

Consultation of stakeholders and citizens

on

INTERREG – Post-2027

in the context of the programme

Interreg Austria – Czechia



Research & Innovation



Climate & Environment



Education, Culture & Tourism



Cross-border Governance

Consultation of stakeholders and citizens Interreg – Post-2027

Interreg Austria-Czechia

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1. Introduction

In general, the programme actors of the Interreg Austria-Czechia 2021-2027 would like to express their thanks to the European Commission (DG REGIO) for offering the opportunity to programme actors to directly contribute to the preparation of the programming period 2028-2034. Particularly at this moment in time, it is crucial to jointly reflect on basic principles for future cooperation programmes, by linking experiences of practitioners from the ground with reflections of EC experts. In this sense, the programme actors gladly seized the Commission's call to contribute to the future evolvement of Interreg to by grasping perspectives of stakeholders and the wider public on the cooperation in the programme area. The programme actors are confident that insights of people experiencing cooperation directly in the programme area, hence in situ, will enrich the Commission's preparatory work for evolving Interreg in a needs-oriented and targeted manner.

For securing the collection and generation of results that can be compared across programmes, the methodological approach of the survey was directly derived from the EC's *Toolkit – Guide for consultations to shape the future Interreg (INTERREG Post-2027)*. The surveys were carried out in summer and autumn 2024, for allowing the timely transmission of the **given** report to the EC until 31 December 2024.

The surveys were prepared and carried out by the Joint Secretariat, in close cooperation with the Managing Authority and with support of the programme partners.

In the given report, the general methodological approach of the surveys will be outlined in a first step. Then, the collected answers will be illustrated in detail. Finally, the given report will be concluded with recommendations for post 2027, thus a summary on the main outcomes, underpinned with some general reflections.

2. Consultation of stakeholders

2.1 Main stakeholders consulted

Stakeholders were contacted digitally (via email, newsletter, website, social media, etc.) and asked to complete an online questionnaire, which was prepared according to the toolkit with regard available from 31 July 2024 via EUSurvey. In addition to programme partners, experienced people with project experience were also made aware of the survey, which was carried out in a completely anonymous matter. We know that the stakeholders had former project experience in average of 4,4 Interreg AT-CZ Projects (ranging from 0-12 projects). Regarding the fields of expertise of the stakeholders, it was possible to achieve a broad coverage of many different subject areas. The stakeholders had project experience primarily in these areas: Governance, tourism, culture, education, climate protection, sustainability, science & research and nature conservation.

2.2 Methods of consultation

The stakeholders were reached exclusively via the online survey via EUSurvey, which was strongly orientated towards the DG Regio template. A total of 17 fully completed questionnaires were submitted to the online stakeholder survey (including 9 contributions from the Czech Republic and 8 contributions from Austria). Most of the questions were open questions and free choice of words. These were published on 31.7.2024 via 'EUSurvey' and contributions were made until 31.10.2024.

2.3 Summary of the input on the key questions

Key questions to stakeholders:

1. Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

15 participants considered living in a border region to be an **advantage**, one person considered this to be a disadvantage, and one person did not live in a border region at all. The main reason for this perception was above all the aspect of cultural enrichment through proximity to neighbours.

2. Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area?

The potential was categorised into subject areas. The greatest potential in our programme area was recognized in **climate and nature conservation** (8 mentions), **culture and tourism** (7 mentions), **infrastructure/transport** (6 mentions) and **education** (4 mentions). The subject areas of **governance** (3 mentions), **healthcare** (3 mentions), **research** (2 mentions), **demographics** (2 mentions) and **people-to-people** measures (2 mentions) were in the midfield. Other individual responses worth mentioning were **emergency services**, the **labour market** (nostrification), **language skills** and **regional marketing**.

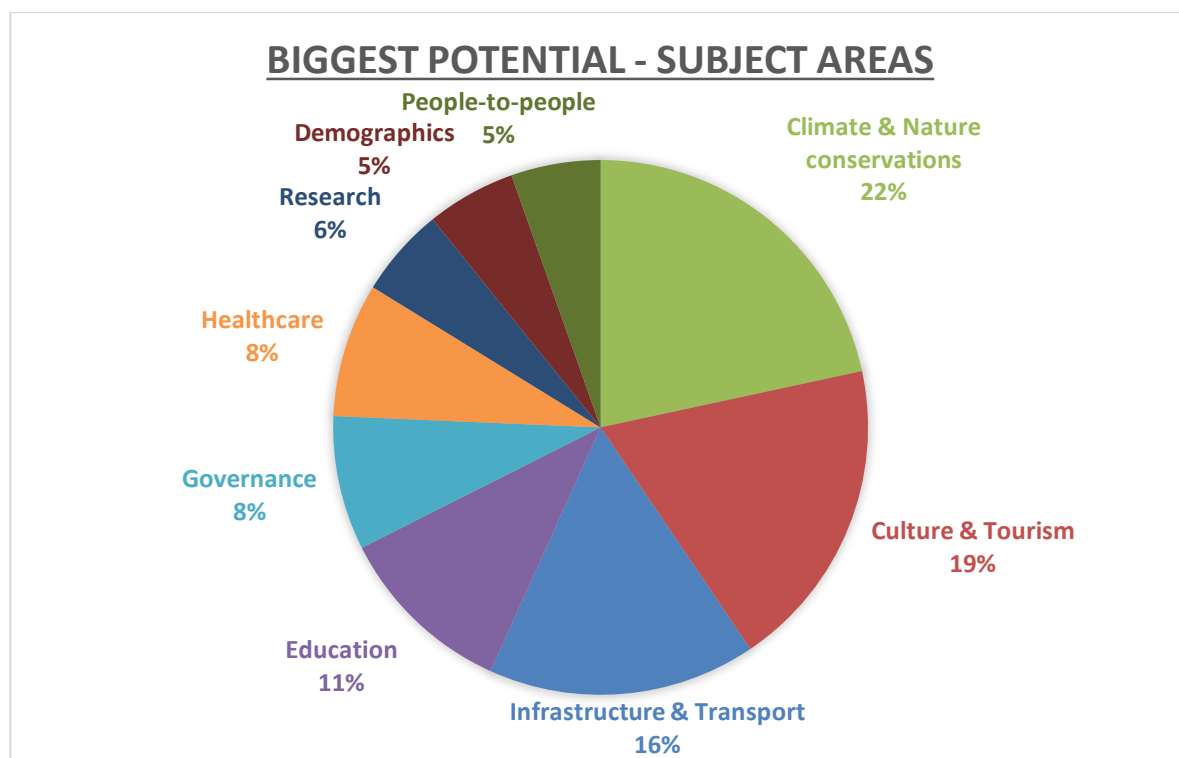


Figure 1: Distribution of responses (in per cent) regarding subject areas in which the biggest potential is recognised.

3. What currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced?

This question was slightly adapted and was asked in this programme area as follows: In which areas do you perceive well-functioning cooperation between Austria and the Czech Republic? The participants' perception of this question is naturally influenced by their field of expertise, which is reflected in the answers. The following topics emerged in particular: **Ecology, culture, tourism, health, water management, education, research and governance.**

4. What currently does not work well in this cooperation and should be improved?

This question was slightly adapted and was asked in this programme area as follows: In your opinion, in which areas should cooperation between Austria and the Czech Republic be improved? The participants in the stakeholder survey saw potential for improvement primarily in the areas of **climate & nature conservation** and **infrastructure**. The second most frequently mentioned areas were **education, culture, healthcare** and the **labour market**. Other areas such as cooperation between **NGOs, the energy industry, water management, demographic megatrends, civil protection** and cooperation between **emergency services** were also mentioned:



Figure 2: Tag cloud based on the answers regarding potential areas of improvement.

5. What are the major obstacles for a good cooperation in your area?

The **language barrier** was mentioned most frequently as the biggest obstacle to more efficient cooperation.

"Language is a major obstacle, but it is very important for mutual understanding and appreciation. I speak Czech and notice how positively Czech colleagues react to it."

Czech participants mentioned several times that **finding a project partner** on the Austrian side is sometimes very difficult due to a lack of interest.

"Austrian partners often take a back seat in the preparation of a project due to the high administrative effort involved".

Furthermore, the **high administrative effort**, which also involves a great deal of human resources, was also mentioned.

"High administrative burden, which is why Austrian partners refused to submit further projects to Interreg - we tried to form three partnerships with the aim of submitting about 5 projects in the last call and all Austrian partners withdrew from this intention, among other things because the financial resources are of no interest to them as not even the salary costs would have been covered".

In addition, the word **bureaucracy** was mentioned several times, especially regarding reporting.

"Bureaucracy and unpredictable control centres"; "Unnecessary bureaucracy and evidence for e.g. universities !!! e.g. from second level control"

Financing, especially pre-financing and co-financing, as well as the different national/legal systems, e.g. for tendering, have also been identified as further obstacles.

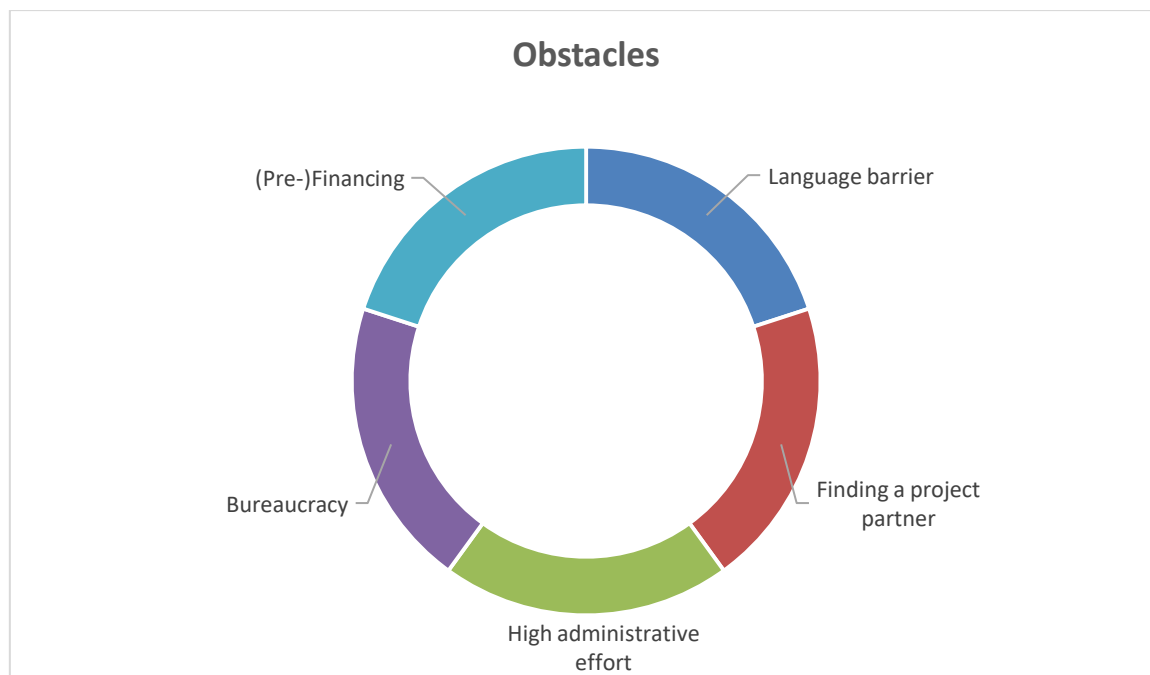


Figure 3: Visual representation of the five most frequently mentioned obstacles for cooperation.

6. Are there things you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? Why?

The majority of participants answered this question with no or don't know. Other responses included the wish that **catering at partner meetings** should once again be eligible for funding so that meetings can once again take place in person and not online, as personal contact is irreplaceable. The possibility of more **constructional measures** was also mentioned, but at the same time understanding was also expressed due to the high costs. With regard to small project funds, it was noted that a **combination of the two existing small project funds** would make practical sense. It should also be noted that it is not the eligibility for funding per se that is considered problematic, but rather the pre-financing and co-financing.

7. What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Interreg?

This question was slightly adapted for the programme area: What adaptations could help to further develop Interreg in a positive way? Do you have any ideas?

Many interesting responses were received. The **reduction of bureaucracy** and the reduction of administrative work was mentioned the most. There was also a strong desire for **support in the search for project partners**. The importance of communication and, above all, **information events organised by the programme** itself also emerged. These are very welcomed and should take place more frequently and offer more, such as support in finding partners. A better

communication by the programme was also mentioned, by asking for **targeted calls for desired solutions by the programme**. Many stakeholders are also somewhat overwhelmed by the many rules, especially the many different rules of the various programmes, and asked for a **simplification of the rules** or proper overview, as many stakeholders have experience with more than just one funding programme. The FLC and SLC were also mentioned, especially regarding **time commitments** and various requirements. The additional **application of flat-rate costs** is very much welcomed. However, difficult financial aspects of pre- and co-financing and support in this question were also requested.

8. Is there a need for some infrastructure projects?

While some participants answered 'no' to this question, there were also several concrete suggestions, particularly regarding cross-border transport infrastructure and infrastructure for IT systems and IT security. Despite all the feedback, however, the importance of soft activities seems to be very high, since it was often mentioned that more funding for infrastructure **should not have a negative impact on soft activities**.

"I think soft activities should be more important for cross-border cooperation."

"Only if this also increases the funding for INTERREG, otherwise this would lead to a reduction in projects."

9. What should be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in another country (governance)

This question was adapted slightly for the programme area: How can Interreg support you even better in your cooperation with Czech organisations? (apart from financial support; keyword: governance).

The answers to this question show that the **programme's communication measures** are very important and significant, especially with physical events and clear statements and overviews on important rules. **Support in the search for partners** also appears to be desirable. To overcome the language barrier, the possibility of submitting and **implementing projects in English** was called for. At the same time, there was also a desire for more security, as there is a feeling that there is a high risk of overlooking something in the many rules and losing project funds at a much later date, years after the project has been completed. Also mentioned was the desire for some pressure from the programme to demand formal partnerships so that the cooperating partnerships work together in a much more binding manner even after the project has been completed, rather than simply on a "friendship basis". In general, there is satisfaction

with the cooperation, even if some of the very positive results of this cooperation can only be described as ‘difficult to measure’, such as mutual understanding, breaking down mental barriers, etc.

10. What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?

The participants provided multiple project ideas:

- Concert tours
- A thematic trail with a historical theme, as a walking or cycling route.
- A project to promote mental health (cooperation with healthy cities).
- Digitalisation projects for museums, exchange of metadata, joint presentations and cross-border connections of museum collections and make them accessible to a European audience
- A project that is about communicating the European idea, simply creating understanding for the ‘Institution Europe’!
- More implementation projects instead of studies with little/no visible impact
- Educational and language projects
- A common platform for the use of scientific expert services across the regions with links to the business and application sector
- Restoration of native meadows and wetlands, pond construction, etc.

2.4 Interesting quotes

“A simplification of the administration and at least pre-financing would help considerably. The type of financing discriminates against non-profit organisations, which, in contrast to the state administration and local governments, only have limited options for pre-financing - loans, credits.”

“I often have the feeling that there is a lot to deliver compared to other strands and that there is always a risk due to later audits, even if the requirements according to the rules have been met.”

“Collaboration works well. More importance should be given to personal exchange and networking (at ALL levels), which is often difficult to measure but is usually very beneficial to the cause.”

“It's not just about how many people were present or heard my content, but how many actually listened and understood.”

“The support from the programme is important - seminars for applicants, seminars for beneficiaries (with the participation of auditors) + the possibility of consulting at regional level is crucial.”

“To apply more flat costs, not to try to treat each monitoring report as a small audit and to allow more flexibility in the use of resources and their transfers between categories, which is necessary [especially] in science.”

“In the education sector, it would make sense not only to call for innovations, but rather for meaningful, targeted measures and activities, for the implementation and, above all, evaluation of which the usual project duration is usually not really sufficient...”

“It is complicated at the beginning to find Austrian partners interested in cooperation with Czech partners and to find a common theme that is meaningful for all partners, otherwise the subsequent cooperation is already going well.”

“Advantage! It is an opportunity for mutual exchange of experience and insight into how systems are implemented or function elsewhere or not, to scrutinise differences and their causes in order to draw conclusions about requirements/framework conditions.”

3. Consultation of citizens

3.1 Main citizens consulted

In order to involve more members of the public, focus groups were organised in addition to the online surveys. These focus groups took place as physical events and qualitative feedback was gathered in person. In order to specifically address young and academic people, we contacted the University of Vienna and the University of Brno to hold these workshops with the purpose of conducting this survey and presenting the programme. The feedback was entered anonymously by the participants themselves via the 'Slido' app. We therefore know that the participants are mainly between the ages of 20-30 and have no previous Interreg experience.

3.2 Methods of consultation

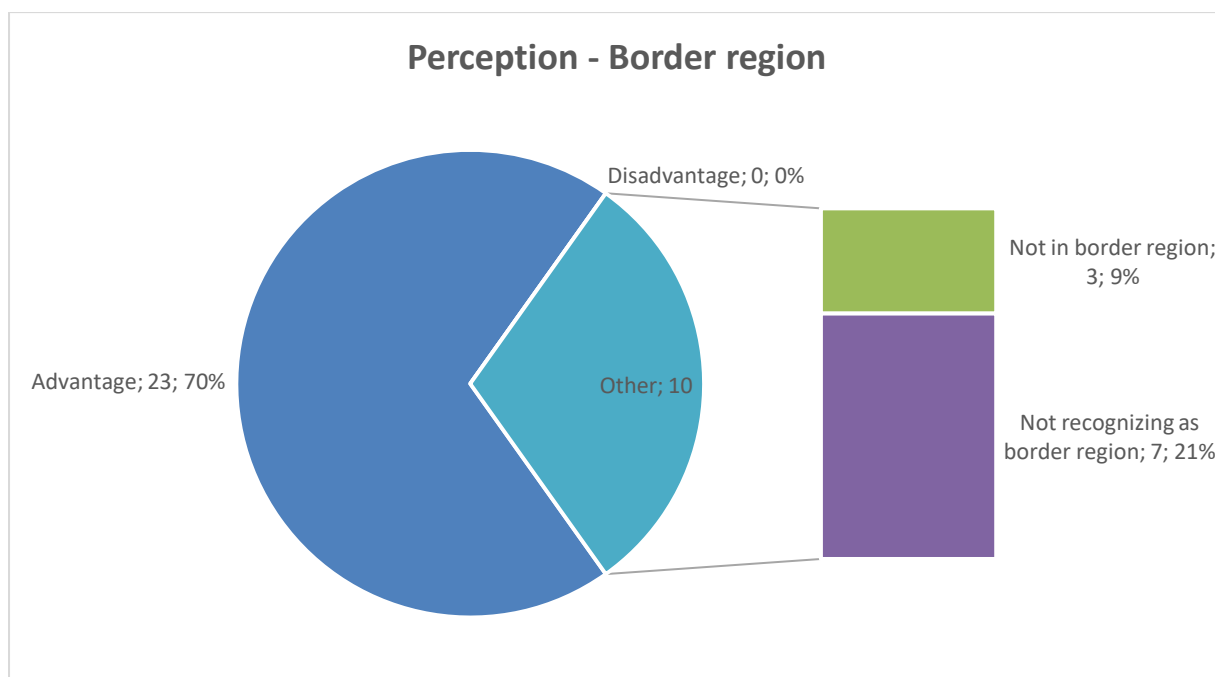
The public was surveyed both online and in-person with focus groups at universities in the two major cities of the programme area, Brno and Vienna. In the online survey, only 5 questionnaires could be collected in full (including 1 contribution from the Czech Republic and 4 contributions from Austria). The in-person survey used the same questions as in the online questionnaire for the public, but they were obtained through personal interviews on site, with the technical help of an app called "Slido". These surveys and focus groups took place on 4 November 2024 in Brno and on 6 November 2024 in Vienna. The focus groups reached a total of 28 people (13 from the Czech Republic and 15 from Austria). A total of 33 contributions from the public were therefore included in this survey. These were mainly open questions with a free choice of words.

3.3 Summary of the input on the key questions

Key questions to citizens:

1. Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

23 people recognized this as an advantage. *"We have a lot to learn from each other and can enrich each other"*. 3 people did not live in a border region, 7 people did not perceive their centre of life as a border region even though it is a border region. Examples: an advantage because there are more choices to get a job; a disadvantage as things can get complicated like simply public transport; etc.



2. In the place where you live, what are the main topics where cooperation is needed?

Many different topics were identified by the public, but the main topics were transportation, nature protection and conservation, culture, tourism and climate change.



3. Can you name an Interreg project that you find useful in the place where you live?

Of the 33 people surveyed, 23 people (69.70%) were aware of the Interreg Austria-Czech Republic programme. Of these 23 people, 14 people (60.87% or 42.42% of the total respondents) also knew of a specific project. Only very few were able to name the project but were able to describe it. Cycling paths such as the Iron Curtain Trail were particularly memorable.

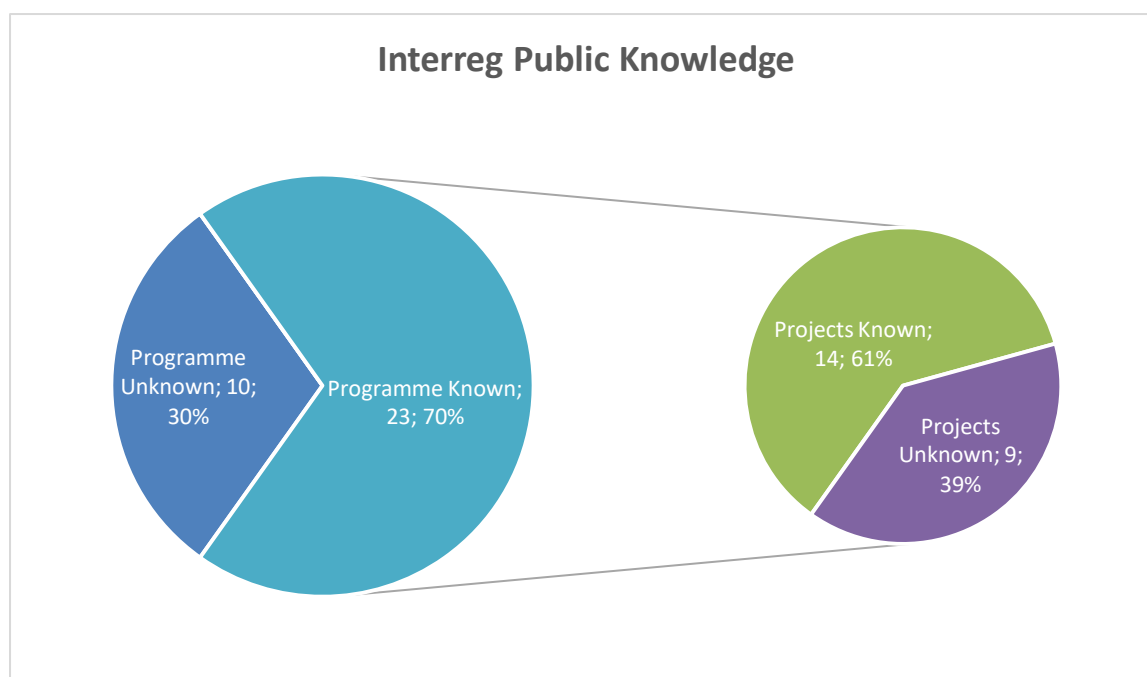


Figure 6: Charts showing the distribution of responses regarding public knowledge of the Interreg programme and projects.

4. In your daily life, what are the biggest difficulties for (cross-border and transnational) cooperation?

The language barrier is being mentioned very often, since the Czech and German language are quite different. Also missing contacts is another challenge, since years of separation (Iron Curtain) destroyed many transboundary relationships, even families. Also mistrust and prejudices were mentioned, which is something that takes a long time to rebuild. It seems to be a challenge to find a common ground and agree on common approach to find a topic for a new transboundary project. *“Constant endeavour to arouse interest on both sides of the border”*. Generally different approaches or view on things seem to be a noticeable difference. *“I find the Czechs more hard-working, the Austrians sometimes don't want to have any extra*

work.” Therefore, besides the language barrier the different understanding of things (politics, spatial planning, etc.) is a major topic.

5. What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?

Many different project ideas were mentioned, here listed is a selection of them:

- Educational network, exchange between children and young people,
- Expansion of cross-border (high-speed) rail transport (e.g. Franz Josef Railway),
- Strengthening of cross-border tourism (e.g. Waldviertel-South Bohemia pond landscape, Weinviertel-South Moravia wine landscape), e.g. through cross-border tourism agencies or stronger networking in this area.
- Discounts on transport and joint cultural events
- Co-operation in agriculture with involvement of children/young people
- Survey and refurbishment of existing buildings/vacant properties
- Energy communities (without nuclear power plants),

4. Recommendations for post 2027

The actors of the programme Interreg Austria-Czechia 2021-2027 gladly seized the Commission's call to contribute to the evolvement of Interreg, by grasping perspectives of stakeholders and citizens on the cooperation in the programme area. The programme actors are confident that insights of people experiencing cooperation directly in situ will enrich the Commission's preparatory work for the programming period 2028-2034, particularly for developing Interreg in a needs-oriented and targeted manner.

A total of 50 complete responses were obtained by using methods as derived from the EC's *Toolkit – Guide for consultations to shape the future Interreg (INTERREG Post-2027)*. The online questionnaires via EUSurvey collected a total of 22 responses (including 10 people from the Czech Republic and 12 people from Austria), embracing mainly stakeholders having already direct experiences with the programme. The in-person surveys were used to contact 28 people (13 from the Czech Republic and 15 from Austria), constituting both young people and academic persons. This means that a total of 50 responses, 23 votes from the Czech Republic and 27 votes from Austria were included in this survey. Furthermore, the in-person surveys provided us with in-depth qualitative responses that allowed us to evaluate and interpret the data beyond a purely quantitative analysis. By this means, it was possible to generate a meaningful picture on the perceptions on cooperation in the Austrian-Czech area.

Summary on the main outcomes of the surveys

The surveys revealed that there is still great interest in cooperating across borders in the programme area of the Interreg Austria-Czechia 2021-2027 programme. The survey shows that 82% consider cooperation between Austria and the Czech Republic to be very important and 18% consider it to be important. No one stated that transboundary cooperation between Austria and Czechia is negligible. A large proportion (70%) were also aware of the programme Interreg Austria-Czechia. There is (still) a clear interest in cooperation and a variety of new project ideas was mentioned by the respondents. Of course, the actual framework conditions will be decisive regarding actual future cooperations – hence, many respondents used the opportunity to indicate concrete suggestions in technical terms. However, the outcomes of the surveys show that there is great interest in the programme and its development. There is a willingness to work together and a recognition of the need for support from the programme. A stronger focus on infrastructure was not considered to be of extraordinary importance, by contrast, it was stated that soft activities are usually in the main focus of Interreg projects. However, barriers and mental boundaries still need to be broken down and mutual understanding needs still to be developed further.

As general obstacles, the language barrier, difficulties in finding appropriate partners, the high administrative effort and bureaucracy as well as financing per se were identified. To counteract this, suggestions for improvement were introduced, such as the possibility of project application and implementation in English. Support from the programme in finding partners and simplified communication of the programme rules were mentioned as well. It was suggested to realize specific calls for specific goals. The consideration of poorly measurable objectives, but which make an important contribution, is also an aspect that should not be forgotten, such as reducing mistrust, shared understanding, etc.

The survey revealed that it is generally seen as an advantage to live in a border region, as regular exchange and cultural diversity is deemed an enrichment for both sides. However, vivid cross-border cooperation is indispensable for facilitating and deepening cooperation. All in all, there is a certain sense of gratitude towards the programme. It is recognised and appreciated that Interreg facilitates the implementation of a broad range of very diverse projects.

In thematic terms, the greatest potential is seen in climate and environmental protection, culture and tourism, infrastructure and education. New or further development opportunities are seen in disaster control, emergency services, demographic megatrends, cooperation between NGOs, the labour market and the energy sector.

Reflections of the programme actors

The programme actors of the Interreg Austria-Czechia 2021-2027 programme welcome the positive outcomes of the surveys, which **clearly demonstrate the need of continuing the financing of cooperation across borders via Interreg**. The most important topics are covered by the programme and it can further strengthen the will to work together through even better communication. The path for this has been paved, new changes in this period have been positively accepted, the course is seen very positive.

From the point of view of the programme actors, cohesion policy is generally a long-term investment policy and thus the main instrument for promoting the economic, territorial and social cohesion of the European Union. Cohesion policy is furthermore a regionally anchored policy instrument, which also enables the added value of the EU to be made visible to citizens directly on the ground. Interreg particularly plays an important role for the Austrian-Czech relations. Cooperation with neighbouring countries allows the generation of topic-specific cross-border solutions and strengthening mutual trust. In view of this specific European added value, an **increase of funding for Interreg** compared to the 2021-2027 period would be desirable. In view of an appropriate effectiveness and an efficient programme development,

the programme actors suggest to the EC to pay specific attention to the **proper balance between funding, benefits and costs**.

In thematic terms, the programme actors suggest the EC to **define the future strategic specifications as flexible as possible**, e.g. in the sense of broader POs – so that Interreg programmes can be adjusted to the territorial needs prevailing in the cooperation area concerned. In this sense, the programmes could be set up as strategic as possible in a long-term manner, but could react on issues emerging in the programme area (including also responses to crises in case they are territorially relevant). The main endeavour should be to **further elaborate the CI of Interreg, hence the multi-level cooperation dimension across borders**.

Geographical considerations

In the sense of continuity and for deepening already initiated cooperations next to enabling of new cooperations, the continuation of the programme area in territorial terms seems desirable. As the given survey revealed and as it was also stated in the accompanying evaluation of the Interreg AT-CZ programme 2014-2020, the **territorial effects generated by the programme are manifold and are not only referring to the border region in a narrower sense**. From the point of view of the programme partners, **no region should be left behind and excluded from funding, as all regions will face digital, ecological and social transformation challenges and as rural and urban areas are intertwined** in a complementary manner. By these means, further structural cooperation effects can be generated and strengthened.

Implementation issues

The **basic attitude towards the programme**, as generated via the surveys, is **thoroughly positive**, and many contributions can be seen as constructive criticism towards the positive further development of the programme. The importance and development of the programme is generally recognised and desired in the programme area.

Nonetheless, the **need for a reduction of bureaucracy and of administrative work** was mentioned the most. The survey also showed the use of simplified cost options is perceived as positive and that the cost categories as covered by the eligibility rules are generally deemed as suitable. Many stakeholders are also somewhat overwhelmed by the variety of rules across programmes. Control and audit are perceived as general challenges. It was stated that enhanced cooperation between institutions could increase the **legal certainty** and thus the

willingness to participate in new projects, since there is currently a feeling of risks and uncertainty – even years after a project has been successfully finished.

From the perspective of the programme actors, these worries can be deemed as comprehensible. From the point of view of the programme partners, language barriers (incl. the request to allow applications in English), administrative burdens, and financing issues are challenges recurring in preparation of every programme period. Both the programme partners and bodies are aware of these challenges, they generally strive for making the programme requirements as manageable as possible – against the background of the regulations and the steadily growing audit requirements. The **steadily growing complexity and bureaucracy of Interreg programmes are not only challenging beneficiaries, but also programme actors** – generating uncertainty and decreasing acceptance. The Interreg programmes are hardly manageable under the current framework conditions and the primary strategic objectives of Interreg programmes per se are becoming increasingly secondary. The current system causes an **enormous density of controls and audits**. For instance, the level of detail to be unveiled by beneficiaries in the framework of SLC audits often are clearly exceeding the requirements as formulated in the regulations – which are proceeding from the control of operations and not of systemic audits. Even if the ECs efforts in streamlining the regulations for the period 2021-2027 are very welcome, there is still a clear lack regarding the common understanding of all bodies involved – this refers to the focus of control and audit per se and also to specific requirements, e.g. regarding simplifications (e.g. SCOs).

In order to avoid gold-plating and for fostering harmonisation, a **clearer role of the EC** would be desirable for the future. In any case, important elements should be defined and operationalized centrally at European level. The dialogue among different Interreg programmes should be further strengthened.

In this context, regarding the technical level, also the work of **Interact** is deemed as very useful for the Interreg community – comprising the jointly defined and centrally maintained monitoring system (Jems), the HIT tools and technical notes, the communication material (incl. brand) and finally the broad variety of seminars and events, which allow exchange of experience and capitalisation of approaches and results in a fruitful manner.

As another layer, the **overload with objectives** also play a crucial role, leading to excessive requirements of only secondary or even artificial nature without significant benefit. For instance, state aid mostly plays a rule of limited extent (usually only GBER 20 & 20a, DeMinimis), a focus on DNSH, Bauhaus, citizens' engagement etc. makes only sense to a limited extent. Particularly in **the context of Interreg, not all objectives/ principles being of significance for ERDF funded programme can be directly transferred** – since Interreg is

involving several countries and funding specifically endeavours with soft activities, of pilot character of having a leveraging effects.

As with cohesion policy in general, **the aim for Interreg is to promote simplification and harmonize rules to make the system safer, more transparent and more liveable for all actors** involved. Due to the cross-border dimension and the associated diversity of national implementation structures, a **separate specific legal framework is proposed for Interreg**, without being bound by the extensive requirements of the cohesion policy regulations. Furthermore, against the background that the error rates of Interreg programmes are usually rather low and that simplifications were already defined for the period 2021-2027 (RBMVM, SCOs, single audit), a **performance-based approach at the upper level** is perceived critical – if designed in a too formalistic and rigid manner. The added value of such an approach should be clearly demonstrated, as well as the connection/ complementarity with the lower level arrangements (see below). A potential new system of indicators in the sense of payment triggers should be meaningful, as flexible/ adaptive as possible and directly influenceable by the programme (building on defined core projects' outputs). It is for example questionable that a linkage to reforms would be manageable in the Interreg context, as reforms are generally situated outside of the sphere of influence of Interreg programmes – due to the cross-border dimension and to differing competencies both in a national and a supranational perspective.

Analogously, a mere result-orientation at the **lower level** does not seem compatible with the set-up of Interreg programmes. In Interreg, there are hardly standardized and uniform projects, due to the bilateral orientation of the programme and due to the diversity of project partners. Thus, also other logics should be possible – e.g. by means of a broad set of SCOs, combined with the possibility to also report real costs in those cases if beneficial. A result-orientated set-up should be optional for the Interreg programmes.

Finally, the programme actors welcome that the EC is open to jointly discuss the future of Interreg, for not only responding to transformation challenges, but for rendering the programmes themselves transformative, flexible and adaptable – as transparent, harmonized, permeable and rule-based as possible, but as formalistic and bureaucratic only as necessary.

For queries, please see: <https://interreg.at-cz.eu/at/kontakte>