The future of INTERREG: Unlocking its full potential
Approved by the CPMR Political Bureau, 22 March 2024, Patras (Western Greece)

Preamble

The European Territorial Cooperation (INTERREG) programme is an unparalleled tool for cooperation and a quintessential example of the EU’s objective to overcome barriers across borders putting in place shared actions and tools to face common challenges and needs. It increases the sense of belonging to the European family and the opportunity for territories to contribute to the decision-making process of the European Union. It is one of the flagship programmes of Cohesion Policy offering high value-added returns to the EU by allowing necessary experimentation at territorial level and innovative solutions to common problems to emerge, which would not have been produced without this programme. Throughout the years, CPMR Member Regions have gained substantial expertise in serving as both Managing Authorities, National and Regional Contact Points and beneficiaries of INTERREG programs. This has given them a detailed insight on the present strengths and weaknesses, as well as on the great potential of INTERREG in the future. The CPMR itself with its Geographical Commissions has been actively involved in INTERREG Programmes at all levels of strategy development, programming and implementation.

Interreg programs promote a cooperation model based on territorial specificities and the connections between peoples rather than centralized decisions of member states. It has the potential to be an effective cooperation tool for conflict prevention and the promotion of peace. These programs have demonstrated their capacity to contribute to the challenges of European sovereignty and represent significant support from local actors to the goals and initiatives of the European Union.
The CPMR:

1. Calls for the reinforcement of INTERREG as a means to promote a common European identity, transregional learning and regional integration. Now more than ever, most of the challenges affecting the European continent are borderless and INTERREG contributes to creating appropriate innovative financial and coordination approaches. Territorial cooperation brings significant European added value, as it stimulates the creation of solid inter-regional networks, integrates new participants at various levels in a common dialogue, and builds trust and understanding between citizens while also enabling regional growth through targeted investments.

2. Considers that the present and emerging challenges faced by the European Union and its Neighbours call for the INTERREG instrument to be developed financially to reap the considerable potential benefits of stronger territorial cooperation at cross-border, transnational, interregional and outermost regions' level. It therefore urges the Member States to expand the scope and financial capacity of INTERREG.

3. Advocates that an increased envelope and pre-financing would better equip regions for emerging challenges in the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, increasing its impact. A greater financial capacity would allow for the launch of more impactful projects addressing numerous challenges that require deeper collaboration, as well as facilitating the participation of additional stakeholders, enhancing EU and territorial impact, and allowing the development and implementation of innovative soft measures for European integration. Moreover, calls for the European Commission to emphasise the importance of Interreg to ensure member states give the programmes serious consideration.

4. Stresses the necessity to prioritize territorial needs and the local context in INTERREG programming thus increasing the overall impact. Calls for proposals to be tailored to the specific needs of the participating regions, allowing at the same time appropriate financial and thematic flexibility to adapt to unforeseen challenges and embrace new rising opportunities. It therefore calls for an increased involvement of regional authorities in the programming process and in the whole lifecycle of the programmes. The regional authorities should also be able to complement other ERDF projects with cross-border or transnational elements from the INTERREG programme to expand cross-sectional collaboration.

5. Welcomes the progress on the simplification of INTERREG programmes in the 2021-2027 programming period and supports maintaining the current simplification measures but believes that further work must be carried out. Greater flexibility in the implementation and management of programmes is needed. Underlines the need to clarify precisely the hierarchy of rules to avoid mistakes, ensure the equal implementation of common rules and setting a level playing field within programmes. The issues of bureaucratic burden, restrictive rules and regulatory complexity across cohesion policy have been raised previously by the CPMR. In this sense, these same issues also extend to INTERREG, causing delays in execution and holding back its full potential. A new European tool like the mechanism to resolve legal and administrative obstacles in a cross-border context could also reinforce territorial cooperation.

6. Considers that INTERREG should continue to build on the current strands for 2021-2027 that shall be improved and boosted. The current strands model should be preserved by consolidating and managing overlaps, through an efficient coordination of the diverse actions, maximising the results on the ground. To do so, INTERREG programmes that belong to different strands but have overlapping geographical areas need better coordination.

7. Argues that Maritime cross-border cooperation should remain a priority, given that it can address various key thematic areas for Europe and its regions, such as, for example, sustainable fisheries, blue economy, tourism development, marine research and environment, climate adaptation, logistics, underwater digital and energy connectivity and transport. Furthermore, its current distance limits of cooperation should be revised or applied in a more flexible manner, given that physical proximity requirements can sometimes go against the regional reality, particularly for islands and outermost regions.

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1 CPMR messages that should guide the simplification of Cohesion Policy: Trust, Equity and Creativity
8. Recognises the fundamental **support that INTERREG provides to macro-regional strategies, sea basin strategies and emerging initiatives**. For the sake of consistency and effectiveness between EU priorities and existing funding mechanisms, it is key to further develop effective coordination mechanisms between these strategies, INTERREG programmes and other EU programmes operating in their geographical areas of reference. The involvement of regions could be foreseen or enhanced where they already exist to effectively tap into the experiences and lessons stemming from their regional heterogeneity.

9. Strongly believes that **INTERREG should continue to support cooperation with pre-accession and non-EU countries** as a means to foster the exchange of knowledge and experiences with key partners at the borders of the EU, reinforcing thus cooperation, the identification of solutions to common problems and enhancing the impact of the external dimension of EU policies. The needs of non-EU countries concerning funding, relevant programmes’ ownership and technical support should be addressed to foster strong partnerships with a stable commitment on a reciprocal basis. In this regard, it is **indispensable to improve the coordination of the funds from the ERDF, NDICI and the OCT Association Decision**, in order to facilitate the cooperation of the outermost regions with external partners from the neighbourhood area, ACP and OCT. Cooperation with UK regions and local **authorities should remain** within the INTERREG framework which benefits the overall development of the EU economy and regions. In addition, **flexibility should provide the ability for the EU and its regions to adapt and respond to unexpected changes caused by external factors** in programmes, such as in the case of the eastern borders with Ukraine, Belarus and Russia.

10. Considers that the EU should reintegrate and reinforce **inter-regional learning in Smart Specialisation Strategies** into the framework of INTERREG. The potential of innovative actions between border regions needs to be harnessed with a larger and more flexible support for **smart specialisation encouraging transnational and regional actions**.

This Policy Position will be completed by a **technical note** that gathers a detailed list of proposals from the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions for unlocking the full potential of INTERREG.

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The Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) represents more than 150 regional authorities from 24 countries across Europe and beyond. Organised in Geographical Commissions, the CPMR works to ensure that a balanced territorial development is at the heart of the European Union and its policies.

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