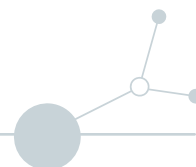




Harvesting Report

Feedback from Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE
Stakeholders on the Future Shape of Interreg



December 2024





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1. Introduction

This *Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Harvesting Report* presents the outcomes of a comprehensive stakeholder consultation designed to shape the future of transnational cooperation beyond 2027. The consultation, which was part of a Europe-wide initiative led by the European Commission, gathered inputs from Interreg stakeholders across central Europe to inform the policy debate from a practitioner perspective.

The consultation took place in two phases. An online transnational survey was closely coordinated among six transnational programmes to avoid overlaps and to reduce burden on both the programmes and stakeholders.¹ It was conducted between April and June 2024 and gathered responses from 711 stakeholders across the six Interreg programmes, including 216 respondents specifically contributing insights for Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE. This was followed by a programme-specific focus group in September 2024, with 11 participants from across sectors and countries. Overall, representatives from all nine programme countries contributed to the consultation, ensuring a broad spectrum of feedback from public, private, academic, and non-profit organisations.

This report synthesises stakeholder feedback in view of areas where transnational cooperation currently works well and where improvements are needed. These insights have directly informed the programme's policy recommendations that aim to inspire the future shape of transnational cooperation. In line with other transnational programmes, Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE did not consult citizens directly since these are primarily targeted and reached on the project and not the programme level.

The report introduces the detailed consultation methodology in chapter 2 and then presents an analysis of survey respondents and focus group participants in chapter 3. Detailed findings from the stakeholder survey and the focus group follow in chapter 4, before chapter 5 offers policy recommendations that are directly derived from the feedback. These recommendations present concrete ideas to guide the shape of future Interreg transnational cooperation, ensuring it remains a robust tool for addressing shared regional challenges through transnational cooperation also in the next programming period.

2. Methods of Consultation

Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE consulted its cooperation stakeholders in two steps: a transnational online survey was followed up by an online focus group for the validation and enhancement of survey feedback.

2.1 Methodological Approach to Transnational Survey Consultation

From 24 April to 14 June 2024, six transnational Interreg programmes jointly launched a coordinated survey to consult their programme stakeholders and project partners on the future of territorial cooperation.²

The survey was based on the 10 key questions outlined in the DG REGIO Consultation Toolkit.³ It was closely coordinated among the programmes to reduce feedback burden on the consulted stakeholders in overlapping territories and to maximise the response rate. **A total of 711 stakeholders responded, with**

¹ The six programmes that jointly developed and launched the survey were Interreg Alpine Space, Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE, Interreg Euro-MED, Interreg IPA-ADRION, Interreg NEXT MED, and Interreg SUDOE.

² All programmes reached out individually to their stakeholders through direct mailings and other communications measures.

³ The key questions were adapted to the transnational programme contexts. The published survey questions are listed in Annex A.



216 of them being directly relevant to the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme, providing a solid foundation for analysing perspectives and ideas related to the programme.

2.1.1 Thematic Survey Analysis

The thematic analysis of the qualitative feedback followed a systematic and structured approach to ensure comprehensive and reliable results. The analysis was carried out in autumn 2024 with the support of ChatGPT Model 4o, specifically for topic modelling, which is a widely adopted method for extracting underlying themes from large datasets. This approach is both common and reliable, offering efficiency and accuracy in identifying patterns and topics from unstructured text, facilitating deeper insights into the qualitative data. It comprised the following methodological steps:

- **Data Preparation**

The data was exported from the survey tool and responses were cleaned to maintain consistency and relevance.

- **Sector Identification**

Stakeholders were categorised into four sectors based on organisational backgrounds: Public Sector, Private Sector, Academic and Research Sector, and Non-Profit and Non-Governmental (NPO/NGO) Sector.⁴ This offers several advantages over analysing all organisation types individually:

- Improved Statistical Significance: Grouping similar types increases the sample size within each cluster, enhancing the robustness of the analyses.
- Enhanced Analytical Clarity: Sector clusters help to focus on specific characteristics and needs of similar organisations, providing clearer insights.
- Better Comparability: Comparing responses within and between clusters becomes more straightforward, highlighting unique and common challenges.
- Balancing Varying Feedback: Clustering balances feedback from organisation types, ensuring that dominant voices do not overshadow smaller groups.

- **Text Analysis**

Survey responses were analysed by sector, with the textual data converted into a numerical format to enable further analysis. To identify key themes within the responses, a Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model was used, which helped uncover the main topics by analysing patterns in the data and extracting significant keywords for each topic. The initial findings from the LDA model were cross-validated using Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA) and a contextual keyword review, ensuring the robustness of the conclusions.

- **Topic Identification and Verification**

The identification and verification of topics were carried out in two steps:

- Main topics were identified for each sector based on the top keywords generated by the LDA model. Each topic was assigned a prevalence score (High, Medium, Low) reflecting its prominence in the responses and briefly described.⁵
- A synthesis of and conclusions on commonly shared topics across all sectors followed.

This stratified approach ensured that the unique challenges and perspectives of each sector are recognised, enabling a more detailed understanding of sector-specific issues. It also facilitated the identification of overarching topics that are common across multiple sectors. To visualise the synthesised topics, a heatmap was created, illustrating the prevalence of each topic across the four sectors.

The above approach ensured that the reported stakeholder feedback was analysed in a thorough and reliable way for providing initial insights and ideas on shaping future transnational cooperation in central Europe.

⁴ See Annex B for more information on the composition of the four sector clusters.

⁵ The detailed analyses of sector feedbacks are not included in this report.



2.2 Methodological Approach to Transnational Focus Group Consultation

Following the survey, an online focus group meeting was conducted on 27 September 2024 to validate and refine the collected feedback topics and deepen insights on specific issues.

The selection of participants aimed to ensure broad representation across the four sectors and nine programme countries. This diversity of perspectives was crucial to obtaining nuanced and well-rounded feedback. Participants were invited based on their involvement in the survey, and their expressed interest in further contributing to the consultation process. A total of 17 stakeholders were invited, of whom 11 finally attended the focus group meeting. For further information on focus group participants please see chapter 3.2 of this report.

The focus group followed a structured format, designed to facilitate an in-depth exploration of key themes identified in the survey. The session lasted two hours and was divided into three thematic discussion areas based on the consolidation of the eight original survey questions⁶ into the following overarching themes:

- **Relevance:** Challenges and Benefits of Transnational Cooperation (Questions 1 and 2)
- **Implementation Issues:** Shortcomings, Obstacles and Additional Ideas (Questions 3, 4, and 8)
- **Future Strategy:** Opportunities, Novelties and Funding Focus (Questions 5, 6, and 7), and Geography

This approach, implemented with the support of tools for quantitative feedback collection, helped streamline the discussions and reduce redundancy, while ensuring that all critical issues were covered.

3. Main Stakeholders Consulted

3.1 Stakeholders Consulted in Transnational Survey

An analysis of the 216 survey respondents reveals a broad participation across programme countries and sectors as well as of stakeholders with experience in Interreg transnational cooperation.

The diverse participation in the survey reinforces, that insights are highly relevant for inspiring the future shape of Interreg programmes. Feedback on Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE was provided by stakeholders from all nine programme countries. In addition, there is a diverse sectoral representation, including public administration, academia, business, and civil society.⁷ Last but not least, the stakeholder feedback is mostly grounded in practical experiences with Interreg funding in the programme area.

Overall, the diversity and depth of the respondents' backgrounds provide a solid foundation for the feedback, making it a valuable resource for shaping the future of Interreg.

3.1.1 Experience with Interreg

From the analysis, it is evident that a significant majority of respondents (75.93%) have been beneficiaries of Interreg projects, indicating that the survey successfully engaged participants with direct experience in transnational cooperation. This suggests also that the provided feedback is grounded in substantial and recent experience with the programme and adds validity to the insights, as the respondents are well-positioned to offer informed perspectives on the future direction of Interreg.

⁶ See Annex A.

⁷ See Annex B.



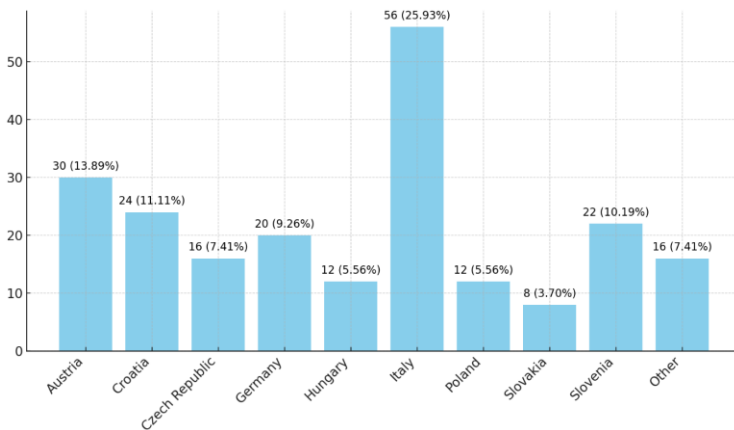
Chart 1: Participation in transnational Interreg projects



3.1.2 Territorial Background

Respondents came from a wide geographical spread, with significant participation from the nine Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE programme countries. Italy (25.93%) and Austria (13.89%) had the highest representation, followed by Croatia (11.11%) and Slovenia (10.19%). This strong representation from Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE programme countries ensures that the feedback is relevant to the programme area. The inclusion of respondents from other countries (7.41%) further enriches the diversity of perspectives, although the focus remains on the central European context.

Chart 2: Territorial background of respondents



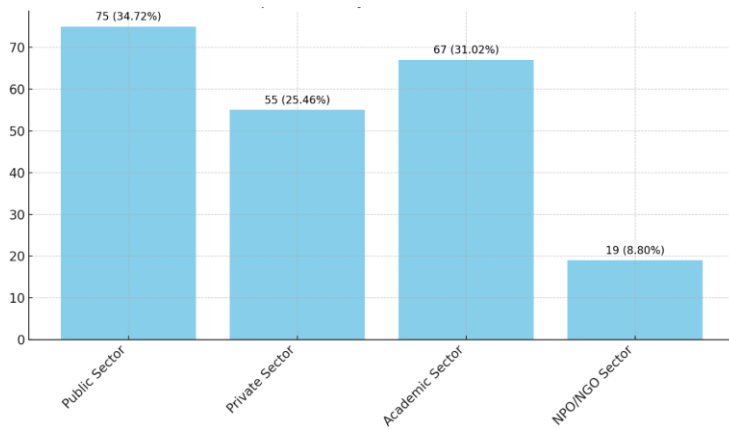
3.1.3 Institutional Background⁸

The analysis of the respondents' sector backgrounds reveals a well-balanced representation across the Public, Academic, Private, and Non-Profit/Non-Governmental (NPO/NGO) sectors. The Public Sector has the largest representation (34.72%), reflecting the central role of public authorities in transnational cooperation. The Academic Sector follows closely (31.02%), indicating significant engagement from educational and research institutions. The Private Sector (25.46%) and NPO/NGO Sector (8.80%) are also well-represented, underscoring the recognition of the value of transnational collaboration among businesses and civil society organisations.

⁸ See Annex B.



Chart 3: Institutional backgrounds of respondents (sectors)

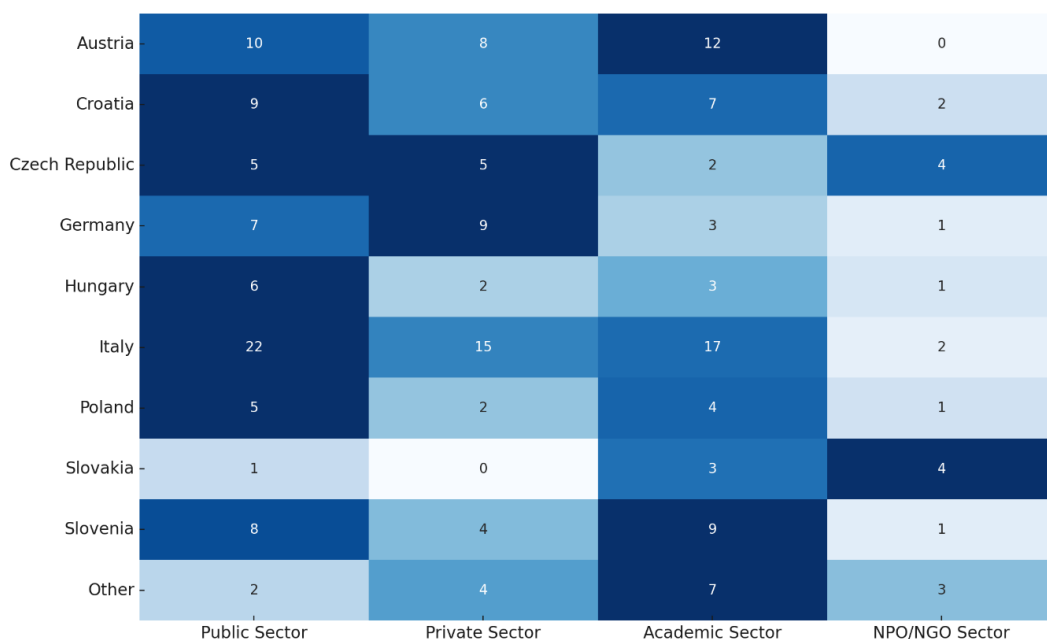


Further analysis by specific organisation types shows a diverse range of respondents, with higher education and research organisations (26.39%) and small and medium enterprises (11.57%) being particularly prominent. This diversity in organisation types ensures that the feedback reflects a wide spectrum of experiences and challenges, from policy implementation to business development and social advocacy.

3.1.4 Sector Prevalence per Country

The correlation analysis between country groups and sectors reveals additional patterns. Respondents with a Public sector background are widely represented across all countries, particularly in Italy and Austria. The Academic Sector shows strong representation in Italy, Austria, and Slovenia. The Private Sector has significant representation in Italy and Germany, while NPO/NGO participation is more evenly distributed across various countries, albeit in smaller numbers. These correlations indicate that feedback from different countries might have different focus areas in transnational cooperation, depending on the sectoral composition of their respondents.

Chart 4: Prevalence of sector feedback per country





3.2 Stakeholders Consulted in Transnational Focus Group

The focus group aimed to represent a cross-section of stakeholders involved in transnational cooperation across the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE programme area. Participants were selected based on their involvement in the stakeholder survey and their willingness to provide further input on shaping future transnational cooperation. The selection process ensured that different perspectives from the programme countries and the four sectors were represented, including both experienced stakeholders who had participated in different programme periods, and less experienced ones.

Of the 17 participants initially invited, 11 finally attended the meeting. All Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE programme countries were represented in the focus group, with the exception of Czech Republic due to the spontaneous absence of one participant. Focus group participants also reflected the different sectors, with four participants from the Public Sector, three from the Private Sector, three from the Academic Sector, and one from the NPO/NGO sector⁹.

4. Summary of Survey Feedback

This chapter presents the most commonly shared feedback of Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE stakeholders to each of the eight survey questions¹⁰ that addressed transnational challenges, benefits, shortcomings, obstacles, potential novelties, potential funding opportunities, funding focuses, and ideas for facilitating future transnational cooperation.

4.1 Q1: “What is the key challenge in your area that should be addressed through transnational cooperation?”¹¹

Main Survey Feedback

Feedback to this question on key challenges highlights several areas where transnational cooperation is seen as essential and highly valued by stakeholders. **Climate Change and Sustainability** emerged as the most crucial challenge across all sectors, reflecting a broad consensus on the need for collaborative efforts to address environmental challenges. Respondents identified environmental sustainability as a priority, although their focus varied from energy transitions and green innovation to the protection of vulnerable ecosystems and communities. This widespread concern underscores the continued need for coordinated actions to combat climate change and promote sustainable development, aligning with the European Union’s broader environmental goals.

Regional Development and Policy Alignment also stood out as a challenge to be addressed by transnational cooperation, particularly regarding the need for better governance and policy harmonisation across borders. For example, one stakeholder mentioned a need for “*Multi-level cooperation to create innovative solutions for regional and local governments in the field of public services for local communities and companies.*” This topic was prevalent across all sectors, with specific emphasis on the challenges posed by differing regulations and the need for streamlined policies to support cooperation. The alignment of policies across borders is seen as essential for addressing common challenges and ensuring that transnational cooperation is effective and beneficial for all.

⁹ The absent participant was a representative of the NPO sector.

¹⁰ See Annex A.

¹¹ This question relates to Key Question 2 in the European Commission Consultation Toolkit: “Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area?”. See also Annex A.



In addition, many respondents also emphasised **Innovation and Digitalisation** as a key challenge for future innovation and competitiveness, with an emphasis on the need for support in adopting new technologies.

Detailed Survey Insights

Topic 1: Climate Change and Sustainability

- Keywords: climate, environment, sustainability, green, energy, transport, mobility, biodiversity

Public Sector respondents emphasised the need for collaborative efforts in adapting to climate change and promoting green energy transitions. **Private Sector** participants highlighted the importance of sustainability in driving innovation and ensuring competitiveness, especially for SMEs. **Academic Sector** respondents focused on the need for research and knowledge sharing to address climate challenges and foster sustainable practices. **NPO/NGO Sector** feedback underscored the role of environmental protection and sustainable development in supporting vulnerable communities and ecosystems.

Topic 2: Regional Development and Policy Alignment

- Keywords: cooperation, policy, development, regional, metropolitan, governance, transnational

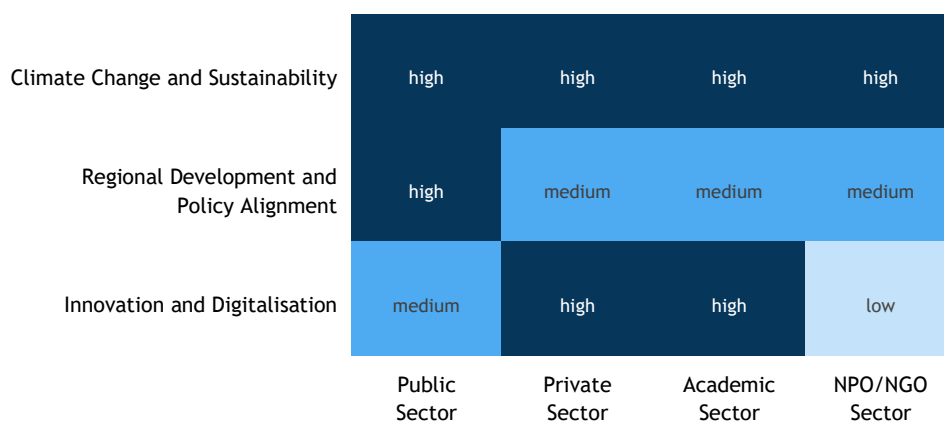
Public Sector organisations specifically stressed the importance of enhancing transnational governance frameworks and policy alignment to address shared challenges effectively. **Private Sector** respondents were concerned with the impact of differing cross-border regulations on business operations, advocating for better harmonisation to support commerce and innovation. **Academic Sector** feedback highlighted the need for coordinated policies to tackle environmental and social issues that transcend national boundaries. **NPO/NGO Sector** participants focused on the importance of transnational cooperation in delivering social services and protecting the environment, particularly in peripheral border regions.

Topic 3: Innovation and Digitalisation

- Keywords: innovation, technology, transfer, digital, SMEs, adoption, expertise, competitiveness

Many respondents also emphasised digital transformation as a key challenge for future innovation and competitiveness, with an emphasis on the need for support in adopting new technologies. The **Private Sector**, in particular, highlighted the challenges faced by SMEs in this regard, while the **Academic Sector** focused on the role of research and knowledge transfer in fostering technological advancements. In the **Public Sector** there were mentions of the importance of digitalisation and the integration of innovative technologies in addressing transnational challenges.

Chart 5: Prevalence of challenges across sectors





Insights from the Focus Group

Participants largely confirmed the challenges identified in the survey. Participants highlighted in particular the need for transnational policy and regulatory harmonisation and emphasised that policy alignment efforts should focus on fostering synergies among existing policies at both the European and local levels.

4.2 Q2: “What are key benefits that transnational cooperation offers to stakeholders like you?”¹²

Main Survey Feedback

Feedback to this question indicates a strong appreciation for the benefits of transnational cooperation across all sectors. Stakeholders see significant value in expanding transnational partnerships to enhance their impact.

Overall, **Knowledge Exchange and Collaboration**, the development of **Innovative Solutions and Best Practices**, and **Institutional Capacity-Building** are the most commonly mentioned benefits of transnational cooperation. The feedback suggests a crucial role for transnational cooperation in enhancing knowledge, fostering innovation, developing new solutions, and building the capacity of organisations to address shared challenges. Typical feedback included statements such as: *“Transnational cooperation facilitates the sharing of best practices, pooling of resources, and fostering of cross-border collaboration to address multi-faceted challenges.”*

Respondents noted that transnational cooperation enhances their ability to deliver services, advocate for change, and implement solutions and suggested that continued investment in transnational cooperation is essential for achieving shared goals - whether in public service delivery, business growth, research advancement, or social impact.

Detailed Survey Insights

Topic 1: Knowledge Exchange and Collaboration

- Keywords: knowledge, exchange, research, network, collaboration, sharing, new, approaches

In the **Public Sector**, respondents highlighted the value of exchanging ideas and experiences with partners from different regions, which leads to the adoption of effective practices and innovative solutions. Such transnational learning is seen as a crucial element in enhancing public service delivery and addressing shared challenges. The **Private Sector** emphasised the role of collaboration in accessing new markets and enhancing competitiveness. Transnational cooperation provides a platform for companies to connect with others, exchange ideas, and learn from different experiences. Networking is perceived as particularly valuable for building partnerships and enhancing skills, which are essential for innovation and business development. For the **Academic Sector**, knowledge exchange drives research collaboration and the development of innovative solutions. The **NPO/NGO Sector** valued knowledge sharing for building capacity and implementing best practices across different regions.

Topic 2: Innovative Solutions and Best Practices

- Keywords: solutions, best, practice, innovation, projects, new

The **Public Sector** focused on implementing innovative solutions to improve public services and address regional challenges. Transnational cooperation is seen as essential for testing and piloting innovative

¹² This question relates to Key Question 3 in the European Commission Consultation Toolkit: “What currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced?” See also Annex A.



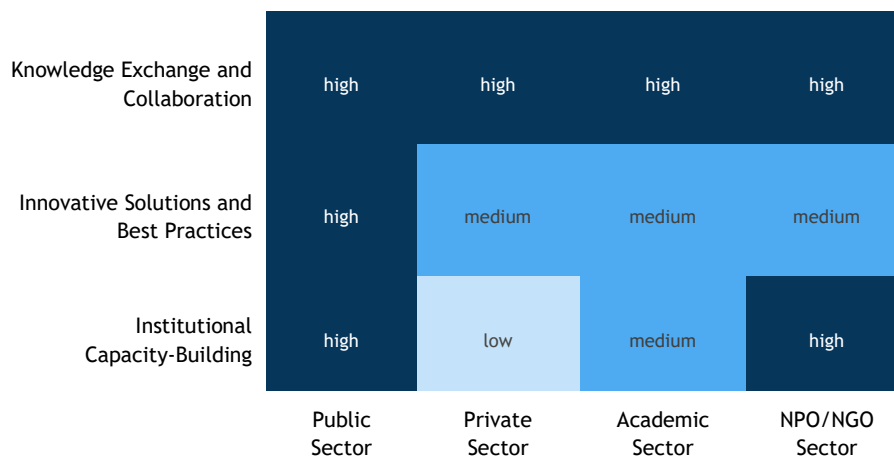
approaches, allowing public sector entities to experiment with new solutions before broader implementation. The **Private Sector** valued the development of new business practices and the implementation of tested solutions to enhance competitiveness. The **Academic Sector** emphasised the creation of innovative research solutions and the adoption of best practices in education and research. The **NPO/NGO Sector** highlighted the importance of developing sustainable practices and solutions to address social and environmental issues.

Topic 3: Institutional Capacity-Building

- Keywords: knowledge, support, learning, skills, resources, challenges, capacity, cooperation

The **Public Sector** viewed transnational cooperation as a means of building capacity to address shared challenges, particularly in regional development. The **NPO/NGO Sector** focused on support and capacity-building as essential for addressing common challenges and improving service delivery. The **Academic Sector** saw capacity-building as critical for enhancing research capabilities and developing innovative solutions.

Chart 6: Prevalence of benefits across sectors



Insights from the Focus Group

The focus group reaffirmed the survey findings and put special emphasis on the topic of capacity-building. Participants appreciated Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE for its role in enhancing organisational abilities to tackle shared challenges. The group also highlighted the importance of cross-sectoral dialogue, which transnational cooperation facilitates exceptionally well. Participants agreed that the ability to collaborate across sectors creates synergies that lead to innovative solutions and impactful projects. The exchange of ideas and good practices was seen as a major strength of transnational cooperation, contributing to long-term institutional growth and shared success.



4.3 Q3: “Do you see any shortcomings in how your transnational cooperation efforts are currently supported?”¹³

Main Survey Feedback

Feedback to the question on shortcomings reflects concerns about the administrative complexity, lack of flexible funding, and cooperation challenges faced in transnational projects. However, it is important to note that **more than 30% of respondents did not identify any shortcomings**. Some did not mention any shortcomings and others expressed their satisfaction with the status quo. This indicates that the current support for transnational cooperation activities is widely perceived as adequate and already works quite well despite the important issues highlighted in the feedback.

When focusing on mentioned issues, **Administrative Complexity** emerged as a prominent shortcoming across all sectors. Respondents mentioned the rigid nature of project management processes. Procedural hurdles - ranging from application to reporting requirements - are seen as a major obstacle to effective cooperation, slowing down project implementation and limiting accessibility.

Another shared topic was the **Lack of Financing and Thematic Flexibility**. There was a concern regarding the lack of support and funding for transnational cooperation and respondents underscored the need for funding that is better tailored to the specific needs of stakeholders. Some respondents sought greater financial flexibility for long-term projects, others highlighted the need for increased funding allocations for research and environmental initiatives. A few respondents also mentioned that the current co-financing mechanism limits their ability to engage in transnational cooperation and some wished for pre-financing.

The third, widely shared theme was **Project Participation and Cooperation Challenges** and focused on barriers to participation and cooperation structures. Respondent sought better support structures to facilitate smoother and more effective collaboration.

Detailed Survey Insights

Topic 1: Administrative Complexity

- Keywords: administrative, project, burden, procedures, reporting, bureaucracy

The **Public Sector** and **Private Sector** highlighted the administrative burden of managing transnational projects, particularly the complexity of reporting, procedures, and bureaucracy. For the **Academic Sector**, this issue was tied to the rigid requirements of project management, which often led to delays and inefficiencies in delivering outcomes. Administrative complexity was viewed as a key barrier to participation and effectiveness in cooperation efforts, requiring simplification to increase accessibility and improve engagement.

Topic 2: Lack of Financing and Thematic Flexibility

- Keywords: funding, resources, financial, co-financing, support, timely

In the **Public Sector**, there was a call for more flexible and targeted funding mechanisms to adapt to the specific needs of stakeholders. The **Academic Sector** echoed this concern, particularly noting the gap between funding allocations and the ambitions for large-scale environmental and research projects. The **Private Sector** and **NPO/NGO Sector** also highlighted issues with insufficient co-financing, which hindered the participation of many organisations in transnational projects.

¹³ This question relates to Key Question 4 in the European Commission Consultation Toolkit: “What currently does not work well in this cooperation and should be improved?” See also Annex A.

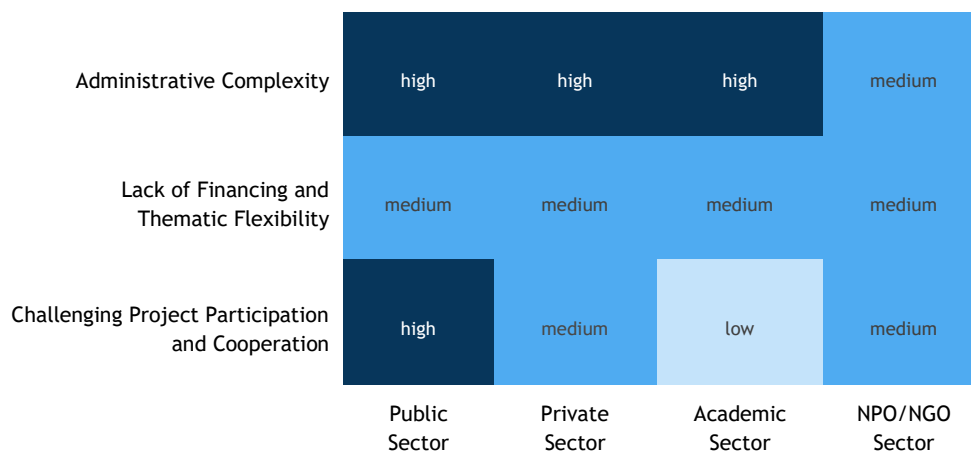


Topic 3: Challenging Project Participation and Cooperation

- Keywords: participation, partners, local, cooperation, results

The **Private Sector** pointed to administrative challenges in effectively participating in projects, especially for SMEs, which often struggled to engage in transnational cooperation. Similarly, the **NPO/NGO Sector** emphasised the difficulty in engaging local policymakers and stakeholders in projects, alongside concerns over the lack of cooperation structures that fully support non-profit involvement. Both sectors called for better cooperation frameworks to facilitate meaningful participation and overcome barriers that hinder their involvement in transnational projects. **Public Sector** respondents commented that projects could benefit from more time and better alignment with local realities.

Chart 7: Prevalence of perceived shortcomings across sectors



Insights from the Focus Group

The focus group discussion on implementation challenges largely aligned with the survey findings, though participants highlighted important nuances regarding administrative complexity and project sustainability.

One key insight was that administrative complexity, while acknowledged as a shortcoming, is often rooted in national-level controls rather than solely in Interreg programme procedures. Additionally, previous negative experiences with administrative burdens have discouraged some organisations from applying, despite improvements in the programme's processes over time. Indeed, some of the more experienced participants praised the huge improvements the programme made over time, including one saying that, *“Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE has become one of the most simplified Interreg programmes.”*

Another concern raised by participants was the recent tendency towards shortened project durations. There was consensus that reducing the duration of projects potentially impacts their sustainability negatively. Shorter timelines could hinder the development of strong partnerships, limit the ability to achieve meaningful results, and affect the dissemination of findings. Participants emphasised that project durations of at least three years are necessary to ensure long-term impacts and to secure ownership of results by policymakers, which is essential for the sustainability of project outcomes.



4.4 Q4: “What are concrete obstacles that prevent stakeholders like you from cooperating transnationally with other partners?”¹⁴

Main Survey Feedback

While the previous question encouraged respondents to reflect on systemic shortcomings of current support, this question prompted slightly more practical feedback about issues that stakeholders face in their efforts to cooperate transnationally. In conclusion, the feedback is very similar to that on shortcomings and underscores the need for improvements in administrative processes, funding structures, and cooperation frameworks to enable more effective participation in transnational projects.

However, it is also important to note that nearly **20% of the respondents did not explicitly mention any obstacles**. While this is not reflected in the change-oriented topics below, it indicates that the current shape of transnational cooperation activities is perceived as adequate by a substantial share of respondents and works quite well despite the identified obstacles.

The main shared concern across all sectors was the **Lack of Financing and Complexity** for territorial cooperation. Respondents reported a lack of funding that could support innovative or longer-term initiatives and criticised high participation costs. The slow pace of funding approvals and co-financing requirements were also mentioned by some respondents as obstacles to participation.

Another prominent feedback was **Administrative Burden** as an obstacle especially when implementing transnational cooperation. Respondents highlighted the reporting requirements, administrative hurdles, and procedural requirements that delay their project implementation and strain organisational resources.

A third, slightly less universally shared, obstacle were **Difficulties in Partner Engagement and Cooperation**. Respondents noted the difficulty in forming and maintaining partnerships across borders due to differences in organisational practices, priorities, and cultural factors. These barriers often result in a lack of alignment between partners, leading to delays and inefficiencies in project execution.

Detailed Survey Insights

Topic 1: Lack of Financing

- Keywords: financial, co-financing, funding, resources, constraints, projects

The lack of sufficient co-financing and funding emerged as a key issue across all sectors. In the **Public Sector**, respondents expressed concerns about the difficulty in securing financial support for large-scale transnational projects, which limits their capacity to engage in long-term cooperation. The **Private Sector**, particularly SMEs, cited financial barriers and high costs of participation as significant deterrents. For the **Academic Sector**, the lack of flexible funding mechanisms constrained their ability to carry out impactful research. The **NPO/NGO Sector** also mentioned the challenge of accessing adequate financial resources, highlighting the slow pace of funding approval and the high co-financing requirements.

Topic 2: Administrative Burden and Complexity

- Keywords: administrative, bureaucratic, burden, procedures, reporting, complex

Administrative burden was highlighted as a significant obstacle by the **Public Sector**, particularly in terms of managing the extensive reporting requirements and compliance with various regulations. This was echoed by the **Private Sector**, especially by SMEs, which found the bureaucratic hurdles overwhelming and time-consuming. The **Academic Sector** similarly raised concerns about over-

¹⁴ This question relates to Key Question 5 in the European Commission Consultation Toolkit: “What are the major obstacles for a good cooperation in your area?” See also Annex A.



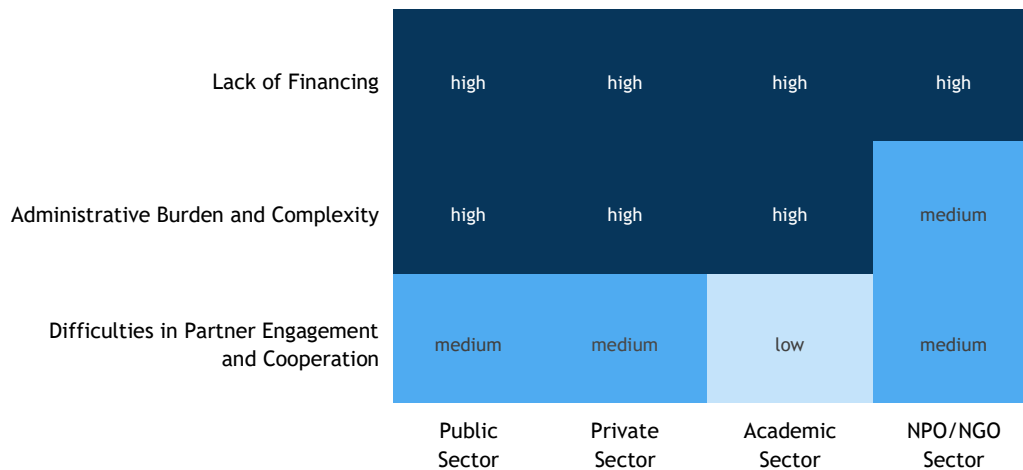
bureaucratisation, emphasising that administrative burdens limit their ability to focus on research and collaboration. These challenges are seen as barriers to effective and efficient project management across borders, creating delays and inefficiencies that hinder cooperation.

Topic 3: Difficulties in Partner Engagement and Cooperation

- Keywords: partnerships, collaboration, cooperation, partners, communication

The **Public Sector** pointed to difficulties in finding and engaging partners with aligned goals and priorities, often citing differences in organisational practices as a barrier to successful cooperation. The **Private Sector**, particularly SMEs, also noted the challenge of engaging strong transnational partners, which is compounded by the lack of shared resources and the complexity of coordinating across borders. For the **NPO/NGO Sector**, the focus was on the lack of effective communication and dialogue between partners, which hampers collaboration and delays project implementation.

Chart 8: Prevalence of obstacles to cooperation across sectors



Insights from the Focus Group

Participants largely mirrored the survey findings and offered additional insights.

One of the major obstacles highlighted was the issue of pre-financing, particularly for smaller organisations. Participants noted that co-financing requirements and the lack of pre-financing limits the ability of many stakeholders, especially from the NGO and private sectors, to participate in transnational cooperation. In terms of administrative burden, participants mentioned that administrative overload discourages participation in transnational Interreg cooperation.

Last but not least, it was discussed that pilot actions and tangible short-term results are crucial to engage policy- and decisionmakers in transnational projects and to create linkages to larger funds. Projects with a strong demonstration effect, investments leverage and policy focus are deemed more successful in political buy-in, and therefore more promising in terms of long-run sustainability and effects in the territories.



4.5 Q5: “Are there things that you would like to do through transnational Interreg programmes but currently you cannot?”¹⁵

Main Survey Feedback

Feedback to this question was very diverse and punctual but revealed a shared desire to engage in more ambitious and impactful transnational cooperation. Similar to the previous questions, it is important to note that **nearly 40% of respondents did not mention potential limitations or expressed their overall satisfaction with current opportunities**, therefore indicating satisfaction with the current funding focus and set-up of the programme.

The most prominent thing that stakeholders would like to see in the future was rather a further **Expansion of Transnational Cooperation**. Respondents from all sectors expressed their interest in more collaborations with partners beyond borders to address additional shared challenges, thus indicating a strong need for funding transnational projects.

Another major topic was the need to **More Opportunities for Innovation and Experimentation**. Some respondents noted that the current transnational funding mechanism makes it rather difficult to take risks on innovative projects and initiatives. There was an often-repeated call for more flexible financing approaches that would allow stakeholders to experiment and test innovative solutions across borders.

Detailed Survey Insights

Topic 1: Expansion of Transnational Cooperation

- Keywords: collaboration, large-scale, funding, long term, projects, infrastructure

Across all sectors, respondents expressed a strong interest in expanding the scope and funding of transnational collaborations across borders. The **Public Sector** highlighted the need to establish and sustain partnerships for infrastructure projects such as transport and energy systems, where cooperation between countries is essential for regional integration. The **Private Sector**, particularly SMEs, sought more support for innovation-driven transnational collaborations, which are crucial for business growth and competitiveness. The **Academic Sector** called for increased opportunities for research partnerships across borders. In the **NPO/NGO Sector**, respondents stressed the need for more support for cross-border social and environmental projects, such as social inclusion and conservation efforts.

Topic 2: More Opportunities for Innovation and Experimentation

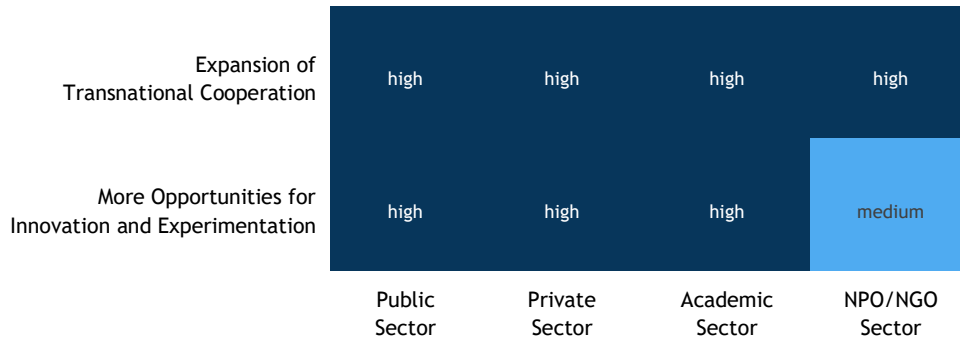
- Keywords: funding, innovation, flexibility, coordination, cooperation, market, access

Respondents often expressed a desire to explore innovative and experimental projects. The **Public Sector** emphasised the importance of pilot projects for testing new solutions in areas like public transport, energy efficiency, and sustainability. SMEs in the **Private Sector** indicated that they would like to take more risks on high-reward innovation projects, but that current funding mechanisms are too restrictive. The **Academic Sector** similarly noted the need for more flexible funding to support experimental research projects that could lead to breakthroughs in fields such as AI and biotechnology.

¹⁵ This question relates to Key Question 6 in the European Commission Consultation Toolkit: “Are there things you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? Why?” See also Annex A.



Chart 9: Prevalence of wished-for opportunities for cooperation across sectors



Insights from the Focus Group

Participants largely shared the survey results, while also confirming that there is not much need to extend the current focus of the programme. They emphasised that Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE should continue to enable experimental projects with pilots that can prepare the ground for larger follow-up investments.

4.6 Q6: “What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in future Interreg transnational programmes?”¹⁶

Main Survey Feedback

Feedback to this question reveals that there is **broad support for the current direction of the programme but stakeholders also see room for improvement**. Much in line with their previous feedback on shortcomings and obstacles, and also with the next question on the funding focus, respondents highlight the need for greater flexibility, long-term support, and administrative simplification to ensure that the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme can continue to foster meaningful cooperation across borders.

One of the most commonly shared needs is a **Greater Flexibility in Funding**. Respondents across all sectors felt that the current transnational funding structure is too rigid. The perceived lack of flexibility limits the scope of projects in particular with a social or local focus, and makes it difficult for smaller organisations and long-term initiatives to secure the necessary resources. Typical feedback was also that, *“There should be more room for changes with ongoing projects to adapt quickly to new circumstances.”*

Another important topic shared by several sectors is the call for more **Support for Sustainable Longer-Term Projects**. Respondents emphasised the need for funding that goes beyond short-term projects, particularly in areas like infrastructure, environmental sustainability, and research.

Finally, there is a demand for the **Simplification of Application and Reporting Processes**. The complexity of current administrative requirements is seen as a barrier to participation, especially for smaller entities with limited resources.

¹⁶ This question relates to Key Question 7 in the European Commission Consultation Toolkit: “What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Interreg?” See also Annex A.



Detailed Survey Insights

Topic 1: Greater Flexibility in Funding

- Keywords: projects, funding, flexibility, conditions, social, local

Respondents from the **Public Sector** called for more flexible funding models that could support projects of varying scopes, scales and durations. The **Private Sector** emphasised the need for more adaptable funding to support innovation and digital transformation. In the **Academic Sector**, there was a strong call for sustained funding for long-term research projects and a better integration with other funding instruments, while the **NPO/NGO Sector** highlighted the complexity of current pre-financing and reporting requirements, advocating for simplified financial conditions.

Topic 2: Support for Sustainable Longer-Term Projects

- Keywords: long-term, sustainable, impact, development, research

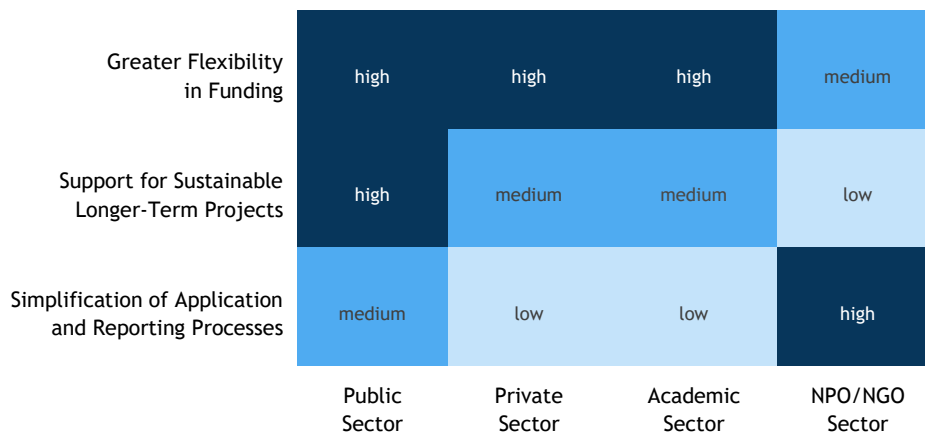
The **Public Sector** highlighted the importance of long-term investments in regional infrastructure and sustainable development, particularly in environmental projects. In the **Private Sector**, there was a focus on supporting innovation-driven projects with a sustainability component, especially in green technologies. The **Academic Sector** called for multi-annual research projects that have a significant transnational impact, suggesting that long-term support is key to achieving meaningful regional development outcomes.

Topic 3: Simplification of Application and Reporting Processes

- Keywords: application, reporting, processes, simplified, complex

Respondents from both the **Public Sector** and **NPO/NGO Sector** raised concerns about the complexity of current application and reporting processes. Respondents from the **Public Sector** suggested streamlining administrative procedures to make funding more accessible, particularly for smaller regional authorities. In the **NPO/NGO Sector**, there were calls for simplified pre-financing and reporting requirements, which would make it easier for smaller organisations to participate in transnational cooperation projects.

Chart 10: Prevalence of desired programme novelties across sectors





Insights from the Focus Group

Participants to the focus group largely confirmed the survey findings. A pre-financing mechanism was reiterated as a potential novelty that could further improve the accessibility of transnational Interreg funding, particularly for smaller organisations.

On another note, when discussing a potential enlargement of the programme area, participants appreciated the current territorial focus of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme. While there was no strong call for expanding the programme area, participants expressed support for maintaining the current level of flexibility, allowing external partners from outside the programme area to participate, in particular keeping an eye to the developments in Ukraine.

4.7 Q7: “Should the funding focus of transnational Interreg programmes change? What would be your transnational dream project?”¹⁷

Main Survey Feedback

This question enquired whether stakeholders see the need to change the funding focus of Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE. Overall, the feedback suggests that there is strong support for the current **Focus on Capacity-Building and Pilot Projects**. *“Collaboration of institutions is important and should be the major goal of such programmes. Therefore capacity-building and pilot investments are the best for transnational cooperation programmes,”* was an often-shared view. Across sectors, these projects are seen as essential for fostering local expertise, testing new solutions, and empowering communities to address social, environmental, and economic challenges.

However, there is also an interest in expanding the scope of funding to **Larger Infrastructure and Investment Projects**, particularly in the areas of infrastructure and sustainability. Finally, **Sustainability and Social Innovation** emerged as cross-cutting themes suggesting more projects that align with sustainability goals, promote social inclusion, and address pressing environmental challenges. A typical quote was: *“Larger investments would also be welcome, clearly, if the programmes themselves would also receive more funding.”*

Detailed Survey Insights

Topic 1: Support for Capacity-Building and Pilot Projects

- Keywords: capacity-building, pilot, projects, support, innovation

The most widely supported topic in the feedback is the **Support for Capacity-Building and Pilot Projects**, which is seen as essential across all sectors. **Public Sector** respondents support the current focus on capacity-building and pilot projects, viewing these as essential for fostering innovation and testing new approaches at the regional level. **Academic Sector** participants echo this sentiment, emphasising the importance of these projects in developing networks and collaborative research. **NPO/NGO Sector** respondents highlight the value of capacity-building in empowering organisations to address social and environmental issues effectively. **Private Sector** respondents also recognise the importance of pilot projects, particularly for SMEs, as these initiatives enable testing and innovation on a smaller scale.

¹⁷ This question relates to Key Question 8 in the European Commission Consultation Toolkit: “Is there a need for some infrastructure projects?” as well as Key Question 10: “What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?” See also Annex A.



Topic 2: Interest in Larger Infrastructure and Investment Projects

- Keywords: infrastructure, investment, larger, projects, regional development, long term

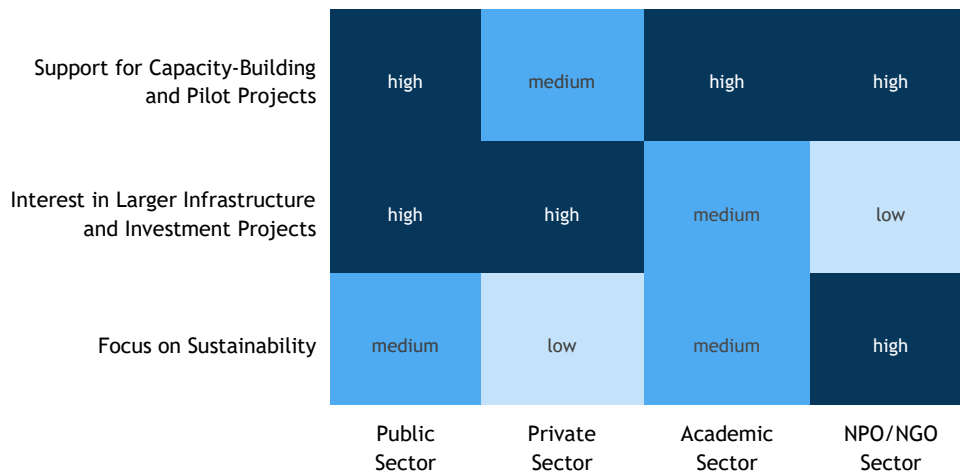
The **Interest in Larger Infrastructure and Investment Projects** also emerged as a significant theme. **Private Sector** respondents advocate for funding larger infrastructure and investment projects, seeing these as crucial for economic growth and competitiveness. **Public Sector** feedback similarly highlight the importance of such projects in driving regional development together with capacity-building. **Academic Sector** respondents, while primarily focused on capacity-building, also express interest in larger projects that could address significant research and infrastructure needs. **NPO/NGO Sector** feedback, in contrast, is rather opposed to large-scale projects and suggests smaller, more manageable projects that align with local needs.

Topic 3: Focus on Sustainability

- Keywords: sustainability, social, innovation, development, impact, cooperation

Another shared feedback was the wish to provide funding for transnational cooperation on sustainability. **NPO/NGO Sector** respondents advocate for projects that address critical environmental and social challenges. **Public Sector** feedback supports this focus, particularly in the context of aligning projects with broader EU strategic goals. **Academic Sector** respondents also recognise the importance of sustainability, especially in research and educational initiatives. **Private Sector** feedback, while primarily focused on economic growth, also acknowledged the importance of sustainability, though it was not a primary focus.

Chart 11: Prevalence of desired funding focus across sectors



Insights from the Focus Group

In the focus group, participants strongly supported the current funding focus of transnational programmes. They emphasised that the funding focus should actually not shift towards larger infrastructure projects, as there are already sufficient EU instruments dedicated to such initiatives. Instead, participants stressed the value of pilot actions that allow for the testing and application of new approaches to reach broader objectives.



4.8 Q8: “Do you have any additional ideas for facilitating cooperation with your counterparts in other countries in the future?”¹⁸

Main Survey Feedback

Feedback to this question highlights specific areas for improvement but **primarily reflects a general sense of stakeholder satisfaction with the current cooperation framework, with 55% of respondents not suggesting any ideas for further facilitating cooperation.**

Looking into the provided ideas, a need for **Better Project Coordination** was prominent across all sectors, with respondents pointing to inefficiencies in communication and project management that hinder effective transnational cooperation.

More Networking and Exchange Opportunities was another widely shared theme, with respondents across all sectors calling for structured platforms that facilitate collaboration and partnership-building.

Last but not least, **Targeted Capacity-Building and Knowledge Exchange** was mentioned by some respondents who called for specific initiatives that support local authorities, smaller NPO/NGOs, and research institutions. These responses emphasised the need for training and workshops that enhance the skills and expertise required for managing transnational projects and sustaining long-term cooperation.

Detailed Survey Insights

Topic 1: Better Project Coordination

- Keywords: coordination, project, management, communication, partners, processes

The need to improve project coordination was a commonly shared theme across all sectors. In the **Public Sector**, respondents highlighted the importance of clearer communication channels and defined roles in managing Interreg projects. In the **Private Sector**, inefficiencies in communication and project management were seen as barriers to collaboration, with respondents calling for more effective strategies to manage international projects. **Academic Sector** participants similarly pointed out that better project coordination would enhance long-term research collaborations, while the **NPO/NGO Sector** emphasised the need for improved coordination at the national level to align projects with broader goals.

Topic 2: More Networking and Exchange Opportunities

- Keywords: networking, collaboration, partnerships, exchange, events

Networking opportunities were a priority across all sectors, reflecting a shared desire for more structured forums for collaboration. In the **Public Sector**, respondents advocated for platforms that allow regional and national bodies to share best practices and form partnerships. The **Private Sector** placed significant emphasis on networking to foster business growth and innovation, while the **Academic and Research Sector** called for study visits, workshops, and other exchange events to enhance long-term cooperation. In the **NPO/NGO Sector**, networking was seen as essential for building partnerships, particularly in areas like environmental and social development.

Topic 3: Targeted Capacity-Building and Knowledge Exchange

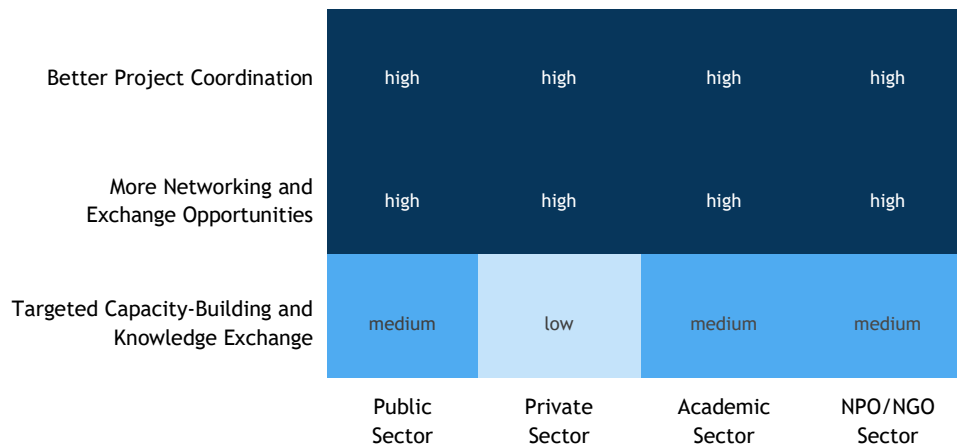
- Keywords: capacity-building, knowledge, exchange, training, workshops, expertise

¹⁸ This question is equivalent to Key Question 9 in the European Commission Consultation Toolkit: “What should be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in another country (governance)?” See also Annex A.



Capacity-building emerged as a key theme in some sectors. Respondents in the **Public Sector** emphasised the need for training and resources to support local authorities in managing transnational projects. **NPO/NGO Sector** respondents similarly called for capacity-building initiatives to empower smaller organisations and ensure effective participation in cross-border initiatives. In the **Academic Sector**, capacity-building was tied to knowledge exchange, with respondents suggesting workshops and training sessions to facilitate the sharing of expertise and foster sustainable research networks.

Chart 12: Prevalence of ideas for facilitating future cooperation across sectors



Insights from the Focus Group

In the focus group, feedback to this question was reviewed together with questions 3 and 4 in the discussion on implementation issues, and the survey responses were widely shared. In view of the number of calls from various funding instruments, participants mentioned the need to better coordinate the timing of calls across Interreg programmes to avoid funding peaks at one time and gaps at other times. The current “congestion” of calls at the start of a programming period is putting a strain on resources of interested organisations.



5. Recommendations for Post-2027

In line with the briefing from the European Commission toolkit, this chapter presents main recommendations derived from the collected feedback of Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE stakeholders. It includes new ideas and covers the following three topics: funding to be offered by the programme, its geography, and the practical implementation of the programme.

In addition, Annex C to this report offers a synthesis of feedback from all 711 stakeholders that responded to the online survey, which was coordinated among six transnational programmes (see chapter 2.1).

5.1 Recommendations for Topics to be Covered by the Programme

Keep Focus on Capacity-Building and Piloting Innovative Ideas

Rationale:

The 9th *Cohesion Report*¹⁹ identifies the quality of institutions, in terms of technical capacity but also transparency, accountability, rule of law, and effective governance structures, as essential for the creation of a healthy business environment and for economic and social development. Central European stakeholders confirm that transnational cooperation enhances their capacity to develop policies, deliver services, advocate for change, and implement innovative solutions. They see transnational cooperation as essential for creating an environment where institutions can learn from each other, test new ideas, and jointly develop solutions that address local and regional challenges shared across a large functional area. In addition, some stakeholders also suggested that transnational cooperation could support larger investments and longer projects to better meet local and regional needs.

Policy Recommendation:

Transnational Interreg cooperation is first and foremost an instrument for building capacities and piloting solutions across borders and sectors. This recommendation from stakeholders is in line with findings of the impact evaluation of Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE 2014-2020²⁰, according to which exchanging know-how and pilot actions play a crucial role in enabling regions to develop and ultimately scale up innovative solutions for their territorial challenges. Transnational Interreg programmes should be strengthened in their role as pivotal instruments for institutional capacity-building and the piloting of innovative solutions.

Improve Governance for a more Integrated Territorial Development

Rationale:

Both the *Letta report* “*Much more than a market*”²¹ and the 9th *Cohesion Report* emphasise the need for reducing regulatory fragmentation to improve the effectiveness of the single market and cohesion policy. Fragmented regulations across national and regional levels are barriers that can ultimately lead to inconsistent implementation of policies. Stakeholders reinforced this need for better governance and policy harmonisation across borders and noted that transnational cooperation is crucial for tackling multi-faceted issues through multi-level and cross-sectoral approaches.

Policy Recommendation:

¹⁹ See European Commission, “Ninth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion”, 2024

²⁰ Available on the programme website at https://www.interreg-central.eu/documents/?@document_category=102

²¹ See Enrico Letta, “Much more than a market - Speed, Security, Solidarity”, 2024



Transnational Interreg programmes improve regional governance and encourage cooperation across sectors, in particular through Interreg-specific objective 1 (ISO 1). This specific objective embodies the core strengths of Interreg, including improved cooperation, better governance, territoriality, and cross-sectoral approaches. To further promote integrated territorial development beyond borders, the future regulatory framework should give these aspects more weight. To this end, ISO 1 could be elevated to the policy objective level in the next ERDF regulation, while keeping transnational projects focused on developing tangible solutions for the green and digital transitions (see next recommendations).

Enhance Climate Action and Sustainability Efforts

Rationale:

The 9th *Cohesion Report* identifies the need for robust action on climate change, particularly to address territorial disparities in climate vulnerability and to meet the EU’s climate neutrality goals. The report underscores the importance of aligning regional efforts with the Green Deal and ensuring that all regions contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Stakeholder feedback reinforces these priorities, highlighting the need for continued collaborative action on environmental challenges that range from energy transitions and green innovation to the protection of vulnerable ecosystems and communities.

Policy Recommendation:

Transnational Interreg cooperation delivers tangible, sustainable solutions. The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE 2014-2020 impact evaluation shows that the programme successfully fosters long-term climate resilience by enabling regions to collaborate on shared environmental challenges. Consulted stakeholders confirmed that transnational cooperation is essential for jointly developing new solutions to emerging environmental issues and ensuring their long-term viability. Transnational Interreg programmes should therefore be recognised as central instruments for helping regions adapt to and mitigate climate-related challenges, in alignment with the EU’s Green Deal.

Pilot Innovation and Digitalisation Efforts

Rationale:

The *Draghi report “The future of European competitiveness”*²² and the 9th *Cohesion Report* both underscore the importance of fostering innovation and advancing digitalisation across regions to boost competitiveness and ensure long-term sustainability. Stakeholder feedback echoes these priorities, calling for more support in digital transformation and regional innovation ecosystems to address disparities in digital capacity and technological advancement across central Europe.

Policy Recommendation:

Stakeholders identify transnational Interreg cooperation as a tool for developing new solutions to regional challenges through digital tools and innovation-driven approaches. This is in line with the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE 2014-2020 impact evaluation, which found that transnational cooperation supports the development of regional innovation ecosystems and helps regions advance their digital capacity. Transnational Interreg programmes should be recognised as key enablers of innovation and digitalisation efforts, supporting regions in building the infrastructure and ecosystems necessary for digital growth.

²² See Mario Draghi, “The future of European competitiveness”, 2024



5.2 Recommendations for the Geography of the Programme

Retain Programme Area with Flexibility for Wider Cooperation

Rationale:

In the focus group discussions, stakeholders expressed satisfaction with the current shape of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE programme area. This satisfaction is in line with findings of the *ESPON CE-FLOWS*²³ targeted analysis, which looked into the transnational linkages between programme regions in different thematic areas. Experts highlighted in this study the importance of existing cooperation structures for the future process of economic, environmental and social integration in central Europe. However, focus group participants also mentioned that flexibility to cooperate with neighbouring regions could bring additional benefits, especially in the context of newly emerging challenges and long-term resilience-building. This resonates with the 9th Cohesion Report, which underscores the importance of engaging neighbouring regions in cohesion policy to address shared challenges and strengthen cooperation beyond the EU's borders.

Policy Recommendation:

The programme area of Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE has evolved over the past programming periods, reflecting each time on previously established cooperation patterns. In its current shape, it is today recognised as a functional area marked by economic, social and cultural flows along common territorial features. However, despite widespread satisfaction with the current geographical scope of the programme, there is room for further enhancing regional cooperation. Expanding the programme's geographical scope, or permitting more geographical flexibility, could allow for more strategic cooperation along existing and newly emerging functional linkages that connect central European regions, and align with the EU's broader geopolitical and cohesion objectives.

5.3 Recommendations for Programme and Project Implementation

Simplify Administrative and Financial Procedures

Rationale:

The 9th *Cohesion Report* emphasises the importance of simplifying administrative and financial procedures to ensure that cohesion policy is more accessible and efficient. Stakeholders pointed towards the complexity of current processes as a barrier to participation, particularly for smaller organisations. They also highlighted difficulties in ensuring co-financing for projects and expressed a need for pre-financing mechanisms to facilitate the participation of smaller organisations in particular. At the same time, stakeholders recognised that transnational Interreg programmes have already set in place numerous and important simplification measures over the past years and appreciated that these efforts are further continued.

Policy Recommendation:

Transnational Interreg programmes have continuously simplified their implementation rules and procedures, which helped to attract a high share of newcomers, as demonstrated by an analysis of current Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE project partners. However, further simplification is necessary and Interreg programmes should be supported in their ongoing simplification efforts by a streamlined regulatory framework that reduces complexity. Possible solutions for the lack of financing faced by many beneficiaries at project start should be explored.

²³ Available on the programme website at https://www.interreg-central.eu/documents/?@document_category=102



Improve Coordination to Foster Sustainable Impacts

Rationale:

Stakeholders identified innovative solutions, knowledge exchange, collaboration, and institutional capacity-building as key benefits of transnational cooperation. As such, transnational cooperation is hardly an end in itself and improving coordination and synergies with other funding programmes is deemed essential by stakeholders for more sustainable impacts: *“Interreg funding programmes work best when coordinated with other policy instruments and strategies.”* To maximise transnational impact, the capitalisation of project results is central and can be most effectively achieved in coordination with other financing instruments. Better cross-programme capitalisation of project results will enable regions to extend the benefits of transnational cooperation and other instruments beyond individual projects and strengthen their long-term impact in the regions.

Policy Recommendation:

Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE has significant experience in creating synergies and coordinating capitalisation efforts with other funding programmes. To improve the impact of these efforts, the harmonisation of rules with centrally managed programmes should be prioritised in the legislation. The capacity of authorities involved in managing these programmes should be strengthened by, for example, dedicating more resources to creating synergies. Incentives should also be introduced to encourage synergies across programmes. While the regulation should include a definition of synergies, this should be for guidance only and not binding.

Address the Need for Flexibility

Rationale:

The 9th *Cohesion Report* identifies the need for flexibility in cohesion policy to help regions adapt to economic challenges, environmental changes, and demographic shifts. Stakeholders see cooperation programmes as rather rigid, calling for more adaptive and flexible funding mechanisms.

Policy Recommendation:

Transnational cooperation already helps regions improve their adaptability and resilience. However, to further strengthen the relevance of transnational Interreg programmes for emerging challenges, the next legislative framework should allow for greater flexibility to enable these programmes to better meet the changing needs and challenges of regions.



Annex A: Alignment of Survey Questions with Key Questions from the European Commission Consultation Toolkit

The survey questionnaire, published by Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE and five other transnational programmes in spring 2024, consisted of eight open-ended questions, modelled on the ten key questions outlined in the European Commission Consultation Toolkit:

European Commission Toolkit	Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Survey
Question 1: Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?	<i>Skipped due to irrelevance for transnational programmes.</i>
Question 2: Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area?	Question 1: What is the key challenge in your area, which should be addressed through transnational cooperation?
Question 3: What currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced?	Question 2: What are key benefits that transnational cooperation offers to stakeholders like you?
Question 4: What currently does not work well in this cooperation and should be improved?	Question 3: Do you see any shortcomings in how your transnational cooperation efforts are currently supported? If yes, please explain.
Question 5: What are the major obstacles for a good cooperation in your area?	Question 4: What are concrete obstacles in your area, which prevent stakeholders like you from cooperating transnationally with other partners?
Question 6: Are there things you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? Why?	Question 5: Are there things that you would like to do through transnational Interreg programmes but currently you cannot? If yes, please explain.
Question 7: What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Interreg?	Question 6: What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Interreg transnational programmes? Please explain how Interreg (or its role within Cohesion Policy) should change in the future to make transnational cooperation more effective.
Question 8: Is there a need for some infrastructure projects?	Question 7: Should the funding focus of transnational Interreg programmes change? What would be your transnational dream project? <i>For example: Should transnational programmes also finance larger investment and infrastructure projects? Or is the current focus on capacity-building and pilot investments fitting well?</i>
Question 9: What should be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in another country (governance)?	Question 8: Do you have any additional ideas for facilitating cooperation with your counterparts in other countries in the future? <i>For example, in terms of coordination, governance, etc.</i>
Question 10: What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?	<i>Integrated into question 7 on funding focus.</i>



Annex B: Composition of Sectors

To make the analysis of survey feedback meaningful, the 15 organisation types that responded were grouped into four broader sectors. These sectors were composed in the following way:

▪ **Public Sector**

The Public Sector includes entities grouped together due to their roles in governance, policy-making, and public service delivery across various administrative levels.

- National public authority (15)
- Regional public authority (22)
- Local public authority (17)
- Sectoral agency (11)
- Infrastructure and (public) service provider (5)
- National, regional, and local development agency (3)
- European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) (2)

Total: 75 respondents

▪ **Private Sector**

The Private Sector includes entities grouped together due to their focus on commercial activities, innovation, and economic growth.

- Small and medium enterprise (SME) (25)
- Business support organisation (23)
- Enterprise, except SME (6)
- Re-assigned from “Other” to “Business support organisation”: Cluster (1)

Total: 55 respondents

▪ **Academic and Research Sector**

The Academic and Research Sector encompasses entities grouped together due to their focus on knowledge creation, scientific research, and the dissemination of educational practices.

- Higher education and research organisations (55)
- Education/training centre and school (10)
- Re-assigned from “Other” to “Higher education and research organisations”: Public research organisation (established by Ministry of Agriculture) (1)
- Re-assigned from “Other” to “Higher education and research organisations”: Advisor and freelance researcher (1)

Total: 67 respondents

▪ **Non-Profit and Non-Governmental Sector**

The NPO/NGO Sector includes organisations grouped together due to their focus on advocacy, social services, and public good initiatives.

- Interest groups including NPO/NGOs (15)
- International organisation, European Economic Interest Grouping (EEIG) (3)
- Re-assigned from “Other” to “Interest groups including NGOs”: NPO (1)

Total: 19 respondents



Annex C: Synthesis of Feedback From Joint Survey

This annex offers a synthesis of feedback from all 711 stakeholders that responded to the joint online survey, which was coordinated among six transnational programmes (see chapter 2.1).

- 1) The role of transnational programmes is considered as crucial by the stakeholders for being a platform to foster extended cooperation among multiple countries and diverse stakeholders, enabling them to work together effectively on common challenges. Moreover, they offer a unique value proposition in federating expertise and know-how from different countries and sectors for a stronger impact on territories and communities. In particular, they are considered instruments for institutional capacity building and piloting innovative solutions as well as improving regional governance and encouraging cooperation across sectors. **Transnational programmes are perceived as a key tool to develop new or upgraded joint and shared solutions to tackle regional environmental, social transformation and sustainable economic development challenges through the use of innovation-driven approaches and the involvement of key stakeholders (SMEs, young people, civil society organizations, universities/research centers and local authorities), this aspect should be emphasized in the next regulatory framework.**
- 2) There is a need for transnational programmes to address the emerging needs of different areas by adapting their strategies to the unique and specific challenges of their respective regions. **To achieve this goal, it is recommended that the new regulations incorporate greater flexibility, enabling programmes to be promptly adjusted to respond effectively to the evolving needs of the territories.**
- 3) Simplification is a main challenge for all Interreg stakeholders. Despite having achieved important progresses through the simplification measures introduced in the regulatory framework for the 2021-2027 period, the administrative burden of programmes and projects remains a concern for both stakeholders and programme authorities. Additional efforts are needed to reduce the administrative workload and, at the same time, to encourage the participation of new actors in the calls for proposals (SMEs, civil society organizations, the youth, etc.). **Simplified funding mechanisms, additional simplified cost options, as well as fast-track funding for pilot projects and financial support to ensure long-term sustainability of networks and results of successful projects are among the recommended measures that should be considered in the new regulatory framework.**
- 4) Synergies and coordination are perceived as important drivers to enhance the impact of the programmes in the territories and beyond. Improving the coordination among Interreg programmes themselves and with other EU initiatives, as well as developing partnerships with international initiatives would foster higher level of cooperation, wider impact, and the possibility to capitalize on common results within complementary sectors of intervention. **Future regulations should stress the objectives, expected results with regard to synergies and complementarities as well as encouraging incentives, financial means to develop structured and mutual coordination mechanisms among the Interreg Programmes and the different EU initiatives.**
- 5) Current specific Interreg indicators partially capture the added value of transnational cooperation. **Developing specific transnational indicators in future regulations — based on common sectors of intervention — would provide stakeholders, institutions, and the general audience with a clearer understanding of the actual achievements of Interreg-funded operations.**