom-up approach, involving marginalised stakeholders and expanding the range of beneficiaries. This approach allows for collecting fresh ideas that directly benefit local territories. Additionally, programmes help citizens see the real-life implications of EU policies, reducing the gap between policy statements and their implementation.

Interreg programmes facilitate cooperation among citizens and stakeholders through small-scale, people-focused projects. Successful aspects include creating thematic communities within programmes to influence policymakers, sharing experiences to facilitate replication, and sustaining results through capitalisation.

Cross-border programmes guarantee concrete territorial impacts and shared solutions for local areas with common issues and development levels. Transnational programmes

involving multilevel stakeholders and decision-makers address broader challenges across countries by transferring best practices and enhancing capacity building. An integrated approach between cross-border and transnational programmes is essential to maximise regional impact and effectively support EUSAIR flagships.

Major obstacles include the difficulty of finding relevant project partners and ensuring result-sharing, which can lead to project isolation. Project duplication and a lack of small-scale projects are significant concerns. Different national procedures and levels of complexity hinder cooperation. Potential solutions include more investment in platforms for partner finding and harmonising actions among regions.

The EUSAIR can enhance coordination and cooperation by testing and implementing effective cooperation formats between Interreg and MRS, supported by systematic approaches and regulations. There is a need and not fully explored potential to better link Interreg projects with projects funded by other programmes. However, there is still a question of who needs to take the lead on it – Interreg programmes or the EUSAIR.

The EUSAIR needs to define its strategy for working with Interreg and other funds projects. More cooperation between programmes and EUSAIR could contribute to preparation of better-quality projects. Successful examples exist where MRS provided a political framework for cross-border projects, encouraging cooperation between countries and bringing concrete results to regions and citizens.

To demonstrate the added value of Interreg and the EUSAIR, both should seize the opportunity and jointly work on the most effective cooperation formats that would benefit the macro-region.

Strengthening communication and coordination for more regional impact

Interreg's openness to ideas, cultures, and beneficiaries at both programme and project levels fosters inclusive participation and is seen as the main strength. However, the lack of result sharing and availability of developed solutions hampers overall project impact.

Implementing an integrated approach between cross-border and transnational programmes is essential to maximise regional impact and effectively support the implementation of EUSAIR flagships. This approach will foster collaboration and resource sharing across various initiatives.

Overcoming significant communication barriers, including insufficient information flow at all levels within Member States and between MRS and programmes, is vital. Improved communication will facilitate the sharing of project results and deliverables, enhancing overall programme effectiveness and ensuring that isolated projects can contribute to broader regional goals. Addressing the lack of communication between MRS and programmes, as well as among programmes, is crucial for improving coordination and cooperation. Effective communication will bridge gaps, ensuring that stakeholders are well-informed and aligned in their efforts.

Concrete results of projects need to be demonstrated and communicated effectively to improve the visibility of the Strategy and increase awareness about EUSAIR's role. This involves encouraging the building of stakeholder networks and implementing a systematic approach to better cooperation and communication formats. Improved communication is essential to engage stakeholders, give them a sense of ownership of the Strategy, and foster robust cooperation and mutual understanding among participating regions. There is a recognised need to improve communication efforts to sensitise and address youth challenges and needs, such as mobility, job opportunities, and social security.

The EUSAIR is invited to invest more efforts in clarifying the macro-regional framework, purpose, and opportunities, including integrating the Strategy into project implementation and seizing opportunities to exploit the EUSAIR as a framework for promoting cohesion policy.

Annex to the report: Summary of brief bullet points collected during the session.

1. Opportunities for cooperation: What are the greatest opportunities for territorial cooperation within the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region?

The main opportunities for territorial cooperation include:

- Engagement of end-users: programmes enable small institutions to participate and benefit from EU funds, gather opinions and propose bottom-up solutions.
- Capacity building and experience exchange facilitates the transfer of effective solutions and exchange of experiences on common issues.
- Embedding territorial challenges: integrating territorial challenges into programme actions through joint efforts of partner states.
- Bottom-up approach: it involves marginalised stakeholders, developing local strategies and pilot tests and collecting fresh ideas for local benefit.
- Cultural exchange: promotes cooperation and mutual understanding among participating regions.
- Real-life EU policy exposure: territorial cooperation demonstrates the practical impact of EU policies in everyday life.
- Cooperation with Western Balkan partners ensures inclusive participation, introduces fresh perspectives, and fosters equal cooperation.
- Youth participation: engaging young people in consultations, fostering inter-generational dialogue.
- Capitalisation: it optimises resources and multiplies the impact of good practices.

2. Cross-border and transnational cooperation: Which issues can be most effectively addressed from a cross border and which from a transnational perspective?

Key issues that need to be addressed from a transnational and cross-border perspective are:

- Environmental protection.
- Coastal and marine environment protection and pollution reduction.
- Brain drain.
- Cultural heritage and MRS destination management.
- Digitalisation, artificial intelligence (AI).
- Sustainable tourism.
- Business management.
- Connectivity.
- Youth challenges and needs.

Beyond the main challenges/sectors of intervention highlighted above, it emerged that stakeholders see the difference in where cross-border and transnational approaches are more efficient:

- Cross-border programmes focus on concrete territorial impacts and local solutions;
- Transnational programmes address broader challenges, requiring multilevel stakeholder involvement and best practice transfer.



An integrated approach between cross-border and transnational programmes is needed to maximise the impact in the area and properly support the implementation of EUSAIR flagship.

The main issues /novelties that the stakeholders would like to see in the future are:

- Mobilization of funds and synergies with direct management programmes, like Horizon+, Creative Europe, etc. Programmes should pave the way in this regard.
- Youth consultation and participation in the decision-making process; simplification of rules and engagement.
- Exchange of ideas between young and elderly on social/health issues.
- Awareness of youth challenges and needs, such as mobility, job opportunities, social security.

3. What works well: What aspects of current cooperation are successful and should be maintained or strengthened?

Successful aspects of maintaining:

- Openness of Interreg: inclusive to ideas, people, cultures, and beneficiaries.
- Facilitation of cooperation and relations among citizens and stakeholders.
- Diversity of beneficiaries involved.
- Management practices such as joint electronic monitoring system and simplified cost options.
- Small-scale project funding.

Aspects of maintaining and reinforcing:

- Working on green issues and pilot actions
- IPA countries' involvement in supporting EU enlargement.
- EUSAIR communication: better understanding of the Strategy and its engagement in projects' implementation.
- Capitalisation: sharing experiences and sustaining results; supporting replicating of project results.
- Inter-programme communication and enhancing cooperation.
- Youth engagement in disseminating projects, programmes, and cohesion policy practices.
- Creation of thematic communities for lobbying towards policy makers.
- Support for goal-oriented approach.

4. Obstacles to Cooperation (challenges and barriers): What are the major obstacles to effective cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region?

Major obstacles include:

- Finding relevant partners: need for investment in partner-finding platforms.
- Competition among Member States on certain topics: in some spaces, persistent competitive attitudes.
- Different national procedures: complexity and lack of harmonisation.
- Project isolation: lack of result-sharing among projects.
- Duplication of projects lack of small-scale dimension projects is a concern in the Mediterranean area.



- Political and policy-level differences: inconsistent political agendas and weak governance.
- Bureaucracy: excessive administrative barriers.
- Funding and reimbursement delays: financial hurdles.
- Lack of strategic investment in youth: insufficient political support for it.
- Communication barriers: insufficient information flow and poor communication between the EUSAIR and Interreg.

5. Enhancing Coordination and Cooperation with EUSAIR: How can the EUSAIR framework be optimally used to enhance coordination and cooperation in the region, ensuring better utilisation of Interreg project outcomes?

To enhance coordination and cooperation, it is essential to acknowledge and further enhance:

- Role of EUSAIR as strategic framework: coordinate efforts, facilitate mutual understanding and integration, promote dialogue, and encourage youth engagement. EUSAIR as a platform for exchange of good practices and mutual learning, capacity building, especially between EU member states and candidate countries, contribution to the EU enlargement process. The EUSAIR events and meetings as an opportunity.
- Communication: develop and practice a systematic approach to building closer cooperation between Interreg and the EUSAIR, supporting, enabling, and encouraging cooperation formats. Demonstrate project results and improve strategy visibility.
- EUSAIR's strategy for working with projects: EUSAIR needs to design and implement its strategy for working with Interreg and other projects.
- Benefit for both: if programmes and EUSAIR cooperated more, better-quality projects could be prepared.
- Better connection between programmes and EUSAIR: potentials for designing and testing effective cooperation formats.
- Systematic approach to cooperation: support, enable and encourage cooperation formats implementation through regulations, programmes, and managing systems.
- Quality of projects: improve through more cooperation between programmes and EUSAIR and linking with projects from other funds within the EUSAIR.
- Engage relevant stakeholders and civil society: better involvement, awareness-raising and encouragement for stakeholder networks and ownership of the Strategy.