

# Costs of non-Interreg

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## I. On the context

The pilot call of Interreg was launched in 1989. During the last 35 years, the Community Initiative and, later, the European Territorial Cooperation objective has become an eminent European tool of solidarity, reconciliation, trust building and strategic cooperation diminishing the separating effects of the borders and boosting the local economies of previously peripheral borderlands.

Today, having experienced multiple crises from the migration crisis and Brexit to the COVID pandemic and the Russian aggression against Ukraine, we are witnessing emerging distrust, discontent, disharmony between the Member States, and the fall of the spirit of solidarity and cooperation, an overall cooperation-fatigue.

We, the members of the Transfrontier Euro-Institut Network (TEIN), share the conviction that there has never been a more urgent need for enhancing the spirit of solidarity and cooperation than today. We consider European Territorial Cooperation the best tool for maintaining European integration's key values and achievements. The national measures taken during the COVID, clearly demonstrated that without open borders the European project loses its sense and energy. To keep the borders open, we need cooperation and mutual trust which can be boosted through Interreg programmes the best. Briefly, we are convinced that without Interreg, in today's crises, the European Union (EU) cannot be kept alive. European Territorial Cooperation and the completion of the Single Market are mutually reinforcing.

Since its introduction 35 years ago, Interreg has demonstrated its unique role and mission within Cohesion Policy and European integration as such (Medeiros et al 2023). It did achieve this by

- (1) generating permanent links and cooperating networks across borders (van Houtum 1998; Wassenberg et al 2015) enabling the local and regional actors to design joint visions for their shared future (Reitel et al 2018; Guillermo-Ramírez 2018) which results in stronger cohesion, not only at cross-border regional but also at European level (Guillermo-Ramírez 2018) when eliminating or, at least, diminishing the barrier effects of the border (Hagen & Andersen 2018) and promoting European principles of subsidiarity and multi-level governance (Medeiros 2018);
- (2) through these new links, the programmes have been energising the local economies and the integration of the labour markets (Guillermo-Ramírez 2018), facilitating the connection of the border areas to the Single Market and exploiting untapped potentials of these areas (Medeiros 2018);
- (3) at a more symbolic level, Interreg programmes have been supporting peace and trust building (Guillermo-Ramírez 2018) and inter-ethnic reconciliation (Wassenberg et al 2015) as well as promoting Europeanisation not only among the new member states but also along the external borders of the EU (Miosga 2008; Popescu 2012; Reitel et al 2018).

As Professor Faludi put it: “Without cohesion policy, the EU as we know it could well disappear” (Faludi 2010: 15). After 35 years, one can add that without Interreg, cohesion policy as we know it could well disappear. “Hence, promoting cross-border cooperation is one of the most fundamental approaches in European regional policy to make the integration process irreversible.” (Miosga 2008: 15)

Obviously, Interreg has a clear triggering effect as in its absence, there would not even be cooperation across a particular border, in many cases (EC 2007; EC 2016). Rightfully, Böhm (2023: 14) states that “in CBC, nothing can be assumed or taken for granted. It is of utmost importance to initiate, facilitate, and sustain interactions across national borders to overcome the barrier effect they create.”

Despite the evident advantages, Interreg is now in danger. Due to its small budget and its peripheral character from the member state perspective, the fund hasn’t ever been too important when defining the multi-annual financial framework (MFF). However, due to the multiple crises the EU is facing today, the priorities of EU policies are changing, while the member states show no willingness to increase their financial contribution to the joint project. In such a case, the leaders endeavour to get rid of “unnecessary cargo” which, currently, seems to contain Rural Development Funds and the Interreg package.

In this paper, based on the knowledge and experience accumulated by the TEIN’s members we are giving a sketchy overview of the costs of a non-Interreg Europe by providing examples of achievements inaccessible without Interreg CBC funds. The arguments are grouped around five basic statements on Interreg and a compilation of recommendations addressing the necessary improvements.

## II. The unquestionable added-value of Interreg

### 1. Interreg - as a promoter of solidarity, reconciliation and trust building

During its history, Interreg has become an acknowledged tool of reconciliation, trust building and cross-border solidarity between the European nations which faced centuries-long armed conflicts. One of the Founding Fathers’ dreams was to create the conditions for peaceful coexistence and mutual respect between the European nations. Today, we can declare that the European Communities and the European Union have been the most successful project(s) in safeguarding peace among the members and keeping military conflicts out of the group.

Border regions and Interreg programmes have been playing a decisive role in this peace project.

## EVIDENCE

- ❖ Interreg programmes have been spending a remarkable share of their total budget so far (30 billion euros since 1989) on inter-institutional and inter-personal cooperation.
- ❖ Several thousands of educational, cultural, ethnic, professional (social, health, environmental protecting, business development, etc.), and advocacy organisations started cooperating thanks to Interreg funding. Several sectoral networks were created via Interreg (Mertens & Unfried, 2022).
- ❖ These cooperation initiatives resulted in a series of events attracting people of different nationalities and languages; encounters, workshops, performances, exchanges, exhibitions; joint protocols; business cooperation, etc., which would have never appeared without the available funding opportunity stimulating them. The relatively small amount dedicated to these projects has created an atmosphere favourable for getting to know each other's languages, habits, and worldviews facilitating mutual learning, solidarity and tolerance as well as deconstructing prejudices which had generated past conflicts. This way Interreg, and, especially, the small or people-to-people projects play a similar role to Erasmus+ since both contribute to the development of the common European identity and enable the new generations to be more open towards their cross-border counterparts which is the basic condition for maintaining the peace project.
- ❖ In this context, special attention needs to be given to the post-Brexit Peace Plus Programme between Ireland and Northern Ireland which unites the legacy of the Peace programmes (since 1995) and Interreg V-A to ensure the conditions for reconciliation on the island of Ireland with the financial support of the EU (through ETC) and the UK.
- ❖ The interpersonal ties stemming from Interreg projects are so strong today that during the COVID-19 pandemic, these contacts kept professional and inter-institutional cooperation alive regardless of border sealing and the tensions generated by different measures applied in the Member States. A best-practice in this regard is the Euregio Meuse-Rhine Incident Response and Crisis Management (EMRIC) network of competent authorities in crisis management that resulted via an Interreg project into a joint coordination office. During cross-border crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and floodings, EMRIC proved to be essential in facilitating cross-border cooperation in times of a national reflex.
- ❖ The contamination and pollution caused by the Turów coal mine located at the tri-border area of Poland, Czechia and Germany generated conflicts between the Polish and Czech governments resulting in a suit in front of the European Court of Justice. The Court issued Poland to pay a fine of EUR 500,000 per day which stimulated negotiations and an agreement between the two countries. The micro-project fund created subsequently following the Interreg model and managed by the Nisse-Nisa-Nysa Euroregion aims at reducing the damages caused by the mine.

## 2. Interreg - as an important tool of European democratisation and multi-level governance

Interreg programmes have been strengthening the principle of subsidiarity, the construction of European multi-level governance (Beck 2022) and local democracy when promoting long-standing institutionalised cross-border and transnational cooperation, and involving the Euroregions and European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) in the management of cross-border programmes. Through the above interventions, Interreg has been strengthening the feeling of ownership – not only that of the shared border areas but also of the European project whose achievements and shortcomings are the most visible at the borders.

The bottom-up character of and the support provided by Interreg programmes for cross-border initiatives, partnerships, long-standing consortia, and cross-border structures have remarkably enhanced the democratic spirit at the local and regional levels. The fact that the projects are selected through a procedure giving a prominent role to the regional and civil society actors justifies this ownership-building character of the programmes. Besides, the partners involved in cross-border activities, which by their nature reach beyond the national confines, were enabled to maintain their contacts and to shape a longer-term vision of their joint future.

### EVIDENCE

- ❖ Up to the end of 2024, nearly 90 EGTCs have been set up in the EU which are authorised to realise cross-border projects and establish and manage cross-border institutions. Without Interreg funding it is almost impossible to ensure the realisation of cross-border developments as the main-stream operational programmes are bound to national jurisdictions and rules. The cross-border structures can guarantee the sustainable cross-border character of the projects reaching beyond the national confines and opening the way for innovative regional cooperation models facilitating the realisation of the European multi-level governance project. Long-standing cross-border cooperation between local and regional institutions requires time and additional costs (interpretation, specialised staff on border issues, training, time to know each other, travel costs) which can be covered through Interreg projects.
- ❖ Cross-border cooperation also spreads democratic spirit through participation in cross-border planning and development facilitating joint vision making and autonomy.
- ❖ Interreg has provided start-up funding for many structures improving governance of public services (cooperation between universities, sharing of geographical data, cooperation of rescue services, etc.) and creating means for delivering appropriate information to citizens (cross-border labour offices, health contact points, competence centres, etc.).

### 3. Interreg - as an asset of European cohesion

Interreg represents not more than 2.5% of the Cohesion Policy budget. However, its impacts on European economic, social and territorial cohesion are much larger. By supporting the development of cross-border transport and business infrastructure, Interreg CBC programmes create the backbone of the cross-border movement of people and goods without which the Single Market cannot be accomplished. Through the projects enabling the collaboration of chambers and B2B cooperation as well as cross-border service provision (even in fields like health care and education where the Member States keep their competencies), the programmes effectively contribute to the free movement of capital and services. When supporting the cross-border development of functional urban centres located along a border, Interreg facilitates the evolution of integrated cross-border living areas organically connecting neighbouring border areas and remarkably diminishing the barrier effects of the state borders which is a prerequisite for stronger cohesion also at the European level. An additional effect of the above factors is that oftentimes peripheral, lagging behind regions are given the chance to catch up with the help of the CBC funds. According to a study published by the European Commission (Caragliu, Capello & Camagni, 2017), by eliminating all cross-border legal obstacles, the GDP of the European border regions would increase by nearly 9%. Today, the most effective tool to reach this goal is Interreg, through its subventions provided for cross-border transport and business infrastructure, economic collaboration, cross-border service provision and the development of functional areas. Cross-border cooperation used to be considered the laboratory or the test-bed of European integration. We can add that they are also seismographs experiencing immediate effects of national and EU-level policies and decisions.

Obviously, without Interreg, European cohesion would not have met the present standards.

#### EVIDENCE

- ❖ In 1989, when Interreg started, seven 24/7 cross-border road crossing points operated at the Czechoslovakian-Hungarian border. Today, there are 39 of them reducing the average distance between two points from 96 to 17 km. More than half of the new border crossings were constructed by Interreg funding and further crossings were designed with the financial aid of Interreg. These investments dramatically improved the conditions for cross-border mobility and cohesion.
- ❖ Interreg programmes generated innovative spatial development tools like the PITEM (Cross-border Thematic Plan) and PITER (Cross-border Territorial Plan) at the French-Italian border area or the Territorial Actions Plan for Employment (TAPE) tool adapted by the Slovak-Hungarian CBC programme(s). These tools are considered prominent piloting instruments for the development of cross-border functional areas. The TAPE projects involved 35 enterprises, resulted in the (re-)construction of production facilities of more than 20 000 m<sup>2</sup>, created 170 new jobs and facilitated the training of 1380 workers in a cross-border context.
- ❖ Innovative tools like Community-led Local Development (CLLD) and Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) are also used for enhancing cross-border economic, social and territorial cohesion along the Italian-Austrian and the Italian-Slovenian borders setting the way for inland regions as well.

- ❖ Numerous cross-border functional urban areas serve as examples of integrated place-based initiatives and projects boosting growth and cohesion, like Greater Geneva, Luxembourg, Greater Copenhagen, Strasbourg, Bratislava, Szczecin, etc. In other cases, twin-cities located at the state borders play the role of spatial engineering of European cohesion and produced numerous joint solutions reducing the barrier effects of the state borders and, thus, strengthening the European Union's economic, social and territorial cohesion. To mention but a few examples: Valka and Valga (LT/EE), Gmünd and České Velenice (AT/CZ) as well as Gorizia and Nova Gorica (IT/SI) developed integrated health services; Giurgiu and Ruse (RO/BG) and Komárno and Komárom (SK/HU) drafted integrated master plans for harmonised spatial development while Frankfurt/Oder and Słubice (DE/PL) regularly update their joint development visions with active participation of the citizens; Chaves and Verín (PT/ES) and Tornio and Haparanda (FI/SE) operate joint tourist services; the former twin-city area has also developed a cross-border educational and a joint urban district heating system; etc. The public funding behind these initiatives is always (at least partly) Interreg.
- ❖ Better interconnectedness and synergies between the regional interventions supported by ERDF programmes targeting border regions in the EU are certainly necessary, but it is not a reality yet. Interreg programmes fulfil this role as platforms for consultation between institutional players who, by developing their joint operational programmes, provide themselves with genuine strategic roadmaps for cross-border cooperation.
- ❖ At the French-German and German-Polish borders, Interreg is an essential funding source for projects improving cross-border vocational training and employment. Regardless of the achievements of the freedom of labour mobility, the economic, academic and institutional stakeholders need to set up common procedures, networks, information, contact points, educational projects to enable smooth cross-border labour mobility (Kurowska-Pysz, Medeiros, Böhm, 2023). This would not be possible without Interreg A. The results are permanent management of cross-border employment, and solutions for problems of unemployment and missing qualified staff (Eberhardt 2022).
- ❖ Interreg is the right tool to develop bridges between students, researchers and business actors in cross-border regions. The impact evaluation of the Interreg V-A Upper Rhine Programme has shown that 541 businesses have been involved in 6 years, as beneficiaries or as partners, in cross-border research projects boosting local and regional innovation ecosystems. Interreg finances the implementation of technology transfer projects, which enable the results of public research produced in a given territory to be transferred to production. A critical mass is achieved in this field in a cross-border context, which is important in international competition. A large number of companies/start-ups have valorised these collaborations.
- ❖ Between 2014 and 2020, Interreg projects by average financed at least 2 new jobs for 3 years. Accordingly, the total number of 5 618 projects generated 11 236 new jobs at minimum.
- ❖ Interreg programmes are also a way to finance jobs for young people and give them an intercultural professional experience that they can exploit when taking another job.
- ❖ Via Interreg programmes, primary and secondary schools are able to cooperate and exchange across borders. Between Germany and the Netherlands the 'Euregioprofilschule' aims to promote the mutual learning of neighbouring languages by joint activities and the exchange of personnel. In the Greater Region, Interreg has enabled the creation of a cross-border

university network (the University of Greater Region), which also offers cross-border master diplomas.

- ❖ The Suwałki gap (an approximately 100-kilometre section of the Polish-Lithuanian border between Kaliningrad and Belarus) became a strategic borderland connecting the Baltic countries with the rest of the European Union after the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine. Thanks to the involvement of policy-makers managing the Interreg Lithuania-Poland Programme, the development of a cross-border tourist functional area started, which became a catalyst for the creation of two EGTCs and resonates for the socio-economic stimulation of the entire Lithuanian-Polish border area.

#### 4. Interreg - as an engine of elimination of obstacles to the Single Market and access to quality services

Despite the remarkable progress that the European Union has made in creating the Single Market, in their everyday practice border citizens still experience many shortages of the principle of free movement of goods, persons, capital and services which shortcomings partly become apparent through the implementation of Interreg projects: during their realisation, the obstacles become visible. However, during the last decades, Interreg has also effectively contributed to the elimination of these obstacles and to the development of integrated cross-border services. This is especially true for the Interreg Specific Objective 1 (ISO1: 'a better cooperation governance') inaugurated by the present generation of ETC programmes facilitating interventions through which legal and administrative obstacles to the Single Market can systematically be identified and eliminated.

#### EVIDENCE

- ❖ Interreg programmes enabled the development of cross-border services like the Cerdanya Hospital at the Spanish-French border, the cross-border rescue services between Lower Austria and Czechia as well as in the Euregio Meuse-Rhine and the Euroregion Rhine-Meuse North, and the cross-border health care zones (the so-called ZOASTs) at the French-Belgian border. Interreg Greater Region and Interreg Upper Rhine Programmes have founded the structuration of cooperation in the field of health through the projects 'TRISAN' and 'GEKO'.
- ❖ On the Polish-Czech and German-Czech borders, Interreg has substantially contributed to the institutionalisation of cross-border cooperation between the fire brigades and disaster management organisations, including investments in the technical equipment and harmonised preparedness enabling the teams to intervene in disasters whose number is increasing due to climate change.
- ❖ The French-German day-care in Strasbourg funded by Interreg welcomes each year 60 children growing in an intercultural context. It was also the Interreg programme that co-funded the Babylingua project in the Greater region, which enabled to open another Franco-German day-care.

- ❖ Interreg has financed a task force for cross-border labour market in the Greater Region (Task Force Grenzgänger). This task force, which employs legal experts, has succeeded in counselling cross-border workers but also negotiating improvements for the free cross-border labour market. Before being financed by the relevant institutions, an introductory phase with Interreg support was necessary.
- ❖ Cross-border obstacles still account for a loss of 451 billion euros European GDP. At the regional level in border regions in the Benelux territory, this can be up to 18% of the regional GDP (Caragliu, Capello & Camagni, 2017). Interreg is one of the few European funds that reduce these cross-border obstacles. A best-practice in this regard is the newly established Interreg project 'Schakelpunt Vlaanderen-Nederland' that aims to pilot the idea of a cross-border coordination point that structurally identifies and analyses obstacles in border regions and prioritises its solutions. Trying to solve border obstacles is the core of this project. The project partners explicitly see the Interreg funding also here as a facilitator, enabling a pilot for a structural body.

## 5. Interreg - as a promoter of European values and the acquis toward the neighbours

Cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation are key for promoting the spread of European values and policies. Border regions are interfaces between the EU Member States and the neighbouring countries. Cross-border cooperation across external borders facilitates the accession process of the candidate countries as these regions are places of learning and capacity development, based on geographic proximity and regular encounters.

The subjects of these learning exchanges include all the above factors from peacebuilding and democratisation to cohesion and integration. Furthermore, the adaptation of EU sectorial and territorial policies always starts at the border areas where geographic proximity eases knowledge transfer. This transfer procedure is one of the main intervention fields of Interreg IPA and NEXT programmes.

### EVIDENCE

- ❖ The Russian aggression against Ukraine generated a critical situation along the shared border of the EU and Ukraine: since the beginning of 2022, the population of the Transcarpathian Region has increased by more than two-fold resulting in extreme pressure on the underdeveloped health infrastructure which assists thousands of wounded Ukrainian soldiers in the meantime. Interreg NEXT programmes have been contributing to the modernisation of hospitals and medical equipment.
- ❖ It is the Interreg NEXT Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine Programme, which enabled the construction of the first-ever waste selection plant in the Transcarpathian Region, where only 0.1% of the total waste produced had been recycled before that investment.



- ❖ Interreg contributes to the share of knowledge in different sectorial fields to the stakeholders of the neighbouring countries facilitating the adoption of the European standards and the integration of the markets.
- ❖ The Interreg IPA Hungary-Serbia Programme enabled the design and construction of a cross-border railway line and a fluvial port at the River Tisza.
- ❖ People-to-people projects of the Interreg IPA and NEXT programmes facilitate the development of the first contacts across external borders, which lay the basis for knowledge transfer, a learning process and long-standing cooperation lasting over the whole accession process and beyond.

### III. For an even better and more effective Interreg

The above examples illustrate the significance of Interreg (especially its strand A) in the European peace-project, democratisation, cohesion, integration and external policies. During the last decade, multiple crises have shaken the European model permanently challenging the open borders and the principle of cooperation which the whole European architecture is built upon. A world without Interreg would further boost re-bordering and re-nationalising tendencies and question the main values of the European Union, i.e. mutual trust, peaceful coexistence, solidarity, democratisation, subsidiarity, territorially balanced development and competitiveness; and the promotion of these values towards the external partners.

Instead of less Interreg, we need more, as the multiple crises (the migration crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian aggression against Ukraine) have clearly justified that today's challenges require common responses and stronger cooperation. Accordingly, we should develop the toolkit for cross-border cooperation further.

Interreg has made a significant contribution to cross-border regions. Yet, as also the European Court of Auditors (ECA 2021) states, the full potential has not yet been fully unlocked. Also the High-Level Group on the future of Cohesion Policy (2024) and the involved experts in the workshops (e.g. Böhm 2023; Medeiros 2023) state that cohesion policy in general and Interreg for cross-border territories in particular have positively contributed to the common goals. Nevertheless, it should even become more place- and people-based, with meaningful simplification and a viable budget.

## Proposals for improving the Interreg programmes

Interreg result and output indicators in the 2014-2020 period were mostly disconnected from reality. On the one hand, the output indicators registered some side products of projects and put them on the same level with indicators that were different in terms of quality and complexity (like “an innovation”, “a solution”). On the other hand, the causal link of the Interreg result indicators to the particular projects could not be justified, as many other factors have influenced their realisation (increase in car traffic, administrative burden for cross-border business, lack of financial funds...). The result indicators in Interreg VI are more strongly connected to the results of the projects, but they are still a bit “abstract” for the beneficiaries. The indicators like “number of participants” give no information on the quality of the measures and the project’s mid-term impact on the participants. A reflection on “what are good indicators” is needed (also in order to ensure good monitoring possibilities for INTERREG Programmes). The use of indicators that make sense for capturing the effects of cross-border projects is also brought forward by the ECA (2021).

In the CrossQuality project, funded by Interreg, the quality of cooperation in Interreg projects was examined. Also, this project emphasised the need for a better assessment framework, capturing the cross-border aspects. The project resulted in an assessment methodology that allows for the assessment of the quality of cooperation in a qualitative manner. Applying the method, the CrossQuality Final Report showed some important points for improvement for more successful and impactful Interreg projects (Mertens & Unfried 2022). The information and consultation improve via cooperation in Interreg projects, especially in sectors where there is not that much cooperation across borders. Yet, there is a clear stop-and-go phenomenon where cooperation after Interreg funding slows down or ceases. To combat these, the CrossQuality project had several recommendations to make capacity building for stable cross-border networks an essential element under the Interreg programmes. This has several implications for a more effective Interreg.

1. The notion of innovation should be reconsidered. The obligation of innovation leads to the creation of new projects, and new structures and sometimes previous results are forgotten. In order to gain efficiency, Interreg should better focus on good interconnection, the added value of the project, rather than on its innovative character. Here, the consolidation or improvement of a cross-border activity could also be seen as innovative.
2. Active measures should be undertaken to promote the formulation of a vision or joint agenda for future cooperation after the Interreg project. In this respect, more partners involved in an Interreg project should not be seen as better. In the assessment of project proposals, Interreg secretariats could also address the question of how a proposal contributes to a stable and sustainable network.
3. Simplification and extended assistance are needed as participation in Interreg requires specific know-how. Some project partners have indicated that the administrative burdens are too high,

preventing them from participating in Interreg calls. This is especially true for new and smaller stakeholders, that have limited capacities or knowledge on administrative management. The programmes could actively support good project management and the different aspects of cooperation.

4. Small structures or civil society associations oftentimes lack financial stability which prevents them from participating in Interreg projects. Advance payment mechanisms known in other EU-funded programmes would be beneficial. Furthermore, the simplified costs are really an improvement and reduce administrative costs for both project teams and managing authorities of Interreg.

After an extensive evaluation, the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy highlights the need for “increasing the budget and enhancing coordination and concentration, including via macroregional strategies or interregional cooperation to transfer good practice. Overcoming ‘border blindness’ by better matching and harmonising regional cross-border territorial coordination programmes with national programmes is essential in this respect.” Furthermore: “Strengthening governance in cross-border areas, focusing on their different typologies (maritime, mountainous, insular, river-based, lake-based, outermost, or within macroregions) is also essential. To achieve this, Cohesion Policy needs to enlarge the scope of Interreg-specific objectives and reinforce the European framework for integrated data collection to support exchanges on cross-border obstacles.”

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- ❖ University of the Greater Region (UniGR)

### **Slovak-Ukrainian Border**

- ❖ Research Institute of European Territorial Cooperation of State University «Uzhhorod National University»

### **Associated TEIN members**

- ❖ Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)
- ❖ Mission opérationnelle transfrontalière (MOT)