

Summary of the Plenary roundtable discussion

Quo Vadis Interreg? The past, present and future of Interreg, during the ***Art of Cooperation 2024 Conference***

Bálna Budapest, 14 November 2024

Moderator: Martin GUILLERMO-RAMÍREZ – Secretary General, Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)

Speakers:

Slawomir TOKARSKI – Director, European Commission, DG REGIO

Péter KISS-PARCIU – Deputy State Secretary, Head of MA, Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Imre CSALAGOVITS – Head of MA, Interreg Danube Region

Sanda ŠIMIĆ STAMBOLIĆ – Assistant Minister of European Integration, Government of the Republic of Serbia, Ministry of European Integration

Iulia HERTZOG – Head of MA for Interreg Black Sea, Interreg Romania-Bulgaria, Interreg NEXT Romania-Ukraine Programmes

Susanne SCHERRER – former Head of MA/JS, Interreg Baltic Sea Programme

Bernadett PETRI – Ministerial Commissioner, Managing Director, Hungarian Development Promotion Office

The plenary roundtable discussion brought together a group of experienced professionals to reflect on the past, present, and future of European Territorial Cooperation. The discussion began with an overview of Interreg's capacity to meet the growing expectations of beneficiaries and stakeholders, particularly local and regional authorities working to overcome cross-border barriers. It was noted that Interreg has significantly contributed to fostering subsidiarity, building trust across national boundaries, and creating a shared sense of belonging to the European project. At the same time, the programme's limitations in addressing an increasing array of initiatives and challenges were acknowledged.

The panellists highlighted the role of Interreg in promoting territorial innovation in complex areas such as spatial planning, which requires cooperation across multiple borders. Particular attention was given to the Western Balkans, where Interreg has played a pivotal role in fostering regional cooperation and stability, especially in countries in the pre-accession phase. Participants emphasised the importance of institutional trust-building and simplifying administrative procedures to better support smaller communities and enable broader participation.

During the second phase of the discussion, attention shifted to the future of Interreg. It was broadly agreed that maintaining a model similar to the current one, while unifying all territorial cooperation efforts under a single brand, is both desirable and feasible. Advances in technology and communication were identified as key tools to improve the programme's efficiency and organisation. There was a strong call to enhance coordination, harmonisation, and simplification, while improving coherence between Interreg and other EU programmes and policies. The importance of aligning Interreg's objectives with broader EU strategies was repeatedly underscored, alongside recommendations to strengthen collaboration across different funding mechanisms.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of cohesion policy as a central pillar of the EU and its role in shaping territorial development. Recent reports were cited as evidence of the significant impact of territorial interventions, reinforcing the need for sustained investment and support for programmes like Interreg. The dialogue underscored the importance of involving local stakeholders more effectively in

shaping objectives, as well as addressing their challenges in accessing funding. Simplification and trust-building were once again identified as crucial to enabling diverse stakeholders to engage meaningfully with the programmes.

The session concluded with a recognition of the resilience shown by regions and municipalities in overcoming crises, with Interreg playing a vital role in this success. There was broad agreement that Interreg programmes demonstrate excellent value for money and are efficient instruments of territorial cohesion. Participants emphasised the need to continue investing in this robust pillar of European integration, while leveraging opportunities to enhance communication about its tangible benefits for citizens across the EU.

