

Post 27 Discussion Paper

External cooperation | Annex

Interreg IPA programmes

18 November 2024

Please note | This discussion paper was produced for the Post 2027 Harvesting event, taking place in Brussels on 25-26 November 2024. It is a tool to stimulate discussion and engagement on the topic. It does not represent an opinion of Interact, Interreg or any other actor. For more information about the Harvesting process, please see the Post 2027 section of [Interact.eu](https://interact.eu)

Overview

The Interreg IPA programmes scope stand at the convergence of European integration and cross-border cooperation, uniquely bridging EU member states and pre-accession countries. These programmes foster partnerships that promote shared growth, stability and development in the regions of Western Balkans and Türkiye. By addressing common challenges - from economic disparities to environmental sustainability - Interreg IPA programmes empower local communities and institutions to build and strengthen their capacities to collaborate, learn and innovate together. They serve as essential mechanisms for preparing candidate countries for EU membership by enhancing institutional capacities, harmonizing standards, building trust and connections across borders.

Alongside supporting the integration process, Interreg IPA programmes contribute to key EU policies, including the green and digital transitions, sustainable tourism, cultural heritage preservation, and improved mobility. They cultivate an environment where joint initiatives drive regional prosperity and further the European integration process.

This report summarises the outcome of the interviews conducted with representatives of Interreg IPA programmes in view of post 27 regulatory framework with the aim to inform future discussion on Interreg IPA programming.

What is working: key strengths of Interreg IPA programmes

- A strong connection between local, regional and national authorities between the countries enhancing already existing communities and building new ones, strengthening sustainable partnerships and contributing to broader agendas like security, enlargement, green and digital transformations.
- Transfer of knowledge and know-how from EU member states to non-EU IPA countries, to their local, regional, national administrations and beneficiaries.

- Addressing common challenges through shared solutions with cross-border impacts.
- Facilitating collaboration via common cultural backgrounds, reinforcing cooperation between countries.
- Contributing to building a trust environment and mutual understanding between stakeholders in both EU and IPA countries.
- Implementation of innovative approaches like Simplified Cost Options (SCO) and small-scale projects that engage smaller organizations and make Interreg IPA programmes more attractive.
- Traditionally, the Interreg IPA programmes involve mainly public authorities and NGOs. However, in 21-27 programming period has seen a deliberate effort to engage SMEs, recognizing their key role in driving competitiveness and real change.
- The EU co-financing (85%) level which significantly reduces the financial burden on beneficiaries and makes the programme more accessible.
- The pre-financing at programme level, which ensures initial financial resources and efficient management of the cash flow.

What are the potential improvements? Main past and present challenges in implementing Interreg IPA programmes

IPA countries challenges:

- Political instability and the internal organization of the involved IPA countries make it sometimes difficult to implement and harmonize procedures and programme management.
- The lack of stable, experienced teams in IPA countries national authorities further complicates the programme implementation.

Programme-level challenges:

- Lack of financial and human capacities/resources of programmes and project partners, making it difficult sometimes to meet the objectives of the programmes.
- Complexity of implementing rules that differ between the EU and non-EU countries, leading to confusion and hindering genuine cooperation.
- Sometimes, small territorial scale limits the impact of projects and affects policy integration across borders.

Legal and administrative constraints:

- Differences in legal frameworks, procurement procedures and institutional development between EU member states and IPA countries slow down harmonization efforts.
- Particular emphasis should be given to the changes in the applicable procurement rules and the adoption of different rules for MS and IPA countries.

These changes require a lot of active measures to be taken by MAs and NAs in order to adapt the management system, FLC units and project partners.

- Complex procedures, related to financing agreements and the involvement of different actors (EC, NA, MA) add unnecessary complications.

Simplification and streamlining:

- The need for a more streamlined and coordinated approach to managing Interreg IPA programmes, ensuring they are accessible, effective and aligned with the specific needs of each region. This simplification would not only help existing beneficiaries but also make the programmes more attractive to newcomers, allowing new institutions to join the cooperation.
- Management verifications need to be streamlined, particularly concerning the use of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs). In some programmes, current auditors are seen as lacking the qualifications to properly assess performance, and the management verification profile needs adaptation to effectively evaluate performance.
- Administrative burdens can be alleviated through off-the-shelf SCOs (extension of the off-the-shelf options, maybe even adapted to Interreg IPA/ external borders context).

Capacity building:

- Promoting cooperation and capacity building activities beyond strict programme borders is seen as essential for building new networks and partnerships.
- More emphasis should be placed on capitalisation, complementarity and synergies (with IPA-IPA and national IPA programmes) to enhance impact.

Roles and responsibilities:

- There is a call for more active engagement and ownership from national authorities, especially those from IPA countries in all the stages of the programme lifecycle (design, implementation, closure). The role of the national authority remains loosely defined in the legal framework, hindering real cooperation and contribution to the IPA programmes.

Delivery models:

- Some specific objectives attract high-quality applications and lead to successful projects, while others struggle due to factors like limited capacity, lack of innovation, or low interest from potential beneficiaries. These outcomes should guide decisions on future priorities post-2027. Some programmes suggest not forcing the selection of policy objectives (POs) where supportive conditions are lacking. However, maintaining flexibility in choosing SOs has allowed programmes to better meet both beneficiaries' needs and programme goals.

- Further promote the integrated way of working, including PO5, is seen from some programmes as a revolutionary approach. While it has both pros and cons, local stakeholders appreciate having a say in the process. In addition, the PO5 approach allows for a more active involvement of local stakeholders in the decision-making and decision implementation.
- Some programmes suggest a distinct priority or specific objective within Interreg IPA programmes, similar to the TAIEX model, to facilitate the direct transfer of expertise from the managing authority to the national authority across various topics, tailored to meet the specific needs of the national authorities.
- In some programmes, infrastructure development particularly in non-EU areas, is considered a key priority. IPA regions often lag behind EU standards in areas such as transport, water, waste management, etc. Therefore, there is a need to focus on tangible outputs that directly benefit these communities.
- Large-scale projects in cross-border areas, along with small-scale projects for new or smaller partners, should be designed to promote real cooperation and capacity-building. Strategic projects, selected top-down, may be necessary to meet broader regional needs, but both types of projects should ensure genuine collaboration, benefiting all participating countries equally.

Key messages – call to action. How should the post2027 framework address the current challenges

- Interreg IPA programmes provide substantial added value by preparing candidate countries for EU accession, building on their past successes over three consecutive programming periods in addressing common emerging challenges.
- Interreg IPA programmes should continue to focus on their core strengths, namely enabling collaborative solutions and capacity building. Whether through smaller projects or strategic initiatives, the priority should remain on fostering genuine, cooperative partnerships that address real needs in border regions.
- Interreg IPA programmes ensure the institutional convergence and capacity building support for the candidate countries.
- Simplify the overall programming exercise and streamlining efficient processes as well as complex procedures to increase accessibility for potential beneficiaries of Interreg IPA programmes.
- Consider of eliminating the compulsory objectives and direct programmes to focus on areas where cooperation truly adds value and is necessary for success. Current broad policy objectives may not always be the best for external cooperation programmes and specific objectives make the programmes fragmented. To simplify and focus on actual needs, giving up of specific objectives could be considered.
- Consider making some tools like JEMS and/or INDEX and procedures such HIT, mandatory to simplify processes for beneficiaries and programmes.

- Interreg IPA programmes play a crucial role in supporting the accession process by fostering exchanges of experience and know-how, strengthening governance systems, and aiding the implementation of the *acquis communautaire*. Hence, it is crucial to continue strengthening the capacities of IPA countries to manage EU funds and build synergies and complementarities between Interreg IPA and IPA-IPA and national IPA programmes as well as the Economic Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.
- Interreg IPA programmes should be allowed the freedom to apply standardisation and use the same procedures for the most important management processes in MSs and IPA countries.
- To address evolving global and regional challenges, future priorities should include resilience, safety, security, civil protection, and refugee support. These objectives reflect contemporary cooperation needs but require coordinated efforts. Variations in commitment and capacity may hinder progress, underscoring the importance of lessons from the current Interreg objective, ISO2 "A Safer and More Secure Europe".
- Consider introducing a mandatory pre-financing requirement at the project level within the legal framework.

In addition, further input for discussion can be found in the report "A Vision for the Post-2027 Interreg IPA Programmes", prepared by the Interreg IPA Programmes during the kick-off meeting "Together for Better Programmes", held in Bucharest (RO) on 14-15 October 2024.

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