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Mid-term performance evaluation Interreg Baltic Sea Region 2021-2027 Programme



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Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
API	Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients
BAMOS+	Electronic Monitoring System BAMOS+ of the Baltic Sea Region Programme
BSO	Business Support Organisation
BSP	Baltic Sea Strategy Point, part of the EUSBSR governance
BSR	Baltic Sea Region
BSSSC	Baltic Sea States Subregional Co-operation
BSRYF	Baltic Sea Region Youth Forum
CBSS	Council of the Baltic Sea States
CEF	Connecting Europe Facility
CPR	Common Provisions Regulation (EU Regulation 2021/1060)
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic Acid
EC	European Commission
EGTC	European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation
EEIG	European Economic Interest Grouping
EMFAF	European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund
EPA	Swedish Environmental Protection Agency
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
ETC	European Territorial Cooperation
EU	European Union
EUSBSR	EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
GIS	Geographic Information System
GPP	Green Public Procurement
HELCOM	Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission – also Helsinki Commission (HELCOM)
IBSR	Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027
IT	Information Technology
LED	Light-emitting diode
LEEG	Local Energy Efficiency Work Group
LP	Lead Partner
MA/JS	Managing Authority and Joint Secretariat
MC	Monitoring Committee
MSP	Maritime Spatial Planning
NBS	Nature-Based Solution
NC	National Coordinator, part of the EUSBSR governance
NCP	National Contact Point
NDPHS	Northern Dimension Partnership in Health and Social Well-being
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PA	Policy Area
PAC	Policy Area Coordinator
PFAS	Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, persistent organic pollutants
PO	Programme objective
PP	Project Partner
PPI	Public Procurement of innovative solutions
PV	Photovoltaic
Reg.	Regulation
SCOs	Simplified Cost Options
SG	Steering Group, part of the EUSBSR governance
SME	Small- and medium-sized enterprise
SUMP	Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan
TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network
UWWTD	Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive
VR/AR	Virtual and Augmented Reality
VTS	Vessel traffic services
XR	Extended Reality

1 Introduction

The regulatory framework to implement the 2021-2027 Programmes under the Commons Provisions Regulation (EU Reg. 2021/1060) requires Programmes to carry out evaluations related to one or more of the following criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and Union added value, with the aim to improve the quality of the design and implementation of Programmes (Article 44(1) of EU Reg. 2021/1060 and Article 35 of EU Reg. 2021/1059).

The Programme

The Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027, hereafter called IBSR or the Programme, is one of the transnational Interreg Programmes that is designed to foster cooperation and territorial development across the Baltic Sea Region (BSR).

The Programme covers an extensive geographical area covering about 2.9 million km^2 with a population of 80 million inhabitants. Overall, there are nine countries involved, eight EU Member States and Norway. The eligible geographic area in the 2021-2027 Programme includes EU Member States Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden and northern parts of Germany (the States (Länder) of Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Schleswig-Holstein and Niedersachsen (only NUTS II area Lüneburg region)), as well as some regions of Norway (Trøndelag, Møre og Romsdal, Vestland, Rogaland, Agder, Vestfold og Telemark, Viken, Innlandet, Oslo).

The Programme is structured around four priorities Innovative societies (Priority 1), Water-smart societies (Priority 2), Climate-neutral societies (Priority 3) or Cooperation governance (Priority 4), further differentiated along nine Programme objectives (PO).

Priority 1: Innovative societies	Priority 2: Water-smart societies	Priority 3: Climate-neutral societies	Priority 4: Cooperation governance
PO 1.1: Resilient economies and communities PO 1.2: Responsive public services	PO2.1: Sustainable waters PO2.2: Blue economy	PO 3.1: Circular economy PO 3.2: Energy transition PO 3.3: Smart green mobility	PO 4.1: Project platforms PO 4.2: Macro-regional governance

Target groups of the Programme include a wide range of entities and organisations. These include public authorities at local, regional and national levels, business support organisations, different service providers, research institutions, training centres, different types of businesses of the Baltic Sea Region.

Projects 2021-2027

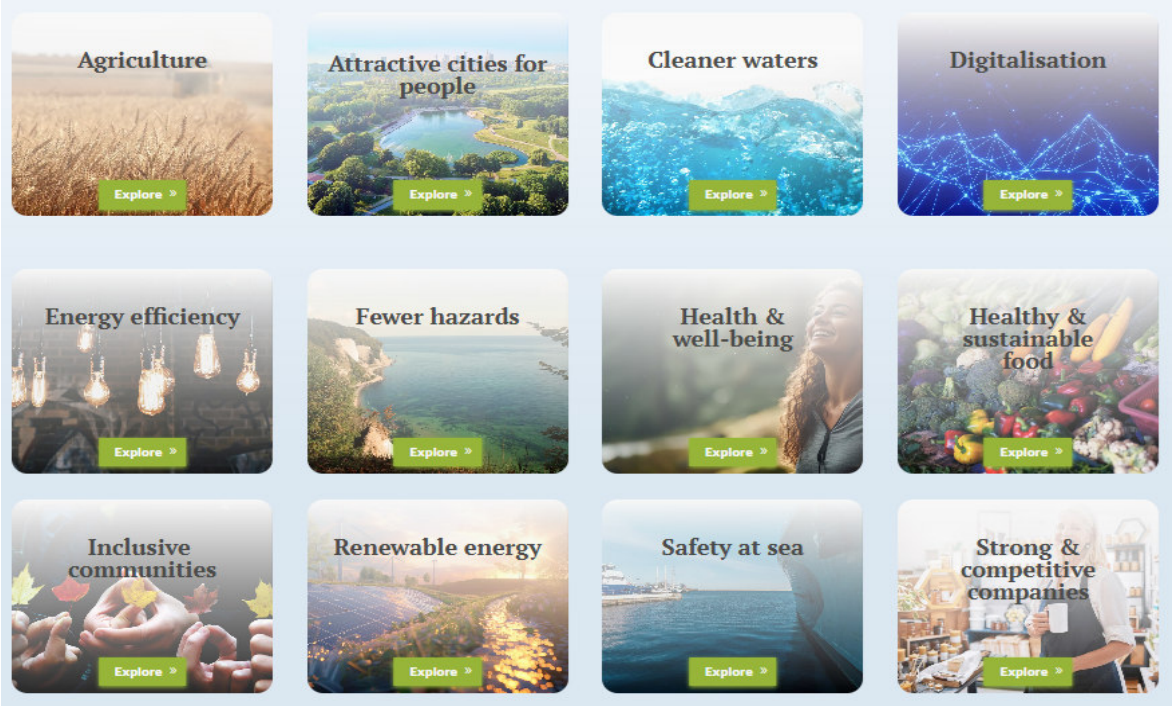
Within the framework of the Programme priorities and Programme objectives different types of projects are funded:

- core projects and small projects within Programme priorities 1-3;

- project platforms within Programme objective 4.1;
- actions that implement and strengthen governance and communication activities of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) within Programme objective 4.2.

One of the key priorities of the Programme, as mentioned above, is its support to the EUSBSR governance. Besides the thematic support showcased by the linking of the Programme priorities to those of the EUSBSR, the Programme connects project results, brings together different players and looks up for synergies and complementarities between the Programme and the EUSBSR. It also supports the EUSBSR coordinators and provides support to the Baltic Sea Strategy Point, as well as the Annual Forum of the EUSBSR.

The projects and solutions can be grouped under different thematic headings, tackling challenges from different perspectives.



Situation in 2026

By the time the evaluation started in January 2026, the 2021-2027 Programme had approved 115 projects (77 core projects, 30 small projects and 8 project platforms) involving over 2,400 organisations, allocating a large part of the Programme budget in the process. By end of March 2026, when the evaluation was well under way, the Programme had approved a further 28 small projects in its final call for proposals. At the same time, the last five project platforms were selected. As these new projects and platforms were still in the contracting phase or in an early stage of implementation, the evaluation analysed the situation in February 2026.

2 Methodology

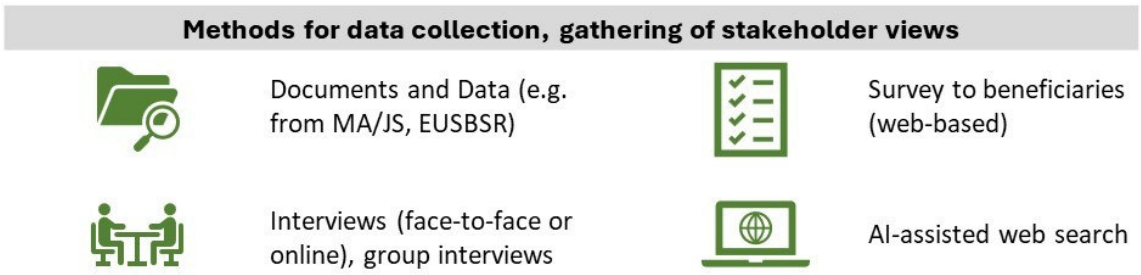
The purpose of the mid-term performance evaluation is to check on the Programme performance and draw evidence-based lessons that could be used in view of planning the next Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme for the period 2028-2034. The mid-term performance evaluation also analyses Programme implementation procedures/tools and implementation in the light of the first project results.

According to the Terms of Reference, the assignment of delivering the mid-term performance evaluation comprises six tasks to assess

1) the relevance of the 2021-2027 Programme objectives' thematic focus,
2) long-term effects of the interventions from the previous Programme period (2014-2020),
3) 2021-2027 Programme new features for projects (including small projects, Simplified Cost Options (SCO), the focus on pilots and solutions, EUSBSR support to projects, as well as new types of partners and newcomers)
4) support to the EUSBSR governance and communication and Policy Area Coordinators (PACs) support to projects,
5) Programme implementation procedures and tools, as well as
6) 2021-2027 Programme communication strategy and its implementation.

In total, 31 Evaluation Questions were defined in the Terms of Reference and had to be answered in the different tasks. The evaluation report structures these evaluation questions in different themes.

The mid-term performance evaluation applied a mixed method approach with qualitative and quantitative methods for data analysis and evaluation. Different methods have been used to collect data and information and to gather the perceptions and views of different stakeholder groups such as the Managing Authority/Joint Secretariat (MA/JS), Monitoring Committee (MC) members, National Contact Points (NCP), EUSBSR stakeholders, project partners and beneficiaries as well as other local and regional stakeholders.

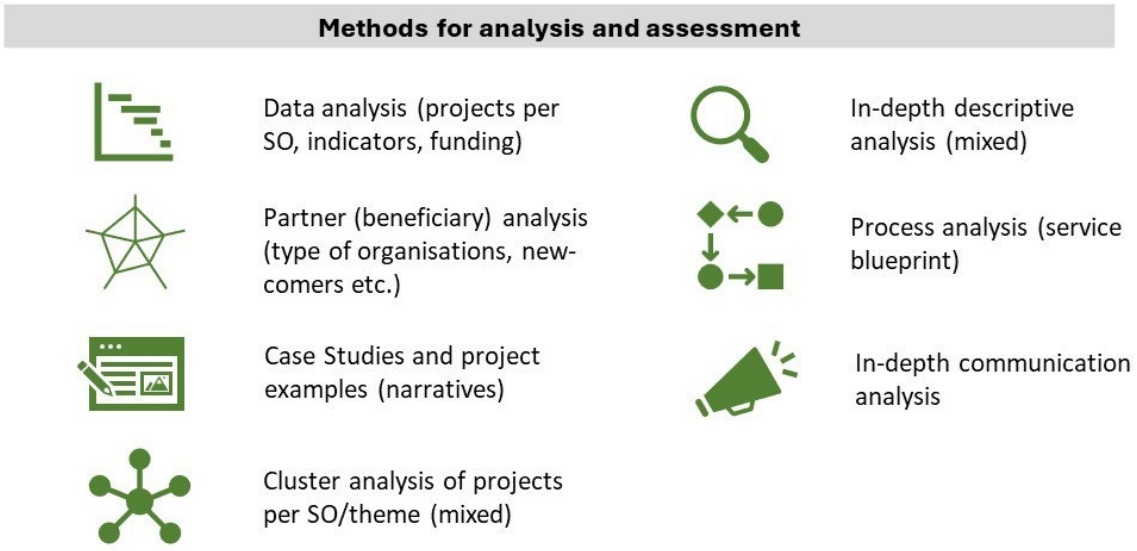


Details of the data collection activities are presented in Annex 1 to this report.

In total, 17 semi-structured interviews have been conducted, 5 of them with the MA/JS, 9 with national delegations, as well as 3 with EUSBSR stakeholders. Three web surveys were used to collect primary

information from different stakeholder groups. The web survey to project partners/beneficiaries generated 335 responses and delivered important insights for most evaluation questions. Two smaller web surveys addressed EUSBSR stakeholder, namely EUSBSR PACs with 15 responses, the Baltic Sea Strategy Point with 2 responses[1].

Different types of analysis were used during the evaluation. Each of them focuses on different methods. Triangulation of methods helped to combine different perspectives on the relevant topics and to come to an integrated and objective assessment.



Project Analysis concentrated on the analysis of data related to the Baltic Sea Region projects. It facilitated the analysis of projects in different thematic areas or within different Programme objectives in relationship to key features of projects such as funding, partnership, outputs and solutions. This was supported by cluster analysis on different themes and impact dimensions. **Case studies** were used to provide a view on complex issues related to the long-term effects of the 2014-2020 interventions. In addition, specific thematic case studies were used to gather information and prepare the analysis of specific aspects such as the performance of small projects compared to core projects, the use of SCO by projects or the effect of pilot actions and testing on transfer of knowledge and uptake of solutions.

The **partner analysis** focused on examining the partner organisations of the partner database in cross-reference with PO/theme, experience in the Programme (experienced or newcomer) and location/region/country. **Process analysis** was carried out on the Programme implementation procedures and the delivery of service during application and implementation of projects. **In-depth analysis** of the support to the EUSBSR or the communication strategy and activities completed the work.

[1] The Baltic Sea Strategy Point (BSP) is hosted jointly by the Centrum Balticum Foundation and the Senate Chancellery of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg. Both organisations provided a response to the survey.

The evaluation was guided by the evaluation questions defined in the Terms of Reference. The report is organised according to the different thematic areas of the evaluation, reflecting the structure of the tasks and re-grouping the evaluation questions.

To make it easier to read, some tasks have been split into different chapters.

- Chapter 3: The relevance of the 2021-2027 Programme objectives' thematic focus – continuation from 2014-2020
- Chapter 4: The relevance of the 2021-2027 Programme objectives' thematic focus – novel objectives
- Chapter 5: The 2021-2027 Programme and geopolitical changes
- Chapter 6: Contribution to the EUSBSR Objectives
- Chapter 7: Participation in the 2021-2027 Programme
- Chapter 8: The long-term effects of the interventions from the previous Programme period (2014-2020)
- Chapter 9: The 2021-2027 Programme new features – Small projects
- Chapter 10: The 2021-2027 Programme new features – Focus on pilots and on testing of solutions
- Chapter 11: The 2021-2027 Programme new features – Simplified Cost Options (SCO)
- Chapter 12: The support to the EUSBSR governance and communication and PACs' support to projects
- Chapter 13: The Programme implementation procedures and tools
- Chapter 14: The 2021-2027 Programme communication strategy and its implementation.

The final chapter summarises the key findings of the mid-term performance evaluation and presents recommendations to further improve efficiency and effectiveness of the Programme.

3 The relevance of the 2021-2027 Programme objectives' thematic focus – continuation from 2014-2020

This section is dedicated to assessing the relevance of the Programme objectives' thematic focus. For Programme objectives (PO), which represent a continuity to the 2014-2020 Programme, the emphasis was placed on the potential change of the thematic focus and on the added value of the new Programme compared to the past.

This chapter refers to the following evaluation questions:

EQ 1.1: Did the thematic focus of the selected projects change from the projects in Programme 2014-2020? If yes, how? How do the changes in the thematic focus correlate with new needs and changed political priorities in the EU and the Baltic Sea Region?
EQ 1.2: What is the added value of the 2021-2027 Programme compared to the 2014-2020 Programme in these topics? (refer for instance to the shifted thematic focus, to the different angle or approach to tackling a topic, to partnership and the main stakeholders engaged, to the type of project achievements and results)

3.1 Context

Four Programme objectives of the 21-27 IBSR represent continuity to the 2014-2020 Programme, namely:

- PO 2.1 Sustainable waters,
- PO 2.2 Blue economy,
- PO 3.2 Energy transition, and
- PO 3.3 Smart green mobility.

The methodological approach featured qualitative content analysis of project descriptions (gathered from application forms, the project library at the IBSR website, project documents and report, additional project or related websites) for projects in both programming periods, as well as an additional comparison of key criteria such as thematic focus, needs and challenges addressed, achievements, partnerships. The results of the analysis, first per PO and later with general conclusions, are presented below.

3.2 Analysis



PO 2.1 Sustainable waters

The Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects on clean and sustainable waters evolved between the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 cycles, moving from a foundation of systemic intervention toward real-scale pilots, advanced digitalisation, and new topics such as Nature-Based Solutions (NBS).

Table 3-1 Comparison of "Water" projects 2014-2020 and 2021-2027

Period	2014-2020	2021-2027
Projects	22 projects (including 2 platforms) under SO 2.1 Clean Waters	11 core and 4 small projects PO 2.1 Sustainable waters
Thematic Focus	Projects were organised under four strategic pillars: sustainable agriculture, advanced wastewater treatment, marine safety/hazardous substances, and urban climate resilience. The focus was on moving from voluntary awareness to active, systemic intervention.	While continuing efforts in nutrient management and maritime safety, the focus has shifted toward circular economy and water reuse, alongside NBS for urban water management and addressing "unseen" threats like per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, persistent organic pollutants (PFAS) and active pharmaceutical ingredients in construction materials.
Needs and challenges	The primary challenge was bridging the gap between scientific monitoring (the "what") and operational implementation (the "how-to") to address eutrophication and legacy pollution.	The 2021-2027 cycle responds to intensified climate change pressures, such as urban flooding in densifying cities, and tackles new social challenges like social resistance to water reuse and the environmental impact of tourism on water infrastructure. Invisible threats like pharmaceutical residues and legacy munitions risks continue to be challenges, as in 2014-2020.
Achievements	Major achievements included legally binding policy integration (e.g., HELCOM manure standards and EU Industrial Emissions Directive updates) and proving that environmental protection is economically viable. Key outputs were practical tools like the Baltic Smart Water Hub and the DAIMON Decision Support System.	Achievements include practical, transferable information technology (IT) tools (e.g. WaterSafe, AISyRISK Baltic), strategic roadmaps (e.g. for munitions remediation), as well as practical tools and handbooks and circular business models to ensure municipalities transition to climate-resilient water supplies.
Partnership	Partnerships followed the "Triple Helix" model, emphasising the role of large national authorities (e.g., SYKE, Swedish EPA) and major municipalities like Stockholm and Riga to ensure administrative continuity and regulatory change. Private sector involvement, such as Aqua&Waste (Germany), focused on proving that environmental innovations were market-ready and industrially viable through technical upgrades at wastewater plants. Water utilities were already involved.	Projects are based on a multi-level governance approach. Public authorities are playing a strong role as project partners, alongside communities that are often involved in shaping outcomes and contributing to the implementation of solutions on the ground. The role of business partners and small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) has shifted from providing general technical expertise to becoming project partners integrated into the delivery of outputs. Water utilities are involved as infrastructure providers and target groups. They act as the "community of practitioners" who co-develop and demonstrate advanced treatment systems for emerging threats like PFAS. SMEs like North.io develop sophisticated IT tools (Decision Support Systems) for munitions remediation. Projects like TRUST ALUM rely on specialised SMEs (e.g. Lake Restoration Sweden Inc.) to provide patented technical equipment and expertise that public authorities lack.

Source: Own elaboration based on project descriptions in Programme database, application forms and project websites

The 2021-2027 projects transition to technical implementation by shifting from the previous cycle's applied research focus toward real-scale pilots and advanced digitalisation. This transition is facilitated through several key mechanisms:

- Practitioner Partnership Model: A primary mechanism for technical implementation is the categorisation of partners into specialised levels of competence. Projects move beyond general collaboration by involving frontrunners (e.g. cities such as Tampere, Malmö, Aarhus, and Riga). Communities of practitioners such as water utilities and infrastructure providers (e.g. Gdańsk

Water Utilities, Kaunas Water) are core partners responsible for the physical construction and piloting of advanced systems, such as quaternary treatment for PFAS removal.

- Real-Scale Piloting for Economic and Technical Viability: The 2021-2027 projects prioritise demonstrating solutions at a scale sufficient to evaluate economic viability and upscaling potential. EMPEREST demonstrates novel treatment technologies on a large scale to help utilities create investment roadmaps for micropollutant removal. City Blues establishes a joint operational model for NBS that is piloted directly within urban watersheds to monitor and maintain green infrastructure. NURSECOAST-II implements real-scale technological solutions specifically designed to handle the high seasonality of wastewater in coastal tourist regions.
- Advanced Digitalisation and Operational IT Tools: Advanced digitalisation serves as a bridge between scientific data and daily management practices. The shift is characterised by the production of functional software and platforms. The APRIORA project provides an open-source geographic information system (GIS) toolbox (QGIS repository) to allow authorities to perform risk assessments as part of their "everyday working practices". OpenRisk II adapts the AISyRISK tool into an operational online service for maritime authorities to prevent accidents and manage ice navigation risks. ReNutriWater developed the WaterSafe IT Tool to manage the safe reuse of reclaimed water for local authorities.
- Specialised Technical Innovation: The current cycle utilises small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as technical engines to provide the specialised knowledge or equipment required for implementation. this includes patent technologies and IT development. TRUST ALUM uses the patented equipment and restoration expertise of specialised SMEs to move the ALUM water treatment method from a Swedish standard to a practical Baltic application. The SME North.io is instrumental in developing the web-based solutions needed for the complex munition remediation process.
- Capacity Building for Integrated Strategic Management: To ensure the transition is durable, projects implement capacity-building programs that train end-users (municipal staff and utility operators) on how to integrate these new technical and digital tools into their workflows. This "learning by doing" approach ensures that the "how-to" knowledge from the previous cycle is now actively used to drive national operating models and policy guidelines.

With regard to thematic focus, the 2021-2027 projects reflect a shift toward practical implementation in new and diverse areas. New themes have emerged, most notably water reuse and the circular economy, which focus on reclaiming treated wastewater as a resource. There is also a stronger emphasis on advanced monitoring using smart imaging and artificial intelligence (AI).

The 2021-2027 cycle marks a shift in priorities toward circular economy, water reuse, and NBS for urban water management. It addresses emerging challenges like PFAS and pharmaceutical residues in construction and water systems, while responding to climate change pressures such as urban flooding in densifying cities. Social resistance to water reuse and the environmental impact of tourism on water infrastructure are new focal points. Meanwhile, invisible threats like legacy munitions and pharmaceutical residues remain persistent challenges, as in the 2014-2020 period.

In 2014-2020, success was often measured by institutional change and policy integration, such as findings being integrated into the EU Industrial Emissions Directive or Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) manure standards. Key outputs included practical handbooks (e.g. the Baltic Sea Blueprint) and digital apps for field operations. In 2021-2027, results are increasingly focused on scalable digital tools, including AI for maritime risk (AISyRISK Baltic), virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) for flood simulation, and open-source GIS toolboxes. This period also emphasises real-scale pilots for quaternary treatment and establishing “learning sites” and “pilots” to test new technologies or methods under real life conditions and in multi-actor settings.

In 2021-2027, public authorities are playing a strong role as project partners, alongside communities that are often involved in shaping outcomes and contributing to the implementation of solutions on the ground. There is also an intensified role for NGOs and the private sector (SMEs). Interest groups and associations often act as the backbone for spreading project results to a wider audience beyond the immediate partners. For example, the Association of Polish Communes of Euroregion Baltic uses its network of 38 communes to facilitate "door-to-door" dissemination and networking for projects like WaterMan and NURSECOAST-II. Sectoral associations such as water associations (e.g. DWA in Germany or EVEL in Estonia) connect science, practice, and policy-making by developing training packages for water utilities. Foundations and NGOs frequently lead the ground-level activities, such as organising field tests and engaging local stakeholders. Examples are the John Nurminen Foundation (FI) organising piloting for gypsum application in agricultural fields, and the Farmers’ Parliament (LV): handling the technical implementation of soil treatments and organises discussions with farmers. In addition, NGOs and interest groups provide niche knowledge that complements scientific research and municipal operations, for example, Coalition Clean Baltic providing staff specialised in hazardous substance emissions. The World Future Council uses its experience to launch environmental awards, such as the NonHazCity Building Award, to promote toxic-free construction solutions.

SMEs and business partners play more often critical roles often filling gaps in technical know-how that public authorities lack. SMEs are frequently involved as project partners (PPs) to provide niche technical services or to trigger innovation within a sector. NonHazCity 3 specifically includes three SME partners (two architect offices and one environmental consultant) to handle practical construction activities and help develop sustainable building standards. In MUNIMAP, the SME North.io is instrumental in developing IT tools for munitions remediation, while other offshore companies test these methodologies in their daily commercial operations. TRUST ALUM relies on two SMEs – Lake Restoration Sweden Inc. and Vattenresurs – to provide the patented technical equipment. Larger enterprises, particularly public service providers and water utilities, act as the "practitioners" who apply and demonstrate technologies on a large scale. EMPEREST involves a "community of practitioners" including Gdańsk Water Utilities and Tartu Veevärk AS, who co-develop and demonstrate advanced treatment systems for removing PFAS. In AdvIQwater a direct discussion with stakeholders like Saur Neptun, a private wastewater treatment company, is established. Business support organisations and chambers of commerce help bridge the gap between scientific research and market application. Lakes connect includes the Siauliai Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Crafts, which uses its network of businesses and educational institutions to raise awareness and build the capacity of local decision-makers regarding microplastic pollution. ReNutriWater explicitly targets SMEs to trigger innovation in water recovery, using pilots to develop sustainable and circular business models for reclaimed water use in sectors like tourism and green area management. To sum up, while the previous cycle used private partners to validate research,

the current cycle integrates them more often as core technical developers to deliver scalable digital and physical tools.

The IBSR 2021-2027 initiatives directly support and shape major European Union policies and environmental directives. The projects act as operational laboratories that help Member States implement and transition to upcoming European regulatory standards. For example, the APRIORA project directly addresses upcoming Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive (UWWTD) mandates, which require quaternary treatment for larger wastewater treatment plants. APRIORA helps environmental protection authorities prepare for these upcoming requirements. GYPREG actively assist EU Member States in fulfilling their legal water-quality obligations. Similarly, the BEACON project supports national implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive by developing indicators and open-sea monitoring methodologies for hazardous contaminants. Initiatives like ReNutriWater and WaterMan implement the Circular Economy Action Plan and establish safe water reuse standards. In the City Blues project, four of the pilot cities (Tampere, Malmö, Aarhus, and Tartu) are part of the selected 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030 and participate in the EU Climate Adaptation Mission.

PO 2.2 Blue economy

The comparison between the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 IBSR projects in the area of blue economy[2] reveals an evolution from foundational research and framework-building toward operationalisation, technical implementation, and digitalisation. Projects evolve from establishing foundational blue economy sectors to implementing advanced technological and climate-resilient solutions.

Table 3-2 Comparison of "blue economy" projects 2014-2020 and 2021-2027

Period	2014-2020	2021-2027
Projects	10 projects under SO 2.4 15 projects under So 3.3 and 3.4	7 core and 3 small projects under PO 2.2
Thematic Focus	Focused heavily on foundational bio-innovation (biotechnology, mussel and seaweed farming frameworks) and establishing Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) to coordinate a shared sea. Maritime projects focused on Sustainable and Safe Maritime Operations looking at: safety & emergency response, environmental protection in the shipping and cruise sector.	Projects evolve from establishing foundational blue economy sectors to implementing advanced technological and climate-resilient solutions. Shifts toward decarbonisation and green energy, specifically port electrification and alternative fuels like green hydrogen. There is a new, heavy emphasis on the use of digital solutions to strengthen the resilience, safety and continuity of navigation and maritime operations in an increasingly challenging security environment (e.g. S-100 navigational standards) as well as a focus on climate change adaptation for coastal infrastructures.
Needs and challenges	Addressed structural and knowledge gaps, such as the lack of cross-border planning data, the immature state of the blue biotechnology sector, and the need to protect overlooked underwater cultural heritage.	Projects address critical needs in climate resilience and environmental protection through innovative adaptation and ecosystem management. There is also a focus on decarbonisation and energy transition, covering onshore power supplies and green hydrogen fuels through initiatives like Blue Supply Chains, as well as improving the viability of the circular bioeconomy. Advancing digital

[2] The comparison has been challenging because in 2014-2020 the thematic field of Blue Economy was tackled by three SOs, i.e. So 2.4 Blue Growth (10 projects), SO 3.3 Maritime safety with 6 projects and 1 project platform and SO 3.4. Environmentally friendly shipping with 7 projects and 1 project platform.

Period	2014-2020	2021-2027
	The maritime projects addressed critical gaps caused by high traffic density and sensitive ecosystems.	safety and navigational resilience is vital (e.g. ORMOBASS, BalMarGrav). Beyond technology, projects address integrated governance and economic growth, e.g. by addressing overlapping coastal jurisdictions through the BalticSea2Land project, which harmonises planning to overcome fragmented decision-making.
Achievements	Produced mostly strategic and knowledge-based tools, such as mentor networks, databases for biotechnology resources, river restoration reports, the "BalticSeaFishing" eco-brand, and multi-level governance agendas. The maritime projects achieved tools and databases, strategic frameworks, e.g. on green cruise ports and LNG ports, as well as networks. Some technological achievements were prototypes for R-Mode transmitters, digital "eco-efficiency" piloting in shipyards, and STM-compatible tanker fleets.	The projects deliver practical tools, strategic frameworks, and technical specifications designed for long-term regional use, such as Practical Tools and Navigators (Baltic Sea2Land developed the Sea2Land Navigator, Baltic Sea e-Nav e-navigation base package compliant with next-generation S-100 standards), Strategic Roadmaps (BaltSusBoating 2030, BEACH-SOS Climate Change Adaptation Pathways Guidelines for municipalities), Technical Feasibility and Pilots (TETRAS pilots on industrial symbiosis), Data and Infrastructure, e.g. for high-capacity shore power.
Partnership	Partnerships were primarily composed of research institutes, innovation agencies, and planning authorities working to establish common frameworks. The maritime projects involved in addition also maritime bodies such as HELCOM, IMO, and OSPAR Commissions, as well as sector-specific actors such as shipping companies, terminal operators, shipyards, port authorities.	In general, partnerships have evolved from research-focused consortia to inclusive ecosystems that cover the entire value chain. Public authorities are strongly engaged. While still involving research, this period features more prominent participation from private technology providers (e.g. FURUNO, Sternula) and large logistics operators (e.g. Stena Line, DFDS) to test and validate commercial-scale green technologies. It also integrates business support and investment agencies to bridge the gap between research and market entry for the circular bioeconomy. This cycle emphasises the full value chain from product development to end-user distribution. Public Authorities and National Sectoral Agencies provide the legal, regulatory, and infrastructural backbone for the projects.

Source: Own elaboration based on project descriptions in Programme database, application forms and project websites

The shift in focus between the two programming periods was driven, among others, by several escalating environmental threats that moved from being theoretical risks to measurable, documented crises. In addition, the increasingly challenging security environment in the Baltic Sea Region has become a major driver of project development and priorities in recent years. The 2021-2027 projects specifically target the following challenges and external threats:

- Climate Change and Coastal Erosion: Rising sea levels are physically reshaping the coast. More frequent and powerful storms are causing physical damage. Changes such as extreme heat or increased rainfall reduce the number of comfortable days for outdoor activities and can impact local ecosystems. Changes in ocean currents and water temperatures can temporarily affect water quality, occasionally making it unsafe for swimming.
- Pollution and Carbon Emissions: 2021-2027 projects targeting maritime logistics and industry focus on reducing the chemical and atmospheric footprint of the blue economy. Projects like Blue Supply Chains work to mitigate this through electrification and alternative fuels. Local ports serve as economic backbones but are also identified as major contributors to air and water

pollution in their regions. Traditional aquaculture and industrial processes are often energy-intensive.

- Invasive Species and Ecosystem changes and its impact on socio-economic patterns: Threats to the ecological balance of the Baltic Sea were less prioritised in the previous cycle but are now addressed. Topics like overfishing, by-catch of threatened species, and the threat of invasive species become more prominent.
- An increasingly challenging security environment in the Baltic Sea Region leads to more emphasis on digital solutions for maritime resilience, safety and continuity.

The transition toward operationalisation, pilot testing, and the delivery of tangible technical solutions is evident across several key blue economy sectors:

- **Safe Resilient and Green Maritime Operations**: Projects focus on modernising maritime infrastructure, improving safety through technology, and reducing the environmental footprint of shipping and logistics. Examples are the transition to next-generation international standards (S-100 framework) to ensure safer and more eco-efficient navigation. MaDaMe aims to create "Digital Fairways" by implementing real-time information sharing. This includes digital navigational warnings and virtual aids to navigation (like virtual buoys) using cybersecure communication protocols (MCP and SECOM). ORMABASS works on resilient positioning systems addressing the vulnerability of satellite navigation (GNSS). Blue Supply Chains focuses on the energy transition within ports.
- **Sustainable Blue Bioeconomy**: This theme explores innovative ways to use marine resources sustainably, focusing on circularity and new commercial markets. TETRAS demonstrates how land-based fish and shrimp farming can become more sustainable by reusing industrial waste heat, water, and geothermal resources. RoundGoby aims to turn an invasive fish species into a commercial asset. The project helps develop new value chains, from specialised fishing gear that avoids by-catch to creating high-value food products for local markets and public kitchens.
- **Integrated Coastal Management and Tourism**: This theme focuses on the governance of coastal spaces and ensuring that tourism remains resilient and competitive in a changing environment. It covers integrated Land-Sea Planning (Baltic Sea2Land), climate-resilient Tourism (BEACH-SOS), helping municipalities adapt to rising sea levels and shifting weather patterns, but also sustainable leisure boating (BaltSusBoating 2030), creating a Sustainability Roadmap to market the Baltic Sea as a single, environmentally friendly destination for leisure boating.

Partnerships in IBSR projects have evolved significantly from the 2014-2020 period to the 2021-2027 cycle, moving from a research-led mentorship model to one where private companies are active partners responsible for technical delivery and commercialisation. In the 2014-2020 period, private companies were often the "target groups" of projects rather than full partners. In contrast, 2021-2027 projects include private companies from the beginning to ensure that solutions are ‘market-ready’ and technically feasible. The current cycle emphasises the full value chain, from applied research to product development by private tech firms and to distribution and end-use by shipping companies.

Public authorities and national sectoral agencies provide the legal, regulatory, and infrastructural backbone for the projects. Local and national authorities (e.g. in BEACH-SOS and Baltic Sea2Land) are responsible for integrating project outputs into regional development strategies and harmonising land-sea planning. Research partners provide the scientific rigor and technical testing necessary to move from theory to practical application. Institutions such as RISE (Sweden) and SAMK (Finland) lead the piloting phases of digital tools, testing them with active mariners in simulated environments to allow for iterative refinement.

Private partners are essential for the technical development of equipment and the commercialisation of project results. Companies like FURUNO Finland supply the onboard navigation technology needed for product testing. In MaDaMe, SMEs such as Sternula and NavSim Poland develop the actual digital systems and connectivity solutions used by ships. Large operators like Stena Line and DFDS participate as end-users, providing vessels for testing new fuels or implementing technical retrofits like silicone hull coatings to validate decarbonisation strategies. The 2021-2027 blue economy projects have added more commercial and practical pilot testing to general awareness raising. For example, the TETRAS project includes Linas Agro Group, a large agricultural company, to provide the commercial perspective for large-scale land-based fish farms. RoundGoby partners directly with fish processing companies (e.g. Fiske-Impex, Baltijos Konservai) to develop new food products for the market.

NGOs, sectoral associations, and networks ensure transnational cooperation and bridge the gap between high-level projects and local stakeholders. The Low Impact Fishers of Europe Platform assists in integrating small-scale fishers into testing and gear analysis. The SUBMARINER Network acts as a communication partner for multiple projects, representing public-private members across ten countries to ensure results are transferred and upscaled throughout the region. Sectoral networks like South Coast Baltic and the Union of Swedish Guest Harbours lead the collaborative marketing and sustainability roadmaps for leisure boating.

The IBSR 2021–2027 projects play a critical role in advancing key European Union policies by transforming high-level directives into practical actions. A primary alignment is with the European Green Deal and the Sustainable Blue Economy strategy, where projects like Baltic Sea2Land equip authorities with decision-support tools to balance environmental protection with economic interests, ensuring sustainable and integrated coastal development. Projects like Baltic Sea e-Nav, MaDaMe, and ORMOBASS address the strategic autonomy and security of the maritime industrial base and ports within the European Commission’s Sustainable Blue Economy strategy. In the maritime transport sector, projects respond to European legislation, such as EU "Fit for 55" and Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) requirements. For example, the Blue Supply Chains project provides a replicable blueprint for ports to transition to zero-emission operations. Furthermore, IBSR initiatives drive the transition to a circular blue economy by integrating sustainable aquaculture into regional development plans and developing new value chains from marine resources.

PO 3.2 Energy transition

The IBSR projects in the field of energy transition[3] have evolved significantly between the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 periods, shifting from removing technical bottlenecks to driving more systemic regional energy sovereignty.

Table 3-3 Comparison of "energy" projects 2014-2020 and 2021-2027

Period	2014-2020	2021-2027
Projects	15 projects under SO 2.2 Renewable Energy and SO 2.3 Energy Efficiency	12 core and 4 small projects under PO 3.2 Energy Transition
Thematic Focus	Focus on two primary pillars: Renewable Energy (offshore wind grids, bioenergy, and spatial planning) and Energy Efficiency (building stock, low-temperature district heating, and smart LED lighting).	Focus on structural decoupling from external energy dependencies. The 2021–2027 projects were fundamentally reshaped by the geopolitical ruptures of 2022. Energy is now considered not only an environmental goal, but also a critical pillar of regional security and sovereignty. This period also adopts more integrated and diversified approaches. It focuses on decarbonizing entire municipal systems, establishing frameworks for hydrogen and offshore wind, and implementing circular energy planning. It also introduces a stronger emphasis on the "renovation wave" for both residential and industrial sectors, alongside citizen-centric transitions.
Needs and challenges	Projects primarily addressed technical and regulatory bottlenecks. Projects aimed to remove technical, social, and regulatory bottlenecks, such as the "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) attitude toward renewable energy and the high upfront costs of modernising heating systems.	Projects shift from "reactive, short-term fixes" to addressing geopolitical volatility and the need for energy independence. Current challenges are framed as a "marathon" requiring resilient planning to avoid technical lock-ins with rigid, non-circular systems that are impossible to upgrade later. This period also highlights a critical diffusion of responsibility in managing public building energy consumption.
Achievements	Notable outputs included the Forest Energy Atlas, training packages for district heating, and nine RENCOPs for community energy. Impacts were tangible, such as a calculated 35 GW offshore wind potential and €9.1 million in investments for building efficiency.	Achievements are leaning toward "digital-first" simulation tools and standardisation. Prominent examples include the CommitClimate Simulator for visualising 2050 emission scenarios, the Energy Equilibrium Platform for storage planning, and the introduction of quality labels for green industrial areas. Projects provide standardised guidelines and "toolboxes" to ensure regional projects are technically sound and scalable. On-the-ground testing ensures that theoretical tools work in real-world environments.
Partnership	Both periods utilise a multidisciplinary partnership model involving local authorities as "practitioners," universities and private partners as "technical experts," and NGOs as "facilitators" to bridge the gap between technical goals and local implementation.	
	During this period, partnerships were characterised by a "tandem approach" specifically designed to bridge capacity and knowledge gaps in smaller municipalities. Expert partners, such as research institutes and energy agencies, provided direct coaching to help local authorities translate strategic energy plans into bankable investments. Furthermore,	The current period has refined these collaborative structures into more defined ecosystems. This culture ensures that technical solutions are grounded in local administrative realities by pairing expert organisations with municipal implementers from the start. While the core actor types remain the same, the 2021-2027 period has expanded to include more specific actors such as Port Authorities and Public Infrastructure providers to handle

[3] The comparison was challenging, as this theme was tackled in 2014-2020 by two SOs on Renewable Energy (SO 2.2) and Energy Efficiency (SO 2.3).

Period	2014-2020	2021-2027
	partnerships were used to link "frontrunners and followers," allowing regions with more experience in community energy to mentor those just beginning their transition.	energy infrastructure such as large-scale hydrogen logistics. NGOs are often responsible for the social element of the energy transition, focusing on behavioural change and inclusive decision-making.

Source: Own elaboration based on project descriptions in Programme database, application forms and project websites

The transition from the 2014-2020 period to the 2021-2027 Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects represents a significant strategic evolution from technical bottleneck removal to regional energy sovereignty. While both periods share a commitment to climate neutrality, they differ in their geopolitical context, technological scope, and methodological approach:

- The most profound difference lies in the underlying motivation. The 2014-2020 projects primarily aimed to remove technical, social, and regulatory bottlenecks to achieve a low-carbon economy. The 2021-2027 projects, however, were fundamentally reshaped by the geopolitical ruptures of 2022. Energy is no longer viewed solely as an environmental goal but as a critical pillar of regional security and sovereignty. This shift moved the focus from urgent, short-term supply shock interventions toward long-term structural decoupling from external energy dependencies.
- The thematic focus has changed from general efficiency and renewables to highly specialised and sector-specific transitions: 2014-2020 projects focused on offshore wind infrastructure, spatial planning, forest biomass and smart urban technologies like LED lighting and power electronics. 2021-2027 projects introduced hydrogen derivatives (H2Deri@BSP), biogas (BEST ACE), local heat planning (PlanHeat) and industrial/ agricultural decarbonisation (GreenIndustrialAreas). There is a new emphasis on climate budgeting, which treats carbon as a finite fiscal resource to be managed alongside financial budgets.

The nature of the outputs has become more digital and “municipality-ready”: 2014-2020 projects produced numerous technical manuals (e.g., the 26-module LowTemp package), GIS platforms for biomass, and policy white papers. 2021-2027 projects often focus on the development of digital simulation tools and strategic frameworks with practical on-the-ground piloting. Most projects create technical models, such as the CommitClimate Simulator, the Energy Equilibrium Platform, or techno-economic models for hydrogen, to help local authorities visualise future energy scenarios. These digital solutions are typically complemented by the creation of standardised manuals, "toolboxes," and roadmaps designed to provide step-by-step guidance. These outputs are validated through pilot implementations in public and private buildings, seaports, and industrial zones.

While both periods utilise a multidisciplinary model, the current period has refined its structure: The 2014-2020 projects pioneered a "tandem approach" where expert partners coached municipalities. The 2021-2027 projects have formalised this into more defined ecosystems, specifically pairing technical experts with local implementers to ensure high-level knowledge is immediately proof-tested in local administrative realities. The current period has brought in new critical stakeholders, such as port authorities, to manage large-scale energy logistics for hydrogen derivatives. Among the actors involved, the following types of organisations can be highlighted:

- Public infrastructure and port authorities play a pivotal role in the energy transition projects, acting as both the primary target groups for new tools and the key implementers of physical and regulatory changes necessary for decarbonisation. In the H2Deri@BSP project, public port

authorities are the central stakeholders responsible for preparing the Baltic Sea Region for low-carbon maritime fuels. In the BOWE2H project, authorities (such as the Lithuanian Energy Agency) provide assistance to national ministries in monitoring offshore wind projects and coordinating the grid and investment frameworks.

- Private companies serve in the current period both as active project partners providing technical expertise and as primary target groups that must implement energy-saving measures. Their roles are multifaceted, ranging from infrastructure operation to the development of digital tools. In projects like BEST ACE and PV 4 All, private engineering firms such as EKODOMA and BENET Solutions act as technical experts, providing consultation on renewable energy, energy efficiency, and photovoltaic systems. In large-scale energy transition sectors like maritime and offshore wind, private companies are essential for the physical handling and production of green energy. In the H2Deri@BSP project, private energy providers like GASUM and Alexela are partners responsible for producing green hydrogen derivatives (methanol, ammonia). Many projects specifically focus on SMEs and industrial actors as the groups that must adopt new technologies. Projects like Easy Energy and Enercracy aim to capacitate SMEs. Energy Circle helps private businesses move toward "circular energy independence" by providing them with methodologies to design long-term energy investment roadmaps.
- NGOs and associations serve as critical intermediaries in IBSR projects, providing expertise, facilitating stakeholder engagement, and bridging the gap between high-level policy and local implementation. NGOs and associations play a key role in engaging citizens and other non-institutional users, helping to build the common ground and broad societal ownership. NGOs are often responsible for the social element of the energy transition, focusing on behavioural change and inclusive decision-making. Associations represent the interests of specific sectors or groups of local governments to ensure that regional needs are reflected in national policy. Some projects are led by non-profit foundations or umbrella organisations, such as Easy Energy and PV4All.

The 2022 energy crisis, triggered by geopolitical ruptures, fundamentally transformed the strategic direction of the projects, shifting the energy discourse from a purely environmental aspiration into a critical pillar of regional security and sovereignty. According to the project analysis, the impact on project strategy becomes tangible observing the following shifts:

- From Environmental Goals to Regional Security: While earlier projects (2014-2020) focused on removing technical and regulatory bottlenecks to achieve a low-carbon economy, the 2021-2027 portfolio responds to the need for structural decoupling from external energy dependencies.
- Decoupling from Imported Fuels: The region now faces a dual necessity: reducing greenhouse gas emissions while simultaneously decreasing reliance on imported oil and gas in light of recent geopolitical tensions.
- Focus on Systemic Change: Project focus has pivoted toward driving systemic regional energy independence. This includes a greater emphasis on scaling emerging green fuels like hydrogen derivatives and biomethane, and using advanced technologies like AI to optimise local energy resources to ensure the region is prepared for long-term energy shifts.

By addressing these interconnected challenges, the projects aim to transform isolated local efforts into a unified transnational network that strengthens the resilience of the entire Baltic Sea Region and addressing EU priorities and strategies. PO 3.2 projects function as a critical practical engine, translating high-level European Union mandates into regional strategies and localised, actionable frameworks. The projects directly support the European Green Deal's overarching objective of achieving climate neutrality by 2050, addressing specific EU directives and initiatives such as the "Fit for 55" climate package. For example, the Climate-4-CAST project directly involves pilot cities of the EU 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission like Tampere, Aarhus, and Riga. The project equips them with an open-source decision-support tool to translate complex climate scenario data into the specific language of municipal budget-makers. The PlanHeat project directly addresses EU Energy Efficiency Directive (EED) Recast 2023 under which EU Member States must ensure that municipalities with more than 45,000 inhabitants prepare comprehensive local heat plans, by co-developing a Transnational Manual on Local Heat Planning to guide cities through data access, technological selection, and financing. The Easy Energy project implements immediate, low-tech solutions across 50 public and SME buildings, addressing the EU RePower Directive. The H2Deri@BSP project provides port authorities with the spatial planning methods, safety regulations, and techno-economic models required to handle green hydrogen derivatives like methanol and ammonia, responding to the FuelEU Maritime Regulation (EU) 2023/1805. Projects like StartSun and Enercracy help realise the EU's vision of decentralised, community-led energy, as requested in the Electricity Market and Renewable Energy Directives. Aligned with the EU Energy Independence Plan, Energy Circle provides private businesses and local administrations with roadmaps to build circular energy independence.

PO 3.3 Smart green mobility

The IBSR projects from the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 cycles[4] demonstrate an evolution from establishing broad regional connectivity to implementing highly specialised, technology-driven, and user-centric 'smart green mobility' solutions.

Table 3-4 Comparison of "mobility" projects 2014-2020 and 2021-2027

Period	2014-2020	2021-2027
Projects	20 Projects under SO 3.1, 3.2, and 3.5	5 core and 2 small projects under PO 3.3 smart green mobility
Thematic Focus	The focus was on accessibility of remote areas, environmentally friendly urban mobility, and interoperability of transport modes. Major themes included rural connectivity, large-scale corridor governance (TEN-T), early-stage e-mobility, and inland waterway transport.	The 2021–2027 period shifts toward "smart green mobility" specifically targeting the decarbonisation of heavy transport via green hydrogen and managing Urban Air Mobility (drones). The current 2021–2027 projects address the seasonal decline of active mobility and support to people-centred Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs). Changes represent a move toward a data-driven, emission-free multimodal transport ecosystem that prioritises environmental resilience and the rapid adoption of alternative fuels.
Needs and challenges	Projects addressed mobility poverty caused by demographic shifts (aging populations) and the need to move freight from road to	The mobility needs in the 2021-2027 period have shifted from a focus on general regional connectivity toward addressing systemic barriers to decarbonisation and the

[4] Again, this comparison was challenging as in 2014-2020 this thematic field was covered by three SOs. SO 3.1 Interoperability of transport modes, 3.2 Accessibility of remote areas, and 3.5 Urban Mobility.

Period	2014-2020	2021-2027
	more sustainable modes like rail and water. Projects responded to opportunities of green and intelligent mobility solutions in cities, towns and rural areas.	integration of disruptive technologies. There is also emphasis on revitalising unexploited inner-urban rail infrastructure supporting small- to medium-sized cities in moving away from car-centric planning. This evolution reflects a regional necessity to transform regulatory climate pressures into opportunities for innovation, such as becoming a frontrunner in Urban Air Mobility (drones) and green hydrogen aviation.
Achievements	Notable achievements included the establishment of Mobility Centres for rural residents, large-scale autonomous minibus pilots, and the creation of formal governance bodies like the Scandria®Alliance. Outputs were often commuter master plans and data visualisation tools.	The 2021–2027 period emphasises practical technical toolkits and harmonised standards, such as harmonised standards for hydrogen refuelling stations to ensure interoperability. Current projects are delivering digital tools. Achievements are increasingly focused on small-scale mobility experiments that test the social acceptance and feasibility of new services. Beyond standard infrastructure, current achievements prioritise citizen activation.
Partnership	Partnerships were primarily cross-sectoral, involving public authorities, research institutions, and national ministries to ensure solutions were both technically sound and politically viable.	The partnership model has matured into a formal "multi-level governance framework". The projects are built on diverse, multi-sectoral partnerships that combine public authorities with the specialised knowledge of academia and civil society. Projects like BATS and SUMPs for BSR directly involve local and regional authorities from across seven different countries. SMEs and large companies provide essential technological insights e.g. into fuel cell technology and IT infrastructure. Associations often serve as the primary representatives for industry players and smaller enterprises that might otherwise struggle to participate in transnational cooperation. NGOs are often implementing partners and contribute to the long-term sustainability of project results through scientific advice and advocacy.

Source: Own elaboration based on project descriptions in Programme database, application forms and project websites

In 2014-2020, projects were organised under three broad objectives: Interoperability, accessibility, and urban mobility. Major themes included establishing transnational transport corridors, early e-mobility (e-buses, e-ferries), and promoting inland waterway transport as a road alternative. In 2021-2027, the focus has been merged into PO 3.3: Smart green mobility. Themes are more specialised and/or technology-driven, targeting green hydrogen infrastructure for heavy trucks and aviation, Urban Air Mobility (drones), and year-round active mobility to ensure walking and cycling are safe in harsh winter conditions.

The comparison between the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 project cycles reveals a development from building foundational regional connectivity to implementing highly specialised, technology-driven, and user-centric "smart green mobility" solutions.

The 2014-2020 cycle achieved tangible results in establishing regional cooperation and testing emerging transport modes. Topics were, for example:

- Rural Connectivity: A primary achievement was the creation of nine physical and digital Mobility Centres under the MAMBA project, which pooled transport resources to address rural "mobility poverty". Additionally, the RESPONSE project successfully shifted public transport models from supply-oriented to demand-responsive transport solutions for vulnerable groups.

- Autonomous and Electric Mobility: The Sohjoa Baltic project achieved a major milestone by implementing large-scale pilots of automated driverless electric minibuses across six countries, carrying nearly 20,000 passengers. Meanwhile, the BSR electric project successfully integrated e-buses, e-ferries, and e-logistics into urban transport strategies.
- Corridor Governance and Safety: The Scandria®2Act project established the Scandria®Alliance, a formal cooperation platform that still manages European transport corridors today. For maritime safety, the HAZARD project organised ten large-scale international emergency exercises involving up to 350 rescue staff in major seaports to improve readiness for hazardous materials incidents.

2021-2027 projects address critical regional challenges such as the systemic problem hindering hydrogen fuel adoption, the seasonal decline of active mobility in dark and snowy winters, and the fragmented development of transnational cycle routes. The projects are designed to deliver standardised technical toolkits, specialised digital platforms and inclusive co-creation models to decarbonise transport and enhance urban mobility:

- Technical Toolkits and Practical Solutions: Several projects provide public authorities with concrete tools to implement sustainable mobility. The BATS project creates an YRAM Technical Toolkit and a Citizen Activation Guide to promote walking and cycling in adverse weather. CITYAM is developing an Urban Air Mobility social acceptance toolkit and a landing site planning and selection tool to help cities integrate drone operations into their urban environments. BAB delivers a benchmarking tool for cycle tourism development and international intermodal travel guides for cycle tourists along the EuroVelo 10 route.
- Strategic Frameworks and Policy Recommendations: BSR HyAirport provides suggestions for regulatory framework amendments to support hydrogen-powered aviation. SUMPs for BSR establishes a common framework on monitoring and evaluation for sustainable urban mobility planning tailored for small and mid-sized cities.
- Planning and Feasibility Tools: HyTruck features a digital spatial planning tool and techno-economic models to identify optimal refuelling locations for heavy trucks. UrbFRail offers a screening tool to assess the feasibility of revitalising neglected inner-urban rail infrastructure and land for multimodal freight hubs.
- Capacity Building and Transnational Platforms: A significant achievement across all projects is the creation of collaborative environments for knowledge transfer. UrbFRail created an Urban Rail Freight Learning Platform, while SUMPs for BSR implemented a training Programme for city exchange and joint learning. Projects like CITYAM and BATS utilise concrete pilots and small-scale experiments to test innovative mobility solutions (such as weather-sensitive traffic lights or drone services) before permanent implementation.
- Citizen Engagement and Social Co-Creation Models focus on building capacity and trust by involving residents and social initiatives in the design of mobility services. The Citizen Activation Guide (BATS) helps planners initiate campaigns and prioritise relevant user groups to mainstream year-round active mobility).

Even if many achievements of projects in 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 are comparable, there is a small shift in achievements:

- From one-time pilots to transferable solutions: Projects moved from testing if a technology works (e.g. Sohjoa Baltic's bus pilots) to creating common standards and harmonised operating systems (e.g. HyTruck project).
- From infrastructural planning to user-centric and the active inclusion of diverse user groups: Current projects like BATS or CITYAM now utilise social co-creation models to build capacity and trust develop or guides to help planners prioritise relevant user groups.

The evolution of project outputs and results between the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 cycles represents a slight shift from

- Establishing toolkits and standards towards more specification and transferability: In 2014-2020, toolkits were often focused on risk assessment or broad feasibility roadmaps for emerging technology. Current toolkits are more diagnostic and implementation-oriented for specific regional challenges. For instance, BATS developed the YRAM Technical Toolkit to specifically diagnose and monitor active mobility during harsh winter conditions. Furthermore, the focus has moved from individual pilots to regional standardisation, such as in SUMPs for BSR, which uses "small-scale mobility experiments" specifically as a transferable model for cities.
- Digital monitoring towards digital planning tools: In 2014-2020 digital outputs primarily targeted data visualisation and flow monitoring to help authorities understand existing mobility gaps. Key examples include the Population Mobility Monitor and the ELIAS Inland Waterway Information System. In 2021-2027 digital tools have evolved into spatial planning and optimisation platforms for advanced green infrastructure. HyTruck provides an IT-based tool for the transnational placement of hydrogen refuelling stations, while CITYAM delivers a landing site selection tool for integrating drones into urban airspace.
- Isolated solutions towards systemic solutions and impact: In the earlier cycle, projects like MAMBA achieved the physical establishment of Mobility Centres to pool resources. In the current cycle, the focus is on creating better intermodal connections such as in BAB, addressing the systemic fragmentation of transnational cycle routes (EuroVelo 10). Achievements in urban mobility moved from testing if a technology works, such as the large-scale autonomous minibus pilots in Sohjoa Baltic, to preparing the infrastructure and regulatory environment for new frontiers like hydrogen-powered aviation (BSR HyAirport) and Urban Air Mobility (CITYAM). While earlier projects produced Commuting Master Plans for urban areas (SUMBA), the 2021-2027 cycle integrates health and well-being directly into mobility, such as in BATS, defining the needs of active mobility users.

In 2014-2020, partnerships were designed to be cross-sectoral, involving local authorities as implementers, universities as knowledge bearers, and national ministries as strategic guides to ensure solutions were both technical and politically viable. In 2021-2027 projects evolved into wider multi-level governance frameworks. There is a more explicit role for social innovation partners (NGOs/social initiatives) to reach vulnerable groups through co-creation and highly specialised industry partners (e.g. aviation clusters and drone operators) to validate cutting-edge technical solutions.

In 2014-2020 private companies were primarily categorised as technical partners with limited roles to test real-world applications, such as real-time data hubs or ‘last mile’ logistics, within their regular commercial services. In 2021-2027, private companies are now viewed as innovators with key roles in testing and implementing solutions. The focus has shifted toward SMEs and specialised industry players who bring market-ready technology and industry-specific expertise to validate cutting-edge solutions. Companies now provide deep technical knowledge. For instance, in the HyTruck and BSR HyAirport initiatives, SMEs and large companies provide essential technological insights into fuel cell technology and IT infrastructure, with companies like Localiser and various regional airlines contributing to pilot operations and economic feasibility models. Associations often serve as the primary representatives for industry players and smaller enterprises that might otherwise struggle to participate in transnational cooperation. In HyTruck, the Polish Alternative Fuels Association (PSPA) and CLIC Innovation Oy represent hundreds of members, including haulage and logistics SMEs, ensuring that the planning for green hydrogen refuelling stations aligns with market realities. In CITYAM, German and Estonian aviation clusters link the project to industry, ensuring that city-level drone policies are compatible with the latest technological advancements.

NGOs, associations, and interest groups play a critical role in the IBSR mobility projects by acting as intermediaries. Their involvement ensures that the developed solutions are practical, socially accepted, and effectively communicated to a broad audience.

The IBSR 2021-2027 projects contribute to overarching European strategies in several major ways. The HyTruck project is a direct response to the EU Regulation 2023/1804on Alternative Fuels Infrastructure, which requires EU Member States to systematically plan and deploy hydrogen refuelling stations in parallel with the market ramp-up of hydrogen-powered heavy-duty vehicles. HyTruck equips public authorities in the Baltic region with the digital spatial planning tools and techno-economic models needed to meet these EU requirements. As the commercial use of drones rapidly accelerates, European aviation is undergoing a major regulatory shift. The CITYAM project works in parallel with the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) as it pushes forward with new urban airspace regulations. CITYAM helps local authorities develop a unified, stronger voice to influence EASA and other transnational regulators, ensuring that local urban realities are reflected in high-level European airspace rules. BSR HyAirport works ahead of the market to prepare regional airports for hydrogen-powered aviation, addressing Regulation (EU) 2023/2405 on ensuring decarbonisation of the aviation sector (ReFuelEU Aviation). Several projects focus on maximising the efficiency and decarbonisation of the European Union’s TEN-T network. HyTruck specifically targets the Eastern part of the North Sea-Baltic TEN-T corridor to ensure seamless, cross-border zero-emission road freight. UrbFRail revitalises inner-urban freight rail infrastructure in major metropolitan hubs (such as Berlin, Warsaw, and Stockholm) to shift freight from road to rail, supporting the EU's strategic push for low-emission last-mile logistics. Several projects envisage climate-neutral transport sector, for instance, BATS and SUMPs for BSR build the local public capacity to transition from car-centric planning to sustainable, people-centred active mobility.

3.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the evaluation questions:

EQ 1.1: Did the thematic focus of the selected projects change from the projects in Programme 2014-2020? If yes, how? How do the changes in the thematic focus correlate with new needs and changed political priorities in the EU and the Baltic Sea Region?

The thematic focus of the selected projects changed from the projects in Programme 2014-2020. The analysis shows that a shift of the thematic focus towards addressing systemic threats can be observed. This shift is in line with new needs and changed political priorities (also described in Chapter 5). An example is the modernisation of maritime infrastructure to ensure safety against external threats and satellite disruptions, which was not a primary focus in the previous programming period. Also in the field of energy this becomes especially visible. In 2021-2027, following the geopolitical ruptures of 2022, energy is now treated more as a critical pillar of regional security. Projects focus on structural decoupling from external energy dependencies through circular planning and regional self-reliance.

A minor shift in focus between the two programming periods was driven, among others, by environmental threats that moved from being theoretical risks to measurable crises. Some 2021-2027 projects target specific environmental pressures. Thematic examples are in the fields of tourism, decarbonising of port operations through electrification and green transport chains. Also threats to the ecological balance of the Baltic Sea are now addressed.

New topics emerged within the previously addressed priorities, such as circularity, nature-based solutions, and advanced digital solutions. One emerging trend is the growing focus on reuse as a strategy to address environmental pressures and resource scarcity. This includes reuse in different contexts, such as new approaches to water retention, wastewater recovery, and the circular use of resources across different sectors and local contexts. In the field of energy, there has been a notable shift towards community-driven initiatives, with stronger citizen engagement in driving change and addressing the need for behavioural transformation at the local level. In the field of smart mobility, the current Programme integrates mobility with health and tourism resilience more deeply than the previous one. There is a shift from pilot-based infrastructural planning to systemic solutions, preparing the regulatory framework for new greener mobility solutions and towards user-centric and active inclusion of diverse user groups.

EQ 1.2: What is the added value of the 2021-2027 Programme compared to the 2014-2020 Programme in these topics? (refer for instance to the shifted thematic focus, to the different angle or approach to tackling a topic, to partnership and the main stakeholders engaged, to the type of project achievements and results)

2021-2027 projects bring added value to the thematic areas where there were already projects in 2014-2020. The current projects represent a leap in the sophistication of technical outputs compared to the 2014-2020 outputs (such as mobile apps and handbooks). Projects now utilises new technologies. Advanced digitalisation in most 2021-2027 projects connects scientific data and daily management practices. The shift is visible in the production of functional software and platforms.

As mentioned above, new topics and well-known 2014-2020 topics are now addressed with more ambitious and mature approaches. In additional innovative areas, the projects move beyond theoretical models by testing solutions in the field to prove their viability and create and spread operational knowledge, for example in the fields of wastewater treatment.

In some areas, maturity of approaches has led to more advanced and systemic projects. One example is the scaling of the Blue Bioeconomy, which aims for industrial symbiosis and commercial viability rather than proving concepts and implementing other early-stage approaches.

By addressing interconnected challenges, projects clearly show unified transnational action to strengthen the resilience of the entire Baltic Sea Region. For example, the topic of energy transition is addressed under PO 3.2 from many different angles, offering relevant lessons and practical entry points for local and regional authorities.

Partnerships in general have evolved from research-heavy consortia to inclusive ecosystems that encompass the full value chain. There is a stronger engagement of public authorities as project partners, alongside communities that often play an active role in shaping the outcomes and contributing to the implementation of solutions on the ground. Especially private business partners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) /associations have more important roles. They have evolved from general awareness roles to leading field-scale pilots and coordinating stakeholder engagement. NGOs and associations play a key role in engaging citizens and other non-institutional users, helping to build the common ground and broad societal ownership. There is a stronger focus on co-creation through living labs and social innovation models which link public authorities with social initiatives.

4 The relevance of the 2021-2027 Programme objectives' thematic focus – novel objectives

For novel Programme objectives not present in the 2014-2020 Programme the focus was on analysing and systematising the projects, their specific topics and partnerships, highlighting the differences and added value compared to mainstream projects of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF).

This chapter refers to the following evaluation questions:

EQ 1.3 For Programme objectives 1.1. and 1.2: How is the specific focus of the 2021-2027 Programme on communities and on social topics implemented through projects? What do projects achieve in these topics? What is characteristic of the way of addressing social topics in the Programme in comparison to projects within the European Social Fund (ESF)?
EQ 1.4 For Programme objective 1.1: In which contexts and from which angle did projects address the challenge of resilience?
EQ 1.5 For Programme objective 1.2: Which public services and for whom did projects focus on? How were the services (further) developed as more responsive?
EQ 1.6 For Programme objective 3.1: From which angle did projects address the challenge of circular economy? How did the projects differ from projects funded by the mainstream ERDF Programmes?
EQ 1.8 What can be concluded on the "Interreg niche" (e.g. public actor focus, increasing institutional capacity) and the Baltic Sea Region specificity of the cooperation topics?

4.1 Context

Three Programme objectives represent continuity to the 2014-2020 Programme (PO 1.1 resilient economies and communities, PO 1.2 responsive public services, and PO 3.1 circular economy). The methodological approach involved a qualitative content analysis of project descriptions gathered from application forms, the project library on the IBSR website, project documents and reports, and additional project- or topic-related websites. The analysis focused on specific aspects identified in the corresponding evaluation questions.

4.2 Analysis



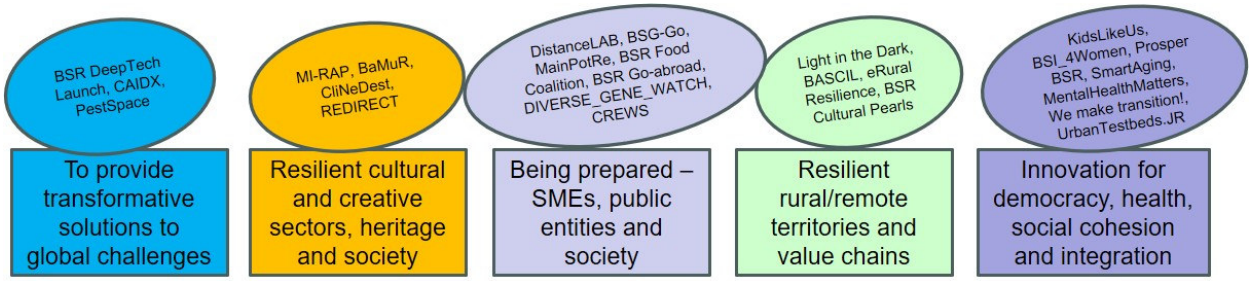
PO 1.1 Resilient economies and communities

Programme objective 1.1 on resilient economies and communities can be understood as evolution of the smart specialisation approach with a focus on innovation in society and economy. The analysis looked into how the projects address the expectations described in the Programme Document.

The projects 2021-2027 can be grouped in the following way according to different social, economic and environmental and cultural benefits for the Baltic Sea Region. The project objectives reach from providing transformative solutions from a technical and entrepreneurial point of view to improving

preparedness for crisis in society, public entities and SMEs. Some projects address the cultural and creative sectors as the most affected ones in a crisis, while other tackle specific needs of rural and remote areas and value chains in these territories. Finally, some projects address specific vulnerable groups and societies in general promoting key values such as democracy, integration or health.

Figure 4-1 Focus of PO 1.1 projects – addressing different forms of territorial resilience



Source: Own elaboration

The projects address a diverse range of societal and economic challenges stemming from the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the energy crisis, but also addressing vulnerable groups and territories.

Key thematic areas include:

- Social Cohesion and Mental Health: Supporting the professional activation of female refugees from Ukraine (BSI_4Women), improving children's mental health through nature-based interventions (KidsLikeUs), and addressing psychosocial risks in the workplace (MentalHealthMatters). Furthermore, strengthening disaster risk reduction by involving civil society (CREWS) and ensuring the resilience of museums and memory institutions (BaMuR).
- Economic and Sectoral Resilience: Enhancing the resilience of micro-enterprises through internationalisation (BSR Go-abroad), supporting the game industry through talent development (BSG-Go), and greening the music sector (MI-RAP).
- Solutions for Territorial Specificities: Bridging the urban-rural divide by promoting e-bio-businesses (eRural resilience), diversifying rural food production into culinary tourism (BASCIL), and ensuring food security through heritage potato varieties (MainPotRe).
- New Technology for Global Challenges: Facilitating the uptake of AI in healthcare (CAIDX), monitoring forest genetic diversity to combat global warming (DIVERSE_GENE_WATCH), and using digital tools to track invasive plant pests (PestSpace).

The projects provide a range of **specialised tools and strategic frameworks** designed to generate long-term benefits for vulnerable groups, the environment, and the regional economy. Projects focus on creating tangible, replicable solutions:

- *Digital Systems and AI Tools:* PestSpace and DIVERSE_GENE_WATCH are developing advanced monitoring systems using DNA genotyping and AI to track plant pests and forest genetic health. CAIDX provides a "Clinical AI Pathway Guide" and a toolbox for hospitals to adopt AI-driven diagnostics. Prosper BSR and PestSpace are creating mobile apps for refugee

labour market integration and real-time pest alerts. UrbanTestbeds.JR includes an AI prototypical tool to help citizens understand complex local climate plans.

- *Strategic Toolboxes and Playbooks:* MentalHealthMatters is producing a "first-aid kit" specifically for SME managers to assess psychosocial risks in the workplace. BSR Cultural Pearls and BaMuR are creating action plans and toolboxes to help vulnerable cities and museums build social and economic resilience through culture. BSG-Go! offers toolboxes for game investor engagement and forward-looking business relations. BSR DeepTech Launch provides a toolbox to inspire students and young researchers to start DeepTech businesses.
- *Economic Blueprints and Marketing Models:* BSR Go-abroad is developing a blueprint for micro-enterprises internationalisation to help small firms diversify their markets. BASCIL and Light in the Dark are creating experience business models and marketing guides for rural culinary and off-season tourism. eRural resilience is establishing a methodology and "Video Knowledge datamine" to support the launch of e-bio-businesses in the countryside.

The **expected outcomes and benefits** go beyond the usual innovation indicators or economic metrics and include social stability, mental well-being, and environmental restoration:

For vulnerable groups (refugees, children, and seniors):

- Professional Activation and Dignity: Projects like BSI_4Women and Prosper BSR help refugees (particularly women) rebuild their lives through entrepreneurship and employment, which prevents long-term social isolation and aids in trauma recovery.
- Mental Health Support: KidsLikeUs benefits children by providing nature-based coping strategies and "Superhero sensory gardens" to handle trauma from war or pandemics.
- Enhanced Senior Care: SmartAging improves the daily living conditions and safety of seniors through home automation and antimicrobial technologies, equipping care providers with better skills.

For nature and the environment:

- Biodiversity Safeguarding: DIVERSE_GENE_WATCH protects forest resilience against global warming by monitoring genetic diversity, while PestSpace enables rapid response to invasive pests that threaten local ecosystems.
- Sustainable and Regenerative Tourism: REDIRECT and CliNeDest aim to transform the tourism sector from a consumer of resources into a force for environmental restoration and CO2 reduction, creating "Climate Smart" destinations.

For society and communities:

- Disaster Resilience: CREWS promotes a "whole-of-society" approach to crisis management, bridging the gap between public authorities and civil society to improve response to weather or military crises.
- Food Security: MainPotRe and BSR Food Coalition strengthen local food systems by securing heritage potato varieties and bringing smallholder farmers closer to school meal programs.
- Social Cohesion: BSR Cultural Pearls increases the "sense of belonging" in smaller cities, making communities more attractive and better prepared for external disturbances.

For SMEs and the workforce:

- Economic Survival: Projects like BSR Go-abroad and Distance LAB help small businesses survive global crises by diversifying market bases and improving remote soft skills.
- Mentally Resilient Workforce: MentalHealthMatters helps protecting the mental health of workers by strengthening the management of psychosocial risks through occupational safety and health systems, policies, and employer support.

The projects define resilience as a proactive process of transformation, learning, and innovation rather than a simple return to a pre-crisis state. They address this challenge across five primary contexts, approaching resilience through different angles. Some projects address the immediate and long-term consequences of the military invasion of Ukraine, focusing on social and economic integration and cultural and mental health consequences. BSI_4Women creates a friendly economic environment for female refugees through professional activation and business-oriented support to prevent social isolation and support mental well-being. Prosper BSR strengthens the institutional knowledge of business support organisations (BSOs) to bridge the gap between refugees and private labour markets. KidsLikeUs develops nature-based "Superhero sensory gardens" and uses VR/AR technology to help refugee children cope with war-related trauma.

Building on the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, some projects focus on **long-term mental and physical health**. MentalHealthMatters prepares systems to handle psychosocial risks and workplace stress, ensuring the economy has a mentally resilient workforce. Distance LAB improves distance soft skills and hybrid business strategies to make organisations more adaptable to remote activities. Senior Care Angle: SmartAging integrates home automation and antimicrobial technologies to improve the safety and active involvement of the elderly in the face of failing conventional care methods. CAIDX facilitates the uptake of AI and data-driven diagnostics in hospitals to increase the speed and accuracy of healthcare delivery.

Several projects aim to protect specific industries that are susceptible to **external shocks like supply chain disruptions or seasonal fluctuations**. BSR Go-abroad stimulates internationalisation for micro-enterprises to diversify their market base and create local value chains that shield them from global disruptions. BASCIL helps small food producers transition into sustainable culinary tourism to reach customers directly and capture higher value. Light in the Dark develops a nature-based concept to build resilience in archipelago and coastal tourism businesses during the cold and dark off-season. BSG-Go strengthens the game industry by fostering young talent and improving communication practices.

Resilience is addressed by some projects from a scientific and regenerative angle to **safeguard natural resources**. Projects focus on biodiversity, plant protection, sustainability and food security. DIVERSE_GENE_WATCH monitors and enriches the genetic diversity of keystone forest trees to ensure forests can withstand global warming stressors. PestSpace develops a digital monitoring system to identify migrating plant pests early using environmental DNA and machine learning. REDIRECT and CliNeDest transition destinations toward regenerative tourism and climate-neutral business models based on carbon data management. MainPotRe strengthens self-sufficiency by preserving and distributing heritage potato varieties, which yield nutritious food quickly even in harsh climates.

Finally, some projects approach resilience from the angle of **community participation and disaster preparedness**. BSR Cultural Pearls uses local culture and creative processes to increase the sense of belonging and social cohesion in vulnerable, non-central cities. We make transition! utilises the 'Transition Arena method' to engage civil society and local authorities in co-creating pathways for a sustainable transition. UrbanTestbeds.JR encourages young citizens to experiment with urban testbeds and AI-supported climate plans to build participatory capacity. With regard to disaster management, CREWS bridges the gap between public authorities and civil society actors to foster a 'whole-of-society' approach to crisis response.

PO 1.1 projects are strategically designed to act as testing grounds and launching pads for broader European policy goals. For instance, Distance LAB builds tools and remote business strategies to support green transition and digitalisation objectives, helping local authorities advocate for a resilient, remote-adapted society. CliNeDest directly accelerates the transition toward climate-neutral tourism, aligning with the UNWTO Glasgow Declaration and driving carbon-data-based management. In response to geopolitical crises, projects like BSI_4Women and Prosper BSR directly support the professional activation of vulnerable refugee groups, which benefits EU economies and prevents long-term social issues. Global and European commitments to the UN SDGs are operationalised locally. BSR Food Coalition builds municipal capacities to work with the SDGs to resolve bottom-up cooperation barriers, reduce food waste, and support smallholder farmers. In general, PO 1.1 projects respond more to specific local and regional needs, rather than addressing requirements by EU strategies or regulatory frameworks, as it can be observed under POs of Priority 2 and 3. This is due to the topics of PO 1.1 projects, which are mostly addressing policy areas (e.g. social, tourism, culture) in the competence of local and regional authorities being less influenced by EU Directives, compared to technical areas like energy or mobility.

PO 1.2 Responsive public services

Projects under Programme objective 1.2 are making public services across the Baltic Sea Region more responsive by bridging the gap between high-level policy and the everyday needs of citizens. Whether it is through AI-based virtual assistants for rehabilitation, VR-enhanced public gardens, or participatory design for 'liveable' cities, these projects demonstrate how transnational cooperation and triple-helix partnerships can solve complex societal challenges. By focusing on capacity building and digital equity, these projects ensure that even the most vulnerable groups and small municipalities are not left behind in the digital transition.

The projects are working with a diverse range of public services aimed at improving the quality of life, environmental resilience, and administrative efficiency. These services include:

- *Health and Social Well-being Services:*
    - Mental Health and Cultural Services: Developing "Arts on Prescription" programmes where individuals with mental conditions like depression or anxiety participate in regular arts activities.
    - Rehabilitation Services: Implementing AI-based virtual assistants to assist in public sector rehabilitation processes.

- Health Services: Enhancing access to electronic health data and building digital health literacy for healthcare professionals and vulnerable citizens. Providing digital counselling environments (using 360-degree photos) to prepare children and families for hospital visits and medical procedures to reduce fear. Developing strategies for healthy and sustainable public catering and food procurement in institutions like schools.

- *Environmental and Infrastructure Services:*
  - Public Green Space Management: Utilising interactive nature-based gardens to promote public health, well-being, and education.
  - Climate and Disaster Management: Planning and implementing Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction strategies at the municipal level. Improving flood preparedness and monitoring runoff pollution through advanced technological solutions.
- *Urban Planning and Design:*
  - Public space: Redesigning school spaces to foster student well-being and sensory inclusivity.
  - Urban Design and Governance: Making cities more "liveable" by applying Public Interest Design to various domains of public services and planning processes.
- *Education Services:*
  - Library and Information Services: Transforming traditional libraries into Urban Knowledge Hubs, i.e. hybrid spaces that provide both physical and digital access to reliable information.
- *Business and Innovation Support Services:*
  - Innovation Ecosystem Support: Creating better regional support for social innovation and social entrepreneurship.
  - Sustainability Reporting: Providing digital tools for companies to manage and disclose social and environmental performance data as required by EU law.
- *Efficient Public Administration and Governance:*
  - Public Procurement: Supporting cities in adopting smart city solutions through the Public procurement of innovative solutions (PPI).
  - Investment and Communication: Using Extended Reality (XR) technology to improve services related to investment attraction and public sector communication.

The projects under the Interreg Baltic Sea Region PO 1.2 target a diverse range of end users and stakeholders, categorised broadly into citizens and vulnerable groups, public authorities, and the private or innovation sectors.

Many projects focus on improving the quality of life for specific segments of the population:

- Patients and Healthcare Users: This includes children and their families facing hospitalization (Mobile Hospital), individuals with diagnosed mental conditions like depression or anxiety (Arts on Prescription), and rehabilitation patients such as those with multiple sclerosis or pulmonary diseases (HybReDe).
- Vulnerable Populations: Specific focus is placed on vulnerable citizen groups with low digital health literacy, including the elderly and refugees (DEAHL BALTIC), and those living in areas at high risk for climate-related disasters (ClimaResponse).
- Youth and Students: Teenagers and students are primary targets for projects redesigning school environments (SchoolChanger), improving public meals (StratKIT+), and enhancing digital literacy through hybrid library spaces (BALTIC UKH).
- General Public: Residents of small- and medium-sized cities (Liveability), tourists seeking digital engagement (3I solutions for PS), and urban populations affected by flooding or water pollution (BALTFLOODS).

Public sector entities are both partners and primary beneficiaries of these initiatives:

- Local and Regional Authorities: These include municipalities (ranging from small rural towns to large capitals), regional planning authorities, and national ministries.
- Public Service Institutions: Specific entities targeted include public libraries, museums, cultural institutions, and hospitals (both university-level and regional).
- Education and Research: Schools, vocational colleges, and universities are end users for tools related to well-being, sustainability, and pedagogical innovation.
- Infrastructure and Safety Providers: Infrastructure owners, service providers, and emergency responders involved in disaster risk reduction and flood monitoring (BALTFLOODS, ClimaResponse).

The projects also support professionals and organisations that drive public service innovation:

- Entrepreneurs and Innovators: For example, social innovators and social entrepreneurs who need better regional support ecosystems (RESIST), as well as SMEs and large companies requiring tools for sustainability reporting (SusTool).
- Specialised Professionals: This includes healthcare professionals, nursing staff, civil servants, public procurers, pedagogues, and design professionals like architects.
- Sectoral Agencies: BSOs, IT associations, and innovation support actors are targeted to bridge the gap between high-tech solutions and public sector needs.

Many projects integrate advanced digital tools to modernise public service delivery, for example, immersive technologies (VR/AR, and XR), artificial intelligence (AI), digital platforms and monitoring. Innovation is also applied to how public authorities work and interact with stakeholders, for example through Public Interest Design (PID), participatory and co-creation models, or hackathons. Several projects introduce unconventional solutions to address complex societal challenges, such as cross-sectoral collaboration, prescription-based well-being or systemic health literacy improvement.

The projects involve a diverse range of partners, often following a triple-helix structure that integrates government, research, and industry to address complex societal challenges. Public authorities often serve as lead partners or piloting sites for new solutions. Research and Higher Education Institutions provide the scientific foundation, technological expertise, and methodological frameworks. Often, NGOs bridge the gap between public services and the community, frequently representing vulnerable groups. NGOs leverage their grassroots connections to foster public participation and ensure that services reach their intended audiences. In many projects, NGOs ensure that the voice of the service user is integrated into the design of public services. Private partners bring high-tech solutions and industry insights to public sector challenges. SMEs and NGOs also contribute technical skills and innovative methods to project activities.

The projects under PO 1.2 focus on creating tangible digital tools, conceptual models, and capacity-building resources to modernise public services. Many projects produce advanced digital tools to improve service delivery and citizen interaction. Some develop structured frameworks and "how-to"-kits to standardise innovative public service concepts. To ensure long-term sustainability, most projects create educational resources for public sector employees and citizens, such as training programmes or practitioner guides and handbooks. In addition to policy recommendations, some projects establish formal networks, such as the European Digital Equity Network and the BSR city network for PPI, to facilitate ongoing transnational cooperation.

Capacity building across these projects focuses on equipping public servants, healthcare professionals, and regional authorities with the skills needed to implement innovative, responsive services.

Table 4-1 Overview of capacity activities in PO 1.2 projects

Area	Capacities influenced	Target Group
Innovation and Agile Management	User-centred design for general interest matters, "agile" governance, social innovation support, and PPI.	City administrations, regional public authorities, BSOs, and sectoral agencies.
Health and Well-being	The ability to search, understand, and use electronic health information as intermediaries for patients; knowledge on how to set up, organise, and evaluate arts-based mental health Programmes.	Healthcare organisations, hospitals, and local/regional authorities in the culture and health sectors.
Environment and Climate	Efficient planning of Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction; technical skills for flood monitoring; and incorporating environmental targets into public catering.	Sub-national public authorities (municipalities), infrastructure owners, schools, and public meal organisations.
Education	Methodological competence in participatory design; the ability to create "hybrid" informational spaces that merge digital and physical services.	Public libraries, schools, vocational colleges, and NGOs working with youth.

Source: Own elaboration based on project descriptions in Programme database, application forms and project websites

The PO 1.2 projects also directly align local public service innovations with broader European Union strategies. These projects help translate critical EU priorities, including digital transition, climate resilience, and health into local action. For example, the DEAHL BALTIC project directly supports by creating a Competence Building Package to the EU's Digital Decade e-Health Target. Under this strategic framework, the EU aims for 100% of its citizens to have access to their electronic health data

by 2030. The SusTool project acts as a direct implementation tool of the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) by developing a digital Sustainability Reporting Tool. This helps SMEs and service/ICT companies comply with EU data requests within their value chains, while participating national ministries use the project to align EC directives with national legislation. The SchoolChanger project directly aligns with EU educational and health agendas. HybReDe aligns with the EU Global Health Strategy's goals of improving health equity, patient-centred therapy, and sustainable healthcare systems.

PO 1.1 and PO 1.2 projects compared to mainstream ESF projects

While it is difficult to make a general **comparison to ESF projects** in national contexts due to their diversity, some reflections can be made on the added value of IBSR projects. 2021-2027 projects under PO 1.1 differ from most ESF projects in their transnational structure, geographic focus, and multisectoral approach to resilience. PO 1.2 projects address social topics by a focus on transnational systemic innovation and the modernisation of public service delivery. While ESF projects typically focus on direct investment in human capital, such as individual training, employment services, and on social inclusion within a single country, PO 1.1 and PO 1.2 Interreg projects have distinctive features:

- **Transnational cooperation and co-creation:** Every project described in the sources is built upon a consortium of partners from multiple countries across the Baltic Sea Region. Social challenges, such as youth mental health or digital health literacy, are addressed through cooperation between multiple countries to align policies and pool resources.
- **Transnational outputs and mechanisms:** Unlike national projects that produce local solutions, these projects aim for results that work across borders. This includes the creation of a transnational BSR fund for refugee women, a BSR-wide competition for cultural pearls, and transnational inclusive sustainability visions.
- **Systemic and cross-sectoral approach:** Instead of providing direct aid to individuals or to institutions, organisations, and public-sector entities that routinely absorb ESF/ESF+ grants[5], projects focus on creating systemic solutions and cross-sectoral approaches.
- **Technological social innovation:** There is a heavy emphasis on using innovation and high-tech tools to solve social problems in IBSR projects, while only a limited share of ESF/ESF+ projects has an innovation or experimental approach.
- **Broad scope of resilience (PO 1.1):** While ESF/ESF+ projects primarily address social and human capital, these projects apply the concept of resilience to ecological, technological, and agricultural fields.
- **Capacity building for public services (PO 1.2):** A primary goal of IBSR projects is to improve the responsiveness and "out-of-the-box" thinking of civil servants and public organisations, compared to financial aid to structures offering support for training, employment, and living.
- **Direct involvement of intergovernmental organisations:** IBSR projects usually involve high-level international bodies that do not typically lead national ESF/ESF+ projects, such as the

[5] Such as national or regional job centres or Regional or Local government bodies tasked with executing local social inclusion and employment strategies.

CBSS and the Secretariat of the NDPHS. These organisations provide direct access to national ministries across the entire region to ensure results are anchored in transnational policy. This is especially relevant for challenges that cannot be solved with conventional approaches.

- **Cross-Border Value Chains:** A key goal of IBSR projects is to shield the region from global supply chain disruptions by creating "local value chains" that span the BSR, stimulating trade and collaboration between micro-SMEs in different countries.

PO 3.1 Circular economy

The 19 projects within the Interreg Baltic Sea Region 2021-2027 cycle under PO 3.1 can be grouped into five thematic categories based on their primary focus and target sectors:

Table 4-2 Overview of thematic categories of PO 3.1 projects

Category	Projects
Sustainable Food Systems and Circular Agriculture	Change(K)now! focuses on shifting food delivery systems from single-use to multi-use packaging. KISMET works with local authorities to create sustainable food environments and regional food chains. FoodLoops (Small Project) builds trust between local actors to turn school food waste into valuable organic compost. BREC (Small Project) focuses on teaching circular agricultural practices through educational materials for farming schools. Circular FoodShift (Small Project) addresses the lack of competencies in local municipalities to develop resilient and sustainable food regions.
Bioeconomy and Biomass Innovation	BioBoosters helps bio-based businesses adopt circular innovation. CEforestry develops innovative practices to turn forestry residues like bark and cones into high-value products. CiNURGi promotes standards for recycling nutrients from agricultural and industrial biomass back into primary production. Blue-Green Bio Lab (Small Project) facilitates industrial symbioses where aquaculture and agriculture exchange resource streams.
Industrial Manufacturing and Material Circularity	CompositeCircle establishes transnational value chains for recycling glass fibre-reinforced polymers, particularly from wind turbine blades. CIRC-2-ZERO assists SMEs in electronics and wood manufacturing by using digital twins to optimise circular product design. GlassCircle (Small Project) focuses on identifying solutions for the reuse of residue materials generated during glass fibre manufacturing.
Governance and Public Procurement	ChemClimCircle-2 and its precursor ChemClimCircle (Small Project) integrate climate protection, circularity, and chemical reduction into Green Public Procurement (GPP). BALTIPLAST equips municipalities with strategic and technical tools to reduce plastic waste and improve packaging management.
Urban Spaces and Lifestyle Transformation	Circ@Home targets households to change consumption lifestyles and introduces ‘Circularity Hubs’ in neighbourhoods. CCC (Cultural and Creative Sectors & Industries) uses the creative sector as a frontrunner to promote ‘circular lifestyles’ and innovation. Circular spaces trains entrepreneurs and the maker space community and start-ups in eco-design and material reuse. Circular Ports provides a toolbox for port city administrations and enterprises to find circular synergies within port environments.

Source: Own elaboration based on project descriptions in Programme database, application forms and project websites

The IBSR projects under Objective 3.1 address circularity from different thematic angles designed to bridge the gap between policy and practice. One cluster of projects focuses on closing **biological cycles and nutrient recycling**. This includes nutrient recycling from agricultural and industrial waste to create sustainable fertilizers (CiNURGi) and the valorisation of forestry residues into high-value products like meat analogues (CEforestry). Projects like BioBoosters and BREC provide the innovation models and educational frameworks needed to transition traditional rural bio-businesses toward circular practices. Some projects target the **urban and regional food chain**. Efforts range from shifting residents, businesses and municipalities away from single-use packaging (Change(K)now!) to helping municipalities establish resilient regional food environments and local innovation partnerships (KISMET, Circular FoodShift). Smaller initiatives, such as FoodLoops, focus on the practical task of turning school kitchen waste into organic compost for local agriculture. **Industrial Manufacturing and technical projects** address the recycling of complex industrial materials. CompositeCircle and GlassCircle establish value chains for glass fibre-reinforced polymers recovered from wind turbines and manufacturing residues. Additionally, CIRC-2-ZERO utilises digital twin technology to help SMEs in electronics and wood manufacturing simulate and optimise their production for circularity. Some projects target the **strategic levers held by public authorities**. ChemClimCircle-2 and its precursor ChemClimCircle focus on Green Public Procurement, ensuring that municipal purchasing accounts for circularity, climate impact, and chemical safety simultaneously. BALTIPLAST equips local governments with the tools to manage and reduce plastic waste strategically. Finally, a number of projects focuses on the **citizen□consumer behaviour□lifestyle and circularity in neighbourhoods**. Beyond simple waste management, projects like Circ@Home and Circular spaces focus on Rethinking, Reducing, and Reusing. They establish "Circularity Hubs" in neighbourhoods and train the "maker" community in eco-design to bridge the gap between consumer intentions and circular actions. Some projects approach circularity through behavioural psychology. The CCC project utilises the Cultural and Creative Sectors as frontrunners to promote "circular lifestyles," while Change(K)now! focuses on nudging consumers to adopt new routines in food delivery to reduce their environmental footprint.

With regard to solutions and outputs, several projects deliver comprehensive toolkits or toolboxes to provide stakeholders with ready-to-use methods and instruments. Technology-driven solutions such as digital tools and databases are a core component of many projects to optimise processes and increase transparency. To address knowledge gaps, projects develop specialised learning materials for various audiences. Projects also create structural innovation models to foster new ways of working and doing business. To ensure long-term impact, projects provide decision-makers with evidence-based recommendations in policy or strategic guidelines.

PO 3.1 projects involve a wide range of private sector actors and business support structures that play critical roles in testing, validating, and scaling circular solutions. Local and regional public authorities are frequently the main target group, the key actors, and the backbone of these circular economy initiatives. **Private sector actors and business support structures** play critical roles in testing, validating, and scaling circular solutions. Clusters and Innovation Hubs often act as intermediaries that connect research to industry. They usually organise the outreach to SMEs within one region and sector. Large enterprises are often involved as ‘technology adapters’ or providers of industrial use cases. They provide industry insights and real-world use cases to help research organisations develop digital twin platforms and circular design tools. SMEs often act as the primary target group for testing solutions in specific niches or as specialised service providers. **NGOs** play a fundamental role in IBSR projects as strategic

think tanks, multipliers and coordinators of behavioural change. They bridge the gap between technical research and the public, ensuring that circular solutions are adopted by residents, businesses, and policymakers.

In the projects under PO 3.1 the contribution to major European Union strategic frameworks becomes especially visible. The EU Green Deal is a primary driver for many of these projects, providing the overarching goal of a climate-neutral and resource-efficient economy. Projects like CiNURGi and Circular Ports explicitly support the new EU Circular Economy Action Plan this plan as a main building block to fight climate change. The CiNURGi project links to the Farm to Fork Programme as the reason sustainable agriculture must move toward 'circular agronomics' to reduce dependency on imported mineral nutrients. Many projects, such as CEforestry, KISMET, and Circ@Home, align their activities with the Green Deal's 2050 climate-neutrality targets. Some projects contribute to the EU Circular Cities & Regions Initiative, e.g. the project Circular Ports is connected to this initiative through its partnership with ICLEI, ensuring that its toolbox for port cities reaches the appropriate EU-level platforms.

PO 3.1 projects compared to mainstream ERDF projects

Projects on circular economy funded by **mainstream ERDF** programmes typically focus on direct regional investment, job creation, and infrastructure within a specific geographic territory, whereas IBSR projects always address complex challenges from a cooperation and transnational perspective. While mainstream ERDF projects often focus on investments within a single region or country, IBSR projects are designed to solve challenges that no single country can address alone. The projects funded under the IBSR Programme differ from mainstream ERDF programmes also through their focus on joint solution development, transferability and regional scaling. The following characteristics show the main differences:

- **Multi-country partnerships – triple-helix by design:** Unlike mainstream ERDF projects that typically involve local partners, IBSR projects involve large and diverse consortia from different regions and countries. For example, Circular Ports includes 17 partners from six BSR countries, and ChemClimCircle-2 involves 45 entities across eight countries. As a diverse and relevant partnership reflecting the triple-helix (or even quadruple-helix approach) is a pre-condition, all IBSR projects also involve unique mixtures of different types of partners, facilitating innovation for truly new solutions and methods. This is not always the case for mainstream ERDF projects.
- **Joint development of transferability:** Rather than funding isolated local infrastructure or pilot projects, these projects focus on creating models, toolkits, and standards intended for use across different territories. Most projects also use transnational co-creation processes to develop approaches that are then tested in demo cities and regions across different countries to ensure they work in diverse legal and cultural contexts. Therefore, the aspect of transferability is in the focus of Interreg projects from the beginning. Thus, the outputs and results are usually easily applicable to other geographical contexts. Often, elaboration and dissemination of project results in different languages is part of the Interreg project, while mainstream ERDF projects usually only work in one language and are not easy to replicate.

- **Shared regional challenges:** Some IBSR projects address issues specific to the Baltic Sea, such as reducing nutrient deposits into BSR waters or building transnational value chains for industrial waste that require pooling capacities across countries to be economically viable.
- **Peer learning and replication:** These projects emphasise institutional capacity building through international exchange, which is a hallmark of Interreg rather than mainstream ERDF. Projects like KISMET specifically include 'replicator cities' to implement and roll out solutions developed by the core partners. They establish international groups and networks of peers (e.g., in BREC) to share experiences between regions that specialise in different circular solutions.
- **Policy integration and multi-level perspective:** IBSR projects often aim to influence transnational policy frameworks rather than just local regulations. There is an intense focus on macro-regional goals. Many projects explicitly link their goals to the EUSBSR or the HELCOM Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy (i.e. CiNURGi, BALTIPLAST). Furthermore, outputs often include 'Policy Roadmaps' or 'Policy Briefs' designed to facilitate dialogue with decision-makers at EU, BSR, national, and local levels simultaneously. This multi-level vision is specific to Interreg projects compared to mainstream ERDF projects.

In summary, where mainstream ESF and ERDF projects are often *inward-looking* to solve domestic social challenges, these projects are *explicitly outward-looking*, treating the Baltic Sea Region as a single, interconnected eco-system that generates innovation and shared learning to withstand external shocks.

4.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the evaluation questions:

EQ 1.3 For Programme objectives 1.1. and 1.2: How is the specific focus of the 2021-2027 Programme on communities and on social topics implemented through projects? What do projects achieve in these topics? What is characteristic of the way of addressing social topics in the Programme in comparison to projects within the European Social Fund (ESF)?

PO 1.1 can be understood as evolution of the smart specialisation approach towards innovation in society and economy. The project objectives reach from providing transformative solutions from a technical and entrepreneurial point of view to improving preparedness for crisis in society, public entities and SMEs. Some projects address the cultural and creative sectors as the most affected ones in a crisis, while other tackle specific needs of rural and remote areas and value chains in these territories. Finally, some projects address specific vulnerable groups and societies in general promoting key values such as democracy, integration or health.

Within PO 1.2 the specific focus of the 2021-2027 Programme on communities and social topics is implemented on the ground through a shifting paradigm in how public services are designed and delivered. Rather than addressing citizens as passive recipients of policies, projects actively integrate them as co-creators, address systemic health and digital inequities, and empower community-led organisations to solve complex local challenges.

In addressing these community and social challenges, the projects deliver concrete, practical achievements – ranging from digital applications and physical prototypes to transferable model

programmes and policy toolkits. To build resilience, the projects employ several innovative methodologies, in particular co-design and participatory approaches, engaging young citizens, civil society, and stakeholders in the development of solutions, capacity building and training. Other projects use technological innovation, namely AI, VR/AR, DNA genotyping, and remote sensing to solve diagnostic, environmental, and educational problems.

While it is difficult to make a general comparison to ESF projects in national contexts due to their diversity, some reflections can be made on the distinctive features of IBSR projects. 2021-2027 IBSR projects under PO 1.1 differ from most ESF projects in their transnational structure, geographic focus, and multisectoral approach to resilience. PO 1.2 projects address social topics by a focus on transnational systemic innovation and the modernisation of public service delivery. While ESF projects typically focus on direct investment in human capital, such as individual training, employment services, and on social inclusion within a single country, PO 1.1 and PO 1.2 Interreg projects have distinctive features, such as cross-sectoral cooperation and co-creation, systemic solutions also using technology for social problems, cross-border value chains, and capacity building for policymakers. IBSR projects usually involve high-level international bodies that do not typically lead national ESF projects, such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the Secretariat of the Northern Dimension Partnership in Health and Social Well-being (NDPHS). These organisations provide direct access to national ministries across the entire region to ensure results are anchored in transnational policy. This is especially relevant for challenges that cannot be solved with conventional approaches at local level.

EQ 1.4 For Programme objective 1.1: In which contexts and from which angle did projects address the challenge of resilience?

The projects address resilience as a proactive process of transformation, learning, and innovation rather than a simple return to a pre-crisis state. They approach resilience from four angles: social cohesion and mental health, economic and sectoral vulnerability, solutions for territorial specificities and the use of technology for global challenges. Projects address a diverse range of societal and economic challenges stemming from the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the energy crisis, but also addressing vulnerable groups and territories. The initiatives address a wide array of concrete challenges, including supporting refugee integration, stabilising local food systems, and advancing digital healthcare through artificial intelligence.

The user-oriented focus on resilience instead of the input orientation on innovation, as in previous funding periods, has helped to improve the practical usability of projects. While some projects focus on strengthening technological solutions to existing challenges, others concentrate on very specific user groups (refugee women, refugee/traumatised children, employees with mental health problems, seniors, young citizens) or territories (rural areas, small municipalities, nature-based tourist destinations). All projects use innovative solutions and methods, and some projects put the application of participatory methods in the centre to address resilience.

EQ 1.5 For Programme objective 1.2: Which public services and for whom did projects focus on? How were the services (further) developed as more responsive?

The projects are working with a diverse range of public services aimed at improving the quality of life, environmental resilience, and administrative efficiency. These services include health and social well-being services, environmental and infrastructure services, urban planning and design, library and information services, business and innovation support services, as well as efficient public administration and governance.

Many projects focus on improving the quality of life for specific segments of the population, such as patients and healthcare users, vulnerable populations (i.e. citizen groups with low digital health literacy, including the elderly and refugees), youth and students. For example, teenagers and students are primary targets for projects redesigning school environments, improving public meals, or enhancing digital literacy through hybrid library spaces. The general public is addressed in different ways, ranging from residents in certain territories such as small- and medium-sized cities, and populations affected by specific threats such as flooding or water pollution, to specific groups such as tourists.

Within PO 1.2 public services are further developed to be more responsive by shifting from conservative, 'top-down' models to participatory, user-centred, and digitally-integrated frameworks. This evolution focuses on involving citizens directly in the design process and utilising technology to meet specific social needs. Public services are developed to be more responsive through participatory and inclusive design, agile governance and innovation management, new feedback loops and cross-sectoral collaboration. Specific intermediaries and end-user groups are integrated directly into the project lifecycle to ensure that the final outputs meet actual societal needs. Small- and medium-sized municipalities are primary beneficiaries of these projects, as many are specifically designed to help smaller authorities. While large cities are also involved, it can be concluded that smaller cities can specifically benefit by becoming more attractive to residents and businesses.

The added value of these projects lies in their ability to provide personalised, evidence-based, and proactive solutions that usual services often lack, such as authenticity (tested under real-life conditions), real-time data connection, proactivity.

EQ 1.6 For Programme objective 3.1: From which angle did projects address the challenge of circular economy? How did the projects differ from projects funded by the mainstream ERDF Programmes?

IBSR Projects under PO 3.1 are dedicated to advancing the circular economy. Projects under PO 3.1 address circularity from different thematic perspectives designed to bridge the gap between policy and practice. A significant cluster of projects focuses on bioeconomy and biomass cycles as well as nutrient recycling. Some projects target sustainable food chains and circular agriculture. Industrial manufacturing with a circular approach addresses the recycling of complex industrial materials. One pillar targets the strategic levers held by public authorities, such as governance and public procurement. Some projects focus on deploying local circular economy strategies in specific urban areas (e.g. ports) or supporting circular lifestyles, education and action in local neighbourhoods. Projects address the transition to the circular economy from four different angles: reuse strategies and lifestyle, industrial symbiosis, behavioural change and mindset shifting, as well as standardisation and systemic integration.

Projects on circular economy funded by mainstream ERDF typically focus on direct regional investment, job creation, and infrastructure within a specific geographic territory, whereas IBSR projects always address complex challenges from a transnational perspective. While mainstream ERDF projects often focus on investments within a single region or country, IBSR projects often aim to influence transnational

policy frameworks. This multi-level perspective is specific for Interreg projects within the ERDF. The projects funded under the IBSR Programme differ from mainstream ERDF projects also through their focus on joint solution development, transferability and regional scaling. Unlike mainstream ERDF projects that typically involve local partners, IBSR projects involve large and diverse consortia. As a diverse and relevant partnership reflecting the triple-helix (or even quadruple-helix approach) is a pre-condition, all IBSR projects also involve unique mixtures of different types of partners, facilitating innovation for truly new solutions and methods. This is not always the case for mainstream ERDF projects.

EQ 1.8 What can be concluded on the “Interreg niche” (e.g. public actor focus, increasing institutional capacity) and the Baltic Sea Region specificity of the cooperation topics?

The following findings and conclusions are based on the combined analysis of findings presented in chapters 3 and 4 of the main evaluation report, with inputs reflected in other chapters, in particular, chapters 7 and 14.

A major characteristic of the 2021–2027 Programme is its increased emphasis on enhancing the capacities of public institutions and governance systems. Projects increasingly move beyond knowledge generation and awareness-raising towards the operational implementation, testing, scaling and institutionalisation of solutions. Local, regional and national authorities constitute a substantial share of beneficiaries across priorities and appear to play an increasingly prominent role in Programme implementation.

The thematic focus of the projects reflects challenges that are particularly relevant to the Baltic Sea macro-region and often require transnational responses.

Following the geopolitical developments of 2022, projects increasingly frame security and self-reliance as regional challenges, focusing on reducing external dependencies and strengthening regional resilience. The Programme's resilience agenda is closely linked to regional realities.

Interreg enables actors to jointly develop solutions for problems that no single country or region can address effectively alone. A distinctive feature compared with mainstream ERDF and ESF Programmes is the Programme’s capacity to create transnational policy learning, connect local implementation with regional and national policymaking, influence macro-regional frameworks, support harmonisation and standardisation across countries.

Beneficiaries see that Interreg has a unique value in contributing to transnational networking and cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. In addition, 85% of the beneficiaries feel a strong positive effect of Interreg on their day-to-day work in the own organisation and country. For them, based on their open responses, the IBSR Programme serves as a catalyst for multi-level cooperation and knowledge transfer within countries. Furthermore, Interreg functions as a badge of quality, expanding professional networks and building strategic partnerships (see Chapter 14).

An important added value lies in the potential to address territorial specificities and specific needs of, for instance, metropolitan areas, rural areas, and small municipalities. This turns Interreg Baltic Sea Region into a valuable Programme addressing territorial disparities across the Baltic Sea Region.

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5 The 2021-2027 Programme facing geopolitical changes

This Chapter analyses the question of how the Programme reacted to the geopolitical changes in the Region. The analysis included documentary review and the analysis of the thematic focus of IBSR projects, also included in Chapter 3 and 4. In addition, the analysis of the beneficiary survey provided relevant information.

This chapter refers to the following evaluation question:

EQ 1.9 Was the Programme flexible in reacting to the unexpected, changed geopolitical situation in the Region (ref. to Russia's aggression to Ukraine and the consequent sudden interruption of cooperation with Russia and Belarus)? How did the Programme react? How did the changed political situation affect the thematic focus of the projects?

5.1 Context

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the implementation of the IBSR during the period 2021–2027 has unfolded amid radically transformed geopolitical conditions. The Russian aggression war in Ukraine marked a structural break for Baltic Sea Region cooperation, abruptly severing long-standing cross-border interactions, economic ties, and institutional partnerships. In response, the European Union introduced a sweeping sanctions regime against Russia - now comprising 21 packages as of July 2026[6] - alongside restrictive measures targeting Belarus. These sanctions, which include individual restrictions, trade and transport bans, energy embargoes and financial penalties, have had a profound disruptive effect on logistics, mobility, trade and energy systems, particularly in areas that were previously dependent on East–West connections.

At the macro-regional level, cooperation frameworks swiftly adapted to the new security landscape. Collaboration with Russia and Belarus was suspended, while priorities shifted towards resilience, security, civil protection, and energy independence. Transport and connectivity strategies now emphasise North–South axes over East–West corridors, reflecting both sanctions constraints and efforts to bolster internal EU cohesion and reduce external dependencies.

Within this context, the IBSR continued to operate with its formally unchanged priorities, but under significantly modified framework conditions. In early 2022 the Programme document of the new programming period 2021-2027 was not yet approved, but it was already in very late stage of development. Originally, Russia and Belarus were intended to remain participants in the new programming period. The draft document had to be revised to exclude these two aggressor countries. 'The European Commission has suspended the participation of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus in the cooperation Programme "(Interreg VI-B) Baltic Sea region" 2021-2027 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and Belarus involvement, and in light of the European Council Conclusions of 24 February 2022.[7]' As these countries were not crucial to the Programme's architecture this did not imply much other amendments. Also, as acknowledged during an interview with the Programme's

[6] For further information, see https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/#/main and https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/07/23/21st-package-of-sanctions-eu-hits-russian-energy-financial-services-and-crypto-hard/

[7] Programme Document https://interreg-baltic.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Approved-2021-27-IBSR-Programme-document.pdf

MA/JS, due to the original schedule, there was not much time left for the Programme to substantially revise its priorities and objectives.

The new programme document was finally approved by EC on 2 June 2022. The exclusion of Russian and Belarusian partners narrowed its geographical scope and disrupted established networks, placing greater emphasis on intra-EU and EU-Norway transnational cooperation.

During summer 2025 DG Regio held consultations with all the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) Programmes effective in the Baltic Sea Region sharing a border with Russia and Belarus. Several meetings were dedicated to take stock of the ETC progress in supporting the participation of partners from regions bordering Russia and Belarus – the EU's Eastern Border Regions. ISBR informed that 'In the current Programme, Russia was suspended before the Programme's start in 2022. Interreg Baltic Sea Region did not receive any additional funding for the participation of the EU's North-Eastern border regions, and currently, the Programme does not have a specific focus on or specific measures for regions bordering Russia or Belarus. However, those regions cover a major part of the Programme area and they actively participate in Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects, benefiting from the cooperation.'[8]

In February 2026, EC published a Communication on the EU's eastern regions bordering Russia, Belarus and Ukraine titled also 'Strong regions for a safe Europe'[9]. This Communication confirms the EC's commitment to supporting eastern border regions, given their importance and relevance to the EU collective security and prosperity. In his remarks the Executive Vice-President Fitto emphasised that 'these are not only national borders – they are European borders. They are the EU's eastern frontier, and what happens there concerns all Europeans.'[10] Following Russia's invasion, the EU suspended Interreg programmes with Russia and Belarus, reallocating EUR 150 million internally and EUR 160 million to Ukraine and Moldova. Additional support was provided through targeted calls for affected regions. The Communication inter alia notes that Interreg programmes manage boosting cross-border security, resilience, and skills in cybersecurity and defence. Though stakeholders found the adjusted measures helpful, they have not fully mitigated the negative impacts of the suspended programmes.

5.2 Analysis



Already regarding the 2014-2020 Interreg Baltic Sea Region, the Programme ensured alignment with EU political decisions and the evolving sanctions regime by suspending the participation of Russian and Belarusian organisations in the ongoing projects. Legal and administrative guidance was provided to beneficiaries on contractual implications and financial arrangements. This helped stabilise project implementation, reduce uncertainty and mitigate risks related to non-compliance. In parallel, the MA/JS increased communication with beneficiaries and offered support to enable necessary adjustments to partnerships, work plans and activities where necessary.

With regard to the 2021-2027 IBSR, programme bodies were already crisis-proofed to a certain extent based on the recent COVID-19 experience. To take up any new projects and to meet new interests

[8] Interreg Baltic Sea Region and the EU's North-Eastern border regions: present benefits and future opportunities, July 2025

[9] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_26_433

[10] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech_26_435

arising from the changed political priorities and geopolitical context, it was not necessary to change priorities, but it was sufficient to operationalise them. In the 2021-2027 Programme, Priorities 1 'Innovative societies' and Priority 3 'Climate neutral societies' provided sufficient frameworks for addressing inter alia the emerging policy needs arising from the new geopolitical crisis. This was feasible under such Programme objectives as 1.1 'Resilient economies and communities' and 3.2 'Energy transition'. Civil preparedness is directly present in the project portfolio showcased by such projects as, for example, CREWS[11] that explicitly addresses disaster risk reduction by facilitating public-civil cooperation. Examples of energy projects include core projects focused on decarbonised heating and energy planning (PlanHeat)[12], municipal energy transition tools and solutions (Energy Equilibrium)[13], and work explicitly linked to 'energy independence' in response to geopolitical challenges and price shocks in Energy Circle[14]. Also under PO 2.2 (blue economy) there is a new emphasis on the use of digital solutions to strengthen the resilience, safety and continuity of navigation and maritime operations in an increasingly challenging security environment.

The Programme objectives were flexible enough to adjust to changes in the thematic focus of projects after 2022. Russia's aggression to Ukraine and the consequent geopolitical changes acted as a catalyst for reorienting project priorities from predominantly sustainability- and innovation-driven objectives towards a broader resilience agenda. Projects increasingly address energy security, crisis preparedness, social cohesion, institutional capacity and regional self-reliance. The most visible shift occurred in the energy field. While previous projects mainly focused on sustainability and energy efficiency, the 2021–2027 projects increasingly treat energy as a strategic security concern. Projects increasingly focus on resilience as a proactive process of adaptation, transformation and preparedness rather than recovery after crises. Under PO 1.1, objectives expanded beyond innovation and economic competitiveness to include preparedness of public authorities, communities and SMEs for crises. Projects increasingly address the needs of vulnerable groups, including refugees, refugee women, traumatised children and communities affected by displacement and social disruption. At the same time, resilience has evolved into a cross-cutting theme that connects environmental, social, economic and governance dimensions, making projects more directly responsive to the geopolitical realities facing the Baltic Sea Region after 2022.

In addition, with the suspension of cooperation with Russia and Belarus, the Programme operated exclusively as an intra-EU and EU-Norway transnational cooperation platform. In this context, cooperation among the remaining Baltic Sea Region partners gained increased importance for maintaining joint learning, trust-based collaboration and the development of shared solutions. IBSR also reports its significant contribution to the EU's North-Eastern border regions for whom part of their regular ENI-CBC Programmes were completely suspended leaving the regions without substantial support. In IBSR these regions benefit from cooperation networks, tested solutions and capacity building in all Programme topics. As of July 2025, there were 78 projects engaging partners from regions at the Russian border with the total number of partners being 152. The number of projects with regions at the

[11] https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/crews/
[12] https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/planheat/
[13] https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/energy-equilibrium/
[14] https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/energy-circle/

Belarus border was 45, with 51 partners from the regions bordering Belarus. The total ERDF commitment to these partners was EUR 30.1 million[15].



The MC member interviews confirmed that IBSR is generally seen as having been sufficiently flexible in adapting to geopolitical realities over its lifetime. Respondents point to concrete examples of adaptability, including the removal of Russia before Programme adoption, the strategic shift toward resilience as a thematic focus, and the facilitation of Ukrainian participation. According to the MC members the Programme's structural features both enable and constrain its flexibility. Its broad thematic framework and transnational design allow some responsiveness within calls, and instruments such as small projects and additional targeted calls have enhanced agility. However, the long programming cycle, uniform project durations, and already-committed funding leave limited room to address emerging needs mid-implementation. This is views as a constraint rooted in Programme architecture rather than a lack of willingness to respond.

There is broad agreement that the Programme is not, and should not become, a crisis-response instrument. Interreg is understood as a long-term strategic development tool, and immediate local needs – particularly in border regions directly affected by the war – are better served through national or mainstream programmes. Caution was expressed against repurposing the Programme as a defence or security mechanism, even as respondents acknowledged the growing relevance of resilience and security-related topics in the region. Looking ahead, the most consistent concern is that future performance-based financing models could significantly erode the flexibility the Programme currently enjoys. Pre-defining outputs and activities too rigidly risks reducing creativity at project level, over-binding the Programme in advance, and introducing administrative complexity ill-suited to the transnational, multi-country logic of Interreg. Respondents were clear that flexibility especially during implementation must be actively preserved in future programming design.



Despite the many political and economic changes that have occurred since the start of the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027, the majority of surveyed beneficiaries found that the thematic focus of their project is still relevant and fits the current needs and political priorities in the Baltic Sea Region. Most respondents – 267 (81%) out of 330 – found their projects still very relevant, with 15% commenting they are still rather relevant. Only 4% think that their projects have lost relevance. However, as can be seen from the responses, generally this is not linked (only) to the geopolitical changes. More than 150 respondents also explained their assessment. They overwhelmingly consider their project's thematic focus to be still highly relevant, with many noting that political and economic changes since the IBSR's start have actually increased rather than diminished that relevance.

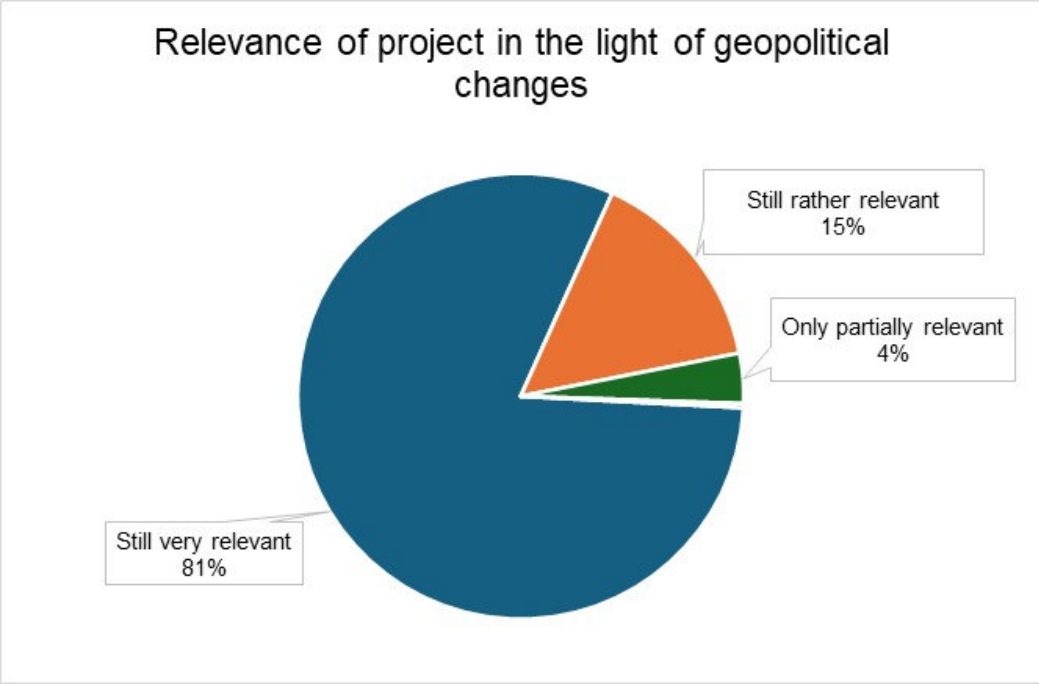
Topics such as energy transition, water management, circular economy, biodiversity, sustainable mobility, and digital innovation are consistently described as long-standing priorities that remain firmly on European and Baltic Sea Region agendas regardless of shifting political circumstances. Several note that the core challenges their projects address – polluted waters, eutrophication, climate change,

[15] Interreg Baltic Sea Region and the EU's North-Eastern border regions: present benefits and future opportunities, July 2025

nutrient recovery, waste management – have not been resolved and continue to demand coordinated transnational action.

A prominent trend across responses is the growing emphasis on resilience. Future-oriented resilience has taken on broader significance in light of Russia's war against Ukraine and the resulting geopolitical instability.

Figure 5-1 Relevance of projects despite geopolitical changes



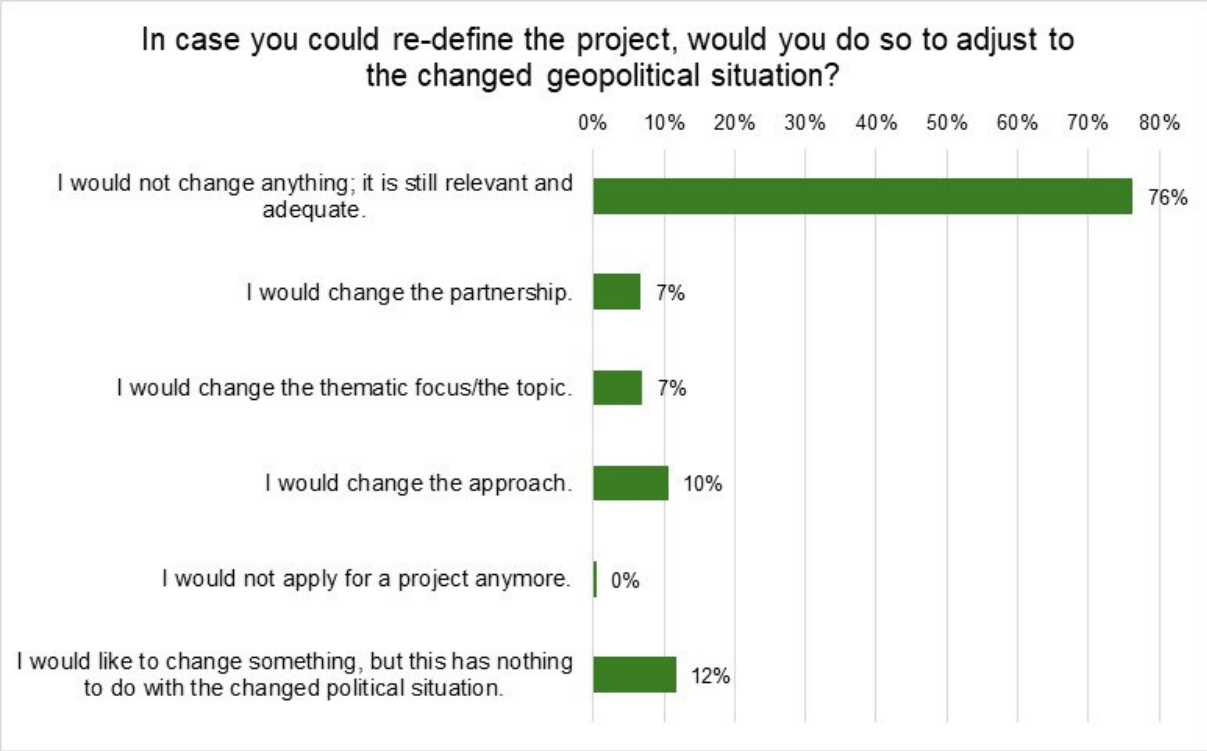
Source: own elaboration based on the results of the beneficiary survey. (Q8: Since the start of the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme, many political and economic changes have occurred. In how far do you think the thematic focus of your project is still relevant and fits to current needs and the political priorities in the Baltic Sea Region? (1 = not relevant anymore – 4 = still very relevant))

Respondents working on energy, transport, maritime safety, digital systems, and community well-being highlight that their projects have become more relevant precisely because resilience – whether energy, social, economic, or infrastructural – has moved to the top of the political agenda. Several note that the connection between civilian resilience and national security has become more explicit, and that dual-use infrastructure, cybersecurity, and civil-military cooperation are increasingly important dimensions of their work.

Energy transition is among the most frequently cited areas of heightened relevance. The geopolitical shock of the war in Ukraine has accelerated the political priority of reducing dependence on external energy supplies and diversifying energy sources. Respondents involved in energy efficiency, renewable energy, alternative fuels, heating and cooling, and maritime energy transition report that urgency around their topics has grown. At the same time, some acknowledge that while the political direction is clear, implementation remains slow and the transformation is still in its early stages.

A smaller number of respondents signal tensions or complications. Some note that political shifts including the rollback of green transition commitments in certain Member States, changes to sustainability reporting requirements, or reduced national interest in GPP have made it harder to maintain momentum or partner motivation. A few observe that parts of their projects have become less aligned with current agendas even as other parts have gained in relevance.

Figure 5-2 Relevance of projects despite geopolitical changes



Source: own elaboration based on the results of the beneficiary survey. (Q9: In case you could re-define the project, would you do so to adjust to the changed political situation?)

In general, most responding beneficiaries would not change anything on their project as reaction to the changed geopolitical situation. Only a limited number would include changes, for example, they would like to add partners from Ukraine or change the thematic focus. Some potential changes are not directly linked to the changed geopolitical situation but rather through general developments and trends, e.g. changed regulation or an even higher political priority for alternative energy sources.

5.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the evaluation questions:

EQ 1.9 Was the Programme flexible in reacting to the unexpected, changed geopolitical situation in the Region (ref. to Russia's aggression to Ukraine and the consequent sudden interruption of cooperation with Russia and Belarus)? How did the Programme react? How did the changed political situation affect the thematic focus of the projects?

The IBSR Programme 2021-2027 responded flexibly and pragmatically to the profound geopolitical disruption caused by Russia's war against Ukraine. It swiftly aligned with EU political decisions and sanctions, stabilising project implementation through clear guidance and intensified support to beneficiaries. The Programme priorities remained relevant and adaptable to the emerging regional needs in the changed geopolitical situation, emphasising resilience preparedness, security and the energy transition. The Programme framework was flexible enough to respond to shifts of interests and political priorities according to the changes in geopolitical conditions and security.

The vast majority of beneficiaries in the survey (96% of 330 replies) found that their projects are still relevant, despite the geopolitical changes. In general, beneficiaries would not change anything on their project due to the changed geopolitical situation.

The analysis of thematic coverage of projects confirms that applications and projects after 2022 were able to respond to changed needs and political priorities. The evidence shows that the Programme's thematic priorities remain well-founded and forward-looking. Russia's aggression to Ukraine and the consequent geopolitical changes acted as a catalyst for reorienting project priorities towards a broader resilience agenda. The Programme addresses energy security, crisis preparedness, social cohesion, institutional capacity and regional self-reliance. The most visible shift occurred in the energy field (PO 3.2). Also under PO 2.2 (blue economy) there is an emerging emphasis on the use of digital solutions to strengthen the resilience, safety and continuity of navigation and maritime operations. Under PO 1.1, objectives expanded beyond innovation and economic competitiveness to include preparedness of public authorities, communities and SMEs for crises. Projects increasingly address the needs of vulnerable groups, including refugees, refugee women, traumatised children and communities affected by displacement and social disruption.

6 Contribution to the EUSBSR objectives

The Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027 is closely linked to the EUSBSR. This link does not only regard the support to the governance of the EUSBSR through the dedicated priority 4 (analysed in Chapter 12), but also the projects of the Programme contributing to the objectives of the EUSBSR. This chapter explores the latter further including also priority 4 projects.

This chapter refers to the following evaluation question:

EQ 1.10 To what extent, and how, do Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects contribute to the objectives of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)?

This chapter builds on the analysis of projects, based on application forms and descriptive information included in the IBSR project library and additional documents and websites, as well as on analysis of stakeholder perceptions gathered via interviews and surveys. The results of these analyses are presented below.

6.1 Context



The IBSR Programme document (2022) explicitly puts the EUSBSR Action Plan as a key reference point when it comes to aligning priorities between the Programme and the strategy, as mentioned in page 12 of the Programme document:

"The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) and its Action Plan provide the central reference to the Programme identifying the main joint challenges and cooperation needs in the region."

The Programme's nine specific objectives include a dedicated section stressing its intended contribution to the strategy's objectives. This embedded alignment means that the Programme's contribution to the EUSBSR is included in its intervention logic from the outset of the Programme, positioning the Programme as a key implementation vehicle for the Strategy. In addition to the Interreg Cooperation Programme document (2022), also the Programme Manual (version 8.0, June 2024) reinforces this alignment, by giving additional practical guidance on how to engage with the EUSBSR. In section B.3, more specifically, state in page 9 of the manual:

"*The MA/JS encourages applicants to consider the possible contribution of a project to policy areas of the Strategy and a particular action within the policy area. Applicants are encouraged to establish contacts with the policy area coordinators of the EUSBSR and discuss if their ideas are in line with the actions in those policy areas."*

Given this strategic alignment by design, all IBSR projects are strongly aligned with EUSBSR objectives and policy areas. However, while there is thematic alignment by design, the actual project contribution to EUSBSR implementation varies across projects as the analysis below shows.

6.2 Analysis

The analysis encompassed a review of projects and project platforms, in addition to a thorough examination of responses from the beneficiary survey.

Project analysis

All projects are expected to explain in their application forms under section 3.5, to which EUSBSR Policy Areas (PAs), indicating maximum three, they plan to contribute, with most indicating two PAs. The table below is based on the analysis of application forms[16] and shows the EUSBSR PAs to which, based on these projects, the Programme priorities contribute mostly to. Priority 1 is strongly aligned with the EUSBSR, with projects contributing to many different PAs. This demonstrates the importance of the cross-cutting Programme objectives under Priority 1, particularly PO 1.1. A strong alignment also emerges under Priority 3, indicating strong thematic coherence between PO 3.2 (Energy transition) and PA Energy, as well as between circular economy projects linked to PAs Bioeconomy and Innovation. Furthermore, Priority 2 has many diverse contribution links to the EUSBSR, in particular to PAs Hazards, Nutri, Safe, Tourism, Ship, Spatial Planning. Contribution is more centred from PO 3.3 on smart green mobility towards PAs Transport, Tourism and Spatial Planning.

Figure 6-1 Contribution of IBSR projects to EUSBSR Policy Areas

	EUSBSR Policy Areas														
	Bioeconomy	Culture	Education	Energy	Hazards	Health	Innovation	Nutri	Safe	Secure	Ship	Spatial Planning	Tourism	Transport	ALL PO
Priority 1 - Innovative Societies															
1.1 Resilient economies & communities	4	5	1			4	6			1		3	6		30
1.2 Responsive public services	1	2	3			4	7			2		1	1		21
Priority 2 - Water-smart societies															
2.1 Sustainable waters	1				6		1	7	1	1	1		3		21
2.2 Blue economy	1						1		4		3	3	2	1	15
Priority 3 - Climate-neutral societies															
3.1 Circular economy	7	1					9	1			1			1	20
3.2 Energy transition		1		16							1	1		1	20
3.3 Smart green mobility												2	2	5	9
ALL Policy Areas	14	9	4	16	6	8	24	8	5	4	6	10	14	8	136

Source: own elaboration based on the application forms

The table deliberately does not include the Programme objective 4.2, as this is a dedicated Programme objective to the governance of the EUSBSR and its alignment is obvious and signifies the strong link of the Programme with the Strategy.

The EUSBSR PAs with most contributions are PA Innovation, Energy, Bioeconomy, and Tourism. On the contrary, the PAs Education, Safe and Secure, have fewer project links. The analysis shows that all PAs benefit from contributions from IBSR projects, showing a strong alignment of the objectives and a clear coherence. Taking a closer look at the project contributions to the EUSBSR as indicated in the

[16] Application forms of contracted and finalised projects.

application forms, the links and contributions are slightly stronger for core projects. There is a strong alignment in the Innovation and Energy PAs, driven mainly by core projects. The PAs Tourism, Bioeconomy and Spatial Planning also show a strong link, with a more balanced mix between core and small projects.

Project platforms funded under Programme objective 4.1 usually show a very strong contribution to EUSBSR. Designed as capitalisation tools, they build on existing knowledge with the aim of pushing isolated project results into broader institutional and political frameworks.

Table 6-1 Project platforms and their connection to EUSBSR

Project platform	Connected to EUSBSR PA	Evidence of contribution
Baltic PlaNet	PA Spatial Planning, PA Secure	Baltic PlaNet supports the work of PA Spatial Planning in the area of climate change adaptation and preparedness for extreme weather events. The project team participated in a breakout session at the EUSBSR Annual Forum 2026 “Shifting tides, resilient territories – advancing spatial resilience in the Baltic Sea region”, organised by the VASAB Secretariat and EUSBSR Policy Area Spatial Planning. The platform contributed also to the “Spatial Planning stand” at the Forum with two activities: the Baltic Sea Region climate resilience quiz the Baltic PlaNet stakeholder survey, to obtain new contacts and raise awareness.
BSR Mental Health	PA Health	The lead partner is the Secretariat of the NDPHS who also is PAC for PA Health. This umbrella project helps the PAC to structure the contributions and contributing organisations to the key actions of the PA action plan, namely to support cross-sectoral collaboration in promoting the “Economy of Wellbeing” concept, and to enhance the capacity of stakeholders to tackle regional health challenges.
BSR Urban Mobility	PA Transport, PA Spatial Planning	The BSR Urban Mobility project platform connects cities, regional authorities, and policymakers in a peer learning network to support the implementation of sustainable urban mobility plans and deliver on EU goals for multimodal, zero-emission transport. BSR Urban Mobility consolidates outcomes from 17 EU projects. It contributes to the achievement of strategic goals of PA Transport, for example, via an Urban Mobility and TEN-T Readiness webinar held on 11 March 2026, bringing together around 50 mobility professionals from across the Baltic Sea Region to explore new survey findings on cities’ preparedness for updated TEN-T requirements.
ENTRA	PA Energy	EnTRA unites 18 energy transition projects and their results: guidance for experts and citizens, simulation and decision-support tools, solution toolboxes, etc. The EnTRA Resource Hub provides results tailored to the needs of local and regional authorities, as well as sectoral agencies. A Policy Memorandum elaborates key recommendations to improve capacity for uptake of energy transition solutions and reduce barriers to innovation.
HAZGONE	PA Hazards	The HAZGONE platform aims to equip local and national authorities, business associations and others with a holistic understanding of the sources and pathways of hazardous substances. The HAZGONE

Project platform	Connected to EUSBSR PA	Evidence of contribution
		platform was showcased at the EUSBSR Annual Forum 2026 at the booth of EUSBSR Policy Area Hazards, contributing to discussions across the Baltic Sea Region on hazardous substances governance and integrated approaches towards a non-toxic environment.
REAVES	PA Culture	REAVES project platform drives the way for a coherent cross-sectoral support strategy for the film, gaming, and music industries in the Baltic Sea region, helping authorities, education, and industry actors retain talent and keep the cultural and creative industries resilient. REAVES consolidates outcomes from 22 EU projects. REAVES contributed to the Networking Village at the BSSSC Day of Cities and Regions and a breakout session at the EUSBSR Annual Forum 2026.
RegenT	PA Tourism	RegenT develops a regenerative tourism hub, offering training and policy recommendations for public authorities, destination management organisations, NGOs, and BSOs to make revitalisation and sustainable tourism a guiding strategy across the region. In June 2026, more than 130 participants assisted the online launch of the Regenerative Tourism community in the webinar “Regenerative Tourism in the Baltic Sea Region: Turning Vision into Action”, organised by EUSBSR PA Tourism and the Regenerative Tourism Platform RegenT project.
SEABAS	PA Spatial Planning, PA Ship	The SEABAS project platform organised during the EUSBSR Annual Forum in May 2026 a breakout session titled ‘The regional recipe for a strategic environmental assessment in maritime spatial planning’. The forum provided a fertile ground to engage representatives from various sectors for a truly transboundary session to discuss regional MSP and Strategic Environmental Assessment.

Source: own elaboration based on the application forms and https://interreg-baltic.eu/projects/ (as of May 2026)

Platforms combine results in the same thematic area from different projects (minimum requirements ask for at least two IBSR projects plus at least one project from a different funding source, such as Horizon Europe, LIFE, Central/South Interreg Baltic, or national initiatives). In practice, the platforms bring together considerably more projects, on average, more than ten projects per platform. It is worthwhile to indicate how project platforms institutionalise and capitalise on project results not only from IBSR or the previous BSR programme, but also on projects from HORIZON, LIFE, ERDF, the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), from other Interreg Programmes and from nationally funded projects, as can be seen in the following example of the project platform Baltic PlaNet.

Project platforms gather regional solutions created in individual projects, synthesise them, and introduce them directly to pan-Baltic organisations like VASAB or HELCOM, ministries, and regional councils. They act as a bridge by offering collaboration across borders, sectors, and tiers of government. In this sense, they represent a valuable and effective tool to institutionalise the contribution of IBSR project to EUSBSR PAs.

Figure 6-2 Projects joining the Baltic PlaNet project platform



Source: https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/baltic-planet/ (accessed on 29 June 2026)

Contribution from BSR projects to EUSBSR can take various forms[17]. One mechanism of contribution is through involving EUSBSR PAC organisations as a partner or associated partners in projects. Another way is staying in contact with the EUSBSR PAC and contributing to their work of disseminating projects results, solutions and stimulating transfer to other regions. A very popular way of contributing is the participation in the EUSBSR Annual Forum (with concrete thematic workshops or sessions) or in other EUSBSR events with a presentation of project results. Projects often act as knowledge hubs for the EUSBSR and the whole region. This effect is stronger, when there is direct involvement of the PACs in these projects. Sometimes, there is cooperation between different PACs within one IBSR project, which adds another layer of contribution to the EUSBSR, leading to cooperation between EUSBSR PAs. A specific form of contributing to the EUSBSR is with project platforms, which often connect the overarching work of EUSBSR PAC organisations and different IBSR projects.

PO 1.1 projects contribute to many diverse EUSBSR PAs and objectives. Several projects (such as BASCIL and Light in the Dark) contribute to Action 1 of PA Tourism “transnational tourism development in remote and rural areas”. The CREWS project contributes directly to PA Secure by strengthening local preparedness and response capacities and fostering a common regional security culture, while also contributing to PA Innovation. eRural Resilience actively contributes to most of PA Bioeconomy actions. Projects CAIDX and Smart Aging contribute especially to PA Health and also to PA Innovation on digital innovation. Other projects contribute to PA Culture and PA Education. To maximise macro-regional impact, several projects involve EUSBSR PACs directly in their partnerships. For example, CliNeDest includes coordinators from both PA INNO and PA Tourism as partners, securing strong linkages and strategic weight within the EUSBSR network. Other projects use the EUSBSR framework as a critical multiplier for project achievements., such as BSR Cultural Pearls, operating in close collaboration with

[17] The examples and forms of contribution have been identified through the Survey to beneficiaries, through interviews with and the survey to EUSBSR PACs, as well as via desk research on specific IBSR projects.

the coordinators of PA Culture and PA Tourism and utilising their networks to help smaller, vulnerable cities build social resilience, disseminate the "Cultural Pearls" award.

PO 1.2 projects leverage EUSBSR structures and coordinators to ensure their outputs influence macro-regional policy in several Policy Areas. ClimaResponse contributes to PA Secure and co-creates a digital planning platform for climate resilience that feeds into macro-regional networks of local authorities, while preparing formal recommendations for National Platforms for Disaster Risk Reduction. Similarly, BALTFLOODS (contributing to PA Secure and PA Nutri) generates targeted policy briefs to enhance transnational flood preparedness. The NDPHS Secretariat – which coordinates EUSBSR PA Health – is a core partner in the Arts on Prescription project. NDPHS coordinates the project's macro-regional transfer activities, using its direct access to senior officials in national health ministries across the BSR and Iceland to put arts-based mental health programs onto official policy-making agendas. The Baltic Institute of Finland acts as a partner in PPI4cities and holds a special role as an associated organisation in RESIST (both contributing to PA Innovation). The Liveability project involves VASAB and the Union of the Baltic Cities as associated partners to promote the "liveable city" label and integrate Public Interest Design into regional administrative standards, contributing to PA Innovation and Spatial Planning.

PO 2.1 projects contribute to several PAs, mainly PA Hazards and PA Nutri. In the OpenRisk II project, the lead partner, the Finnish Transport and Communication Agency (Traficom), serves as the official coordinator for both PA Safe and PA Ship within the EUSBSR. This ensures that the digital risk-assessment tools developed during the project are directly integrated into macro-regional maritime safety strategies. The EMPEREST project, which tackles PFAS contamination, integrates EUSBSR PA Hazards and PA Nutri directly into its policy-making and monitoring community. GYPREG's agricultural solutions help Member States meet their targets under the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan. Projects like BEACON include the HELCOM Secretariat to ensure that new biological monitoring toolboxes are seamlessly integrated into HELCOM's regional policy frameworks. Furthermore, AdvIQwater aims to utilise its newly created scientific network to offer a strong policy-making voice directly at the HELCOM level. The MUNIMAP project collaborates directly with HELCOM and the CBSS.

PO 2.2 projects serve as vehicles for implementing the EUSBSR, primarily by fostering transnational cooperation to solve shared macro-regional challenges in Policy Areas Safe, Ship and Spatial Planning. By bringing together partners from multiple coastal states to co-create digital solutions, projects like Baltic Sea e-Nav directly advance the EUSBSR's goals of promoting a safer and more sustainable blue economy through next-generation navigational standards. This strategic connection is further solidified by the active involvement of projects in the SUBMARINER Network which serves as the Blue EUSBSR connection to PA Innovation and PA Bioeconomy.

PO 3.1 projects contribute considerably to PA Bioeconomy and PA Nutri. For example, BALTIPLAST and CEforestry are directly linked to PA Bioeconomy, focusing on the responsible use of resources and the development of bioeconomy strategy goals. CiNURGi is specifically tied to Action 3 of the PA Nutri, which focuses on nutrient recycling to improve the health of the Baltic Sea. In some cases, organisations like the Union of the Baltic Cities and Centrum Balticum serve as partners to ensure project results feed back into EUSBSR governance. Beyond broad EU policies, projects align with specific regional

documents managed by HELCOM (Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission), such as the HELCOM Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy.

All PO 3.2 projects contribute to PA Energy by promoting climate change mitigation and energy transition with additional contributions to other PAs such as Transport and Spatial Planning. Contributions are multiple and diverse. For example, Flip-EC offers a new approach by including the users of public buildings in measures to improve the energy balance of public buildings. Flip-EC, contributing to Action 1 of PA Energy of the EUSBSR. The significant contribution of CommitClimate is a practical computer simulation tool for performing future CO2 scenario modelling to support skills and knowledge on energy system analysis and energy system models. Contribution is enhanced by integrating EUSBSR stakeholders actively in projects. For example, all three national co-coordinators of the EUSBSR PA Energy are involved as associated organisations, in addition to international networks in the region like the Union of the Baltic Cities and the CBSS in projects like Easy Energy.

All PO 3.3 projects contribute to the Actions of PA Transport in the EUSBSR Action Plan, most of them to Action 2 dedicated to the “development of measures towards climate-neutral and zero pollution transport”, but also to Action 3, “facilitating innovative technologies and solutions in the Baltic Sea Region”, as well as to Action 1, “improving the connectivity of regions”. Projects such as HyTruck also help to reduce pollution from transport in cities and their hinterland. There is also a clear contribution to PA Spatial Planning, for example by SUMPs for BSR, aiming to increase territorial cohesion through spatial planning and better connections and transport competences.

Concrete examples show how IBSR projects contribute to the EUSBSR and its different Policy Areas:

Priority 1:

The **SchoolChanger project** contributes primarily to the EUSBSR PA Education. By involving young people in the co-creation of school environments, it advances the EUSBSR's objectives of improving education systems, strengthening well-being and promoting active citizenship. SchoolChanger also contributes to broader EUSBSR priorities on health and well-being. Its results are incorporated into the BSR Mental Health Platform, which brings together projects addressing mental health and social well-being across the Baltic Sea Region, strengthening synergies between education and health policy. SchoolChanger contributes to the EUSBSR by implementing the objectives of Policy Area Education through participatory and inclusive school development; developing transferable methodologies, toolkits and youth engagement models for schools and municipalities; strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation between education, health, design and local government; and supporting the EUSBSR's broader objectives of active citizenship, responsive public services and improved mental health through transnational cooperation.

BSR Cultural Pearls contributes primarily to EUSBSR PA Culture by strengthening community resilience through culture, while also supporting broader EUSBSR objectives related to social cohesion, local governance and sustainable regional development. It is officially recognised as a core project of PA Culture. The project operationalises one of the central priorities of PA Culture by demonstrating how culture can strengthen the resilience of communities facing demographic, social and economic challenges. It introduces a new concept of "Cultural Pearls" – cities and municipalities that use culture strategically to build stronger, more inclusive and resilient communities. BSR Cultural Pearls develops

a Community Resilience Framework and practical methodology that enables municipalities to co-create resilience action plans with citizens and integrate culture into local development strategies.

The **SmartAging project** contributes directly to the implementation of the EUSBSR through PA Health. It addresses one of the region's major demographic challenges - an ageing population – by developing smart, preventive and user-centred solutions that enable older people to live independently, safely and actively for longer. SmartAging develops innovative smart home and assisted living solutions that improve seniors' quality of life while reducing pressure on health and social care systems. The project focuses on prevention rather than treatment by integrating technologies such as home automation, smart furniture and antimicrobial materials into living environments. This directly supports the PA Health objective of promoting healthy ageing and improving public health. Beyond PA Health, SmartAging supports wider EUSBSR priorities by linking healthy ageing with community resilience, climate adaptation, digital inclusion, affordable living and critical infrastructure. At the EUSBSR Annual Forum 2026, the project organised the workshop "SmartAging 2040 – Building Elderly-Centred Resilience in the Baltic Sea Region", highlighting how demographic change should be integrated into regional resilience planning.

The **REDIRECT project** supports the EUSBSR by promoting regenerative tourism as a new model for sustainable destination management that goes beyond reducing negative impacts to actively restoring natural and cultural assets. It supports the implementation of the EUSBSR PA Tourism Work Plan, particularly its objectives on sustainable destination management, circular economy, climate resilience and cooperation between tourism stakeholders across the Baltic Sea Region. Its contribution includes developing a common Regenerative Tourism Toolkit and Manual that helps destinations, tourism businesses and public authorities integrate regenerative and circular practices into tourism planning and management, strengthening the resilience of local communities by encouraging tourism models that protect biodiversity, enhance cultural heritage and increase environmental self-sufficiency, building the capacity of tourism authorities and SMEs through workshops, demonstrations and practical guidance, enabling wider uptake of regenerative tourism principles.

The **project RESIST** (Regional Ecosystems for Social Innovation and Social Transformation) officially contributes to two EUSBSR Policy Areas: PA Innovation and PA Education. RESIST contributes to PA Innovation by strengthening regional innovation ecosystems and making them more inclusive for social innovation and social entrepreneurship. RESIST contributes to PA Education by building institutional capacities and promoting learning across the Baltic Sea Region. RESIST supports the EUSBSR objective of "Increasing Prosperity" by helping regions become more resilient and inclusive through stronger innovation ecosystems. It also contributes to macro-regional cooperation by creating transferable models that can be adopted across Baltic Sea regions and engaging with EUSBSR stakeholders through the Annual Forum and by promoting a Network of Social Innovation Clusters across the Baltic Sea Region.

3I solutions for PS contributes to the EUSBSR by improving the innovation capacity of public authorities and making public services more responsive through digital transformation. It supports the EUSBSR PA Innovation objectives by accelerating digital innovation, strengthening public-sector innovation ecosystems and enhancing the responsiveness and quality of public services across the Baltic Sea Region. The project introduces immersive and intelligent digital technologies (AR, XR and AI) to improve the delivery of public services and citizen engagement. It develops and pilots the CITYA!

platform, enabling municipalities to visualise investment plans, provide AI-supported information services and strengthen participatory decision-making.

Priority 2:

The **Baltic Sea e-Nav project** contributes to PA Safe and to PA Ship by modernising digital navigation services and harmonising maritime navigation across the Baltic Sea Region. Baltic Sea e-Nav directly supports Action 1 of PA Safe: "Providing reliable navigational conditions to the Baltic Sea." The project develops the next generation of S-100-compliant digital navigation products and services, enabling hydrographic offices and maritime authorities to provide harmonised, accurate and reliable navigation information across national borders. Beyond PA Safe, Baltic Sea e-Nav contributes to the broader objectives of the EUSBSR by strengthening cooperation, bringing together hydrographic offices, meteorological institutes, research organisations and maritime technology providers from across the Baltic Sea Region to jointly develop common standards and services, supporting sustainable shipping (PA Ship) by improving voyage optimisation and navigation efficiency, which can reduce fuel consumption and emissions while maintaining high safety standards, building institutional capacity through common technical guidance, dissemination toolkits and cooperation between national authorities, ensuring coordinated implementation of the new international navigation standards. The project contributes to the EUSBSR through close cooperation with the PA Safe Coordinators, participation in PA Safe meetings, and showcasing results at EUSBSR and international maritime events such as the European Maritime Days.

The **Baltic Sea2Land project** is one of the flagship projects supporting the EUSBSR PA Spatial Planning. It directly contributes to both thematic pillars of the PA – land-based spatial planning and maritime spatial planning – by improving the integration of planning across the land–sea interface and strengthening multi-level governance for coastal areas. Its main contributions are: The project develops the Sea2Land Navigator, a decision-support platform that helps planners harmonise terrestrial and maritime spatial planning by integrating spatial data, governance tools and planning guidance. This directly supports the PA objective of aligning maritime and land-based spatial planning. The project delivers operational outputs – including the Sea2Land Navigator, a Data Hub, Knowledge Hub, Multi-Level Governance Tool, user guides, training materials and policy recommendations – that enable authorities to apply integrated coastal planning in practice. The project organised pilot actions, stakeholder dialogues involving more than 1,500 participants, and the 5th Baltic MSP Forum, thereby reinforcing the cooperation platform established under PA Spatial Planning and supporting long-term capacity building across the Baltic Sea Region.

The **City Blues project** contributes primarily to the EUSBSR PA Nutri. Although it focuses on urban climate adaptation, its main contribution is improving stormwater management and reducing nutrient and pollutant loads entering rivers, lakes and ultimately the Baltic Sea through nature-based solutions. Beyond PA Nutri, City Blues contributes to broader EUSBSR objectives by promoting climate adaptation through nature-based solutions, enhancing biodiversity and green-blue infrastructure, improving citizen well-being through more liveable urban environments. The project has contributed to EUSBSR policy discussions on climate resilience and preparedness. It has also contributed practical recommendations to EU consultations on climate resilience and has organised knowledge-sharing events with EUSBSR PACs.

The **APRIORA** project (Improved Risk Assessment for Strategic Water Management to Reduce Micro-Pollutant Emissions in the Baltic Sea Region) contributes primarily to PA Hazards by supporting the reduction of hazardous substances entering Baltic Sea waters and improving risk-based water management. APRIORA addresses one of the key environmental challenges identified in the EUSBSR by reducing emissions of active pharmaceutical ingredients from wastewater treatment plants. It helps authorities prioritise investments in advanced wastewater treatment based on environmental risk rather than applying uniform measures. This directly supports the PA Hazards objective of reducing hazardous substances entering the Baltic Sea. The project develops a common risk assessment methodology that combines environmental monitoring, hydrological modelling, GIS-based spatial analysis, and multi-criteria risk evaluation. This creates a harmonised approach that can be used across Baltic Sea countries, supporting more coordinated implementation of environmental legislation. APRIORA equips environmental authorities and wastewater operators with an open-source GIS risk assessment tool, regional pollution and risk maps, guidance documents, and a capacity-building programme. These outputs enable authorities to identify which wastewater treatment plants require priority investment under the revised UWWTD and to select the most cost-effective mitigation measures. The project builds the capacity of environmental agencies and wastewater utilities to apply risk-based management in their daily work. By translating scientific knowledge into operational tools and training, APRIORA supports the implementation of EU water and pollution policies at regional and national levels. The project is designed for transfer to additional Baltic Sea catchments and actively disseminates its results through the EUSBSR Annual Forum, HELCOM meetings, international water conferences, and the HAZGONE project platform, which supports capitalisation and wider uptake of PA Hazards projects.

The **TETRAS project** (Technology transfEr for Thriving Recirculating Aquaculture Systems) project contributes primarily to the EUSBSR PA Innovation. Through its work on land-based recirculating aquaculture systems (RAS), it also supports broader objectives of PA Bioeconomy and the EUSBSR goal of Increasing Prosperity, although its formal contribution is to PA Innovation. TETRAS has worked closely with the EUSBSR governance system through cooperation with the Innovation PACs, including the Baltic Institute of Finland as an associated organisation; dissemination through EUSBSR and cross-macro-regional networks; engagement with the Policy Innovation Steering Group; cooperation with the SUBMARINER Network's Aquaculture Working Group, which connects key stakeholders in the Baltic blue bioeconomy.

Priority 3:

Several IBSR projects contribute to the cross-sectoral area of bioeconomy and circularity. The current **EUSBSR PA Bioeconomy** Work Plan is structured around three main action areas, all contributing to strengthening sustainability, resilience and competitiveness in bio-based systems across the Baltic Sea Region. Several IBSR bioeconomy projects directly contribute to it. Projects such as Blue-Green Bio Lab, StratKIT+, BioBoosters, BREC, CEForestry, KISMET, MainPotRe, Circular FoodShift, RoundGoby, GYPREG, eRural resilience, FoodLoops, etc. contribute to implementing different goals of the Bioeconomy workplan. For example, the DIVERSE_GENE_WATCH project contributes primarily to the PA Bioeconomy by strengthening the long-term resilience and sustainable management of forests through an innovative transnational system for monitoring the genetic diversity of key forest tree species.

The IBSR project **Change(K)now!** helps municipalities reduce single-use food packaging in food delivery and catering systems, and build social acceptance among companies and people for circular

reuse of food packaging. It was developed based on a EUSBSR seed money project implemented in the Interreg BSR Programme 2014-2020. Change(K)now! contributes primarily to the EUSBSR Policy Area Innovation (PA Innovation). Its contribution lies in demonstrating how social innovation, circular business models and behavioural change can accelerate the transition to a circular economy in cities. It supports the EUSBSR's broader goals of resource efficiency, climate neutrality and transnational cooperation through practical, scalable solutions. Cooperation with PAC Innovation facilitates the replication of the circular food delivery solutions by connecting the project partners with interested municipalities across the Baltic Sea Region during EUSBSR events and forums.

The **Circular Ports project** contributes primarily to the EUSBSR PA Ship and PA Transport. It supports the EUSBSR by advancing the transition to circular, resource-efficient and climate-neutral port ecosystems across the Baltic Sea Region. The project directly supports PA Ship by improving the environmental performance of ports and maritime activities. By promoting circular business models within ports, the project strengthens the sustainability and resilience of the region's transport infrastructure. More resource-efficient ports improve logistics chains while reducing waste, emissions and resource consumption, supporting the EUSBSR objective of sustainable transport systems. An innovative feature of the project is the use of regulatory sandboxes, allowing authorities, businesses and researchers to test circular solutions under controlled conditions. This helps identify regulatory barriers and informs future policy development for circular economy implementation in ports.

The **Energy Circle project** contributes directly to EUSBSR PA Energy. The project responds to one of the EUSBSR's most pressing challenges: strengthening energy security, resilience and long-term energy independence in the wake of the 2022 energy crisis. Energy Circle contributes to the EUSBSR by implementing the objectives of PA Energy through long-term, circular energy planning; improving energy security and resilience for businesses and communities, developing transferable methodologies for energy independence roadmaps and strengthening the capacity of municipalities and BSOs to lead the energy transition.

The **Easy Energy project** contributes primarily to EUSBSR PA Energy by supporting the implementation of one of its core priorities: improving energy efficiency through practical, affordable solutions that accelerate the clean energy transition across the Baltic Sea Region. The project trains Energy Practitioners who can advise municipalities and SMEs on implementing low-tech energy-saving solutions. This creates lasting local expertise and strengthens institutional capacity, supporting PA Energy's objective of enabling the energy transition through knowledge and skills development. Easy Energy works directly with PA Energy Coordinators and disseminates its results through EUSBSR platforms, including the EUSBSR Annual Forum. It contributes practical examples that support the implementation of PA Energy priorities and feeds project experience into wider regional policy discussions on energy resilience and climate neutrality. The project is connected to the **EnTRA project platform**, working directly with EUSBSR PACs on Energy to demonstrate how transnational cooperation strengthens regional energy resilience.

HyTruck project contributes directly to the implementation of the EUSBSR through PA Transport. The project is officially recognised as contributing to Action 2 of the PA Transport Action Plan, which aims to develop climate-neutral and zero-pollution transport solutions across the Baltic Sea Region. HyTruck helps public authorities plan a transnational network of green hydrogen refuelling stations for heavy-duty trucks. By enabling the shift from diesel to hydrogen-powered freight transport, it directly contributes to the EUSBSR objective of reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector and

advancing zero-emission logistics. The project supports the implementation of Action 2 of PA Transport, which promotes climate-neutral mobility and the deployment of alternative fuels along the TEN-T corridors. HyTruck addresses key implementation challenges, including planning cross-border hydrogen infrastructure; harmonising technical standards and avoiding infrastructure gaps between countries. The project partners established long-term cooperation through a Memorandum of Understanding, under which partners committed to continue sharing planning tools, harmonising standards and coordinating hydrogen infrastructure development beyond the project's lifetime. The project supports the implementation of the EU Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Regulation and the EUSBSR objective of climate-neutral, connected and sustainable transport.

BSR HyAirport prepares airports across the Baltic Sea Region for the introduction of hydrogen-powered aircraft by developing the infrastructure, operational procedures and safety standards needed to store, handle and supply green hydrogen. This directly supports EUSBSR PA Transport's objective of advancing climate-neutral and low-emission transport systems. By preparing regional airports for zero-emission aviation, BSR HyAirport also contributes to PA Tourism. Sustainable regional air connectivity is particularly important in the Baltic Sea Region, where long distances, islands and peripheral regions depend on air transport. Hydrogen-powered aviation can help maintain accessibility while significantly reducing the environmental footprint of tourism and business travel.

H2Deri@BSP (H2-Derivatives@BalticSeaPorts) has a very strong contribution to the EUSBSR. It is linked to PA Energy and PA Ship. H2Deri@BSP supports the transition to climate-neutral shipping by enabling Baltic Sea ports to adopt hydrogen-derived fuels, particularly green methanol and green ammonia. It helps ports prepare the infrastructure, regulations and operational procedures needed for these new fuels, directly supporting the decarbonisation objectives of both PA Energy and PA Ship. The project contributes to PA Energy by facilitating the uptake of renewable hydrogen derivatives as alternative fuels, strengthening links between renewable energy production and maritime transport, supporting the development of integrated energy hubs in Baltic Sea ports and helping ports become key nodes in the regional hydrogen economy. For PA Ship, H2Deri@BSP contributes by reducing emissions from shipping through zero- and low-carbon fuels, improving port readiness for future bunkering operations, developing harmonised safety and operational standards and supporting greener and more resilient maritime logistics. H2Deri@BSP is closely integrated into the EUSBSR governance framework. The project participates in PA SHIP Operational Group meetings, engages with PA Energy capacity-building workshops and contributes to cross-policy discussions involving PA Energy, PA Ship, PA Transport and PA Safe.

Priority 4:

Project platform BSR Mental Health. The project involves the EUSBSR PAC for Health and supports cooperation on mental health issues in the region, bringing together results from 14 other projects, helping public authorities to promote an approach to mental health that spans across the whole Baltic Sea society. BSR projects from 2014-2020, such as Healthy Boost, contributed to set up an important EUSBSR project **Economy of Well-being of People**[18]. This is an EUSBSR project coordinated by PA Health and PA Education, advocating for inclusive growth and well-being, showing how Interreg projects can serve as a launching vehicle for new EUSBSR flagships.

[18] See also Chapter 8 for the long-term effects of 2014-2020 BSR projects.

The **SEABAS (Strategic Ecosystem-based Planning for a Sustainable Future of the Baltic Sea) project platform** contributes primarily to the EUSBSR PA Spatial PlanningPA Ship by capitalising the results of previous projects and embedding ecosystem-based approaches into MSP across the Baltic Sea Region. SEABAS directly implements PA Spatial Planning, particularly the objective of ensuring coherent maritime spatial plans throughout the Baltic Sea Region. It develops a regional framework for integrating environmental considerations into maritime spatial planning, helping countries coordinate planning across borders rather than through isolated national approaches. Building on from more than 13 projects, SEABAS creates a regional framework that incorporates environmental resilience into maritime spatial planning. SEABAS also contributes to PA Ship by ensuring that maritime spatial planning accommodates shipping alongside other marine activities in a safe and sustainable manner. Better planning reduces spatial conflicts between shipping, offshore renewable energy, fisheries, marine protected areas and other sea uses.

Stakeholder perception

Stakeholder perception confirms the links and the support of the IBSR to the EUSBSR identified above.

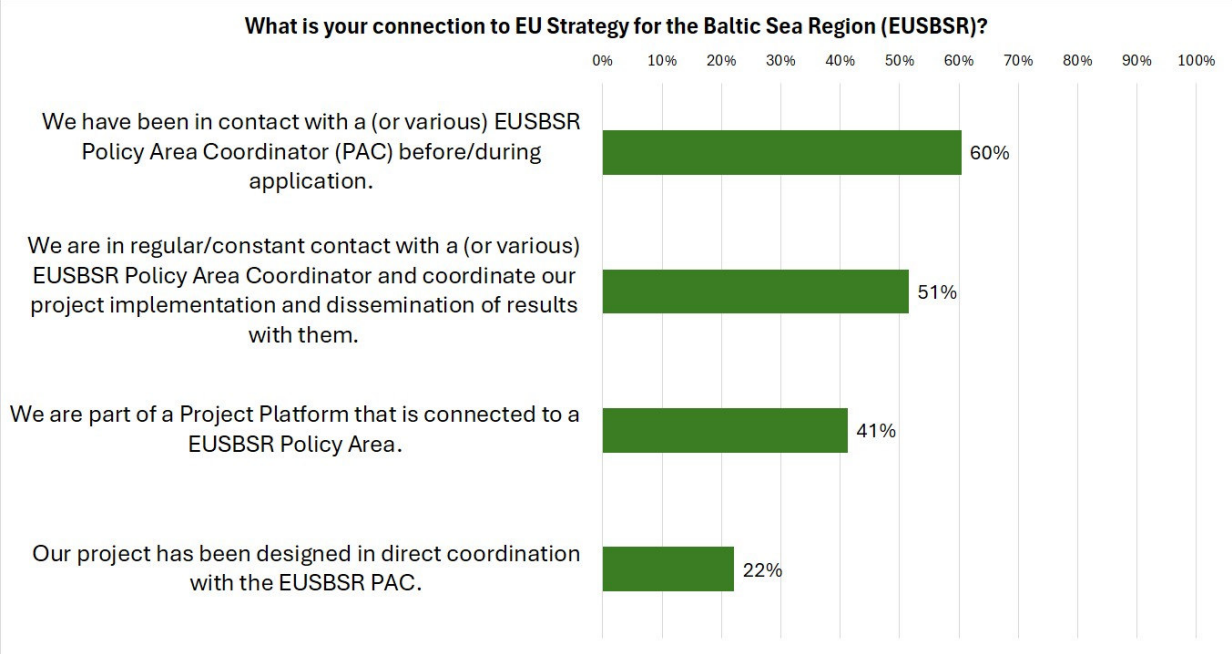


Findings from the interviews to EUSBSR PACs confirm the perception of a strong link of the IBSR with the EUSBSR. The revision of the EUSBSR Action Plan in combination with the new Programme intervention logic and content and governance support, the contribution to the EUSBSR is no longer only limited to the flagship projects, instead all types of projects are expected to support the EUSBSR objectives where relevant. More specifically, on the content side, the Programme strengthened its links by asking the project applicants to demonstrate their contribution to specific PAs and actively the PACs throughout the project cycle. This also includes capacity building activities, guidance during the application development, interaction through Programme events and networks. The interviews indicate that these efforts increased the awareness and the ownership of the EUSBSR among the stakeholders, especially at local and regional levels, where EUSBSR familiarity has been rather limited. Furthermore, the Programme has worked on more structured support and involvement in projects and the PA governance support, which helped projects in contributing more directly to the implementation of the EUSBSR action plan.

According to the interviews to MC members, the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme contributes effectively to the EUSBSR. The IBSR is described as the main funding source for the EUSBSR. Its support goes beyond project funding to include critical administrative infrastructure. It finances PACs and the annual EUSBSR Forum. It provides with Priority 4 a priority that acts as a funding stream for the Strategy's operational needs. At the same time, the Programme enables projects and stakeholders to use the EUSBSR Forum as a platform for networking and visibility. The Strategy serves as a "cornerstone" for the Programme, providing a framework that Member States have collectively agreed upon. In return, the Strategy makes it easier for the Programme to reach decision-makers. While the thematic fit may fluctuate during revisions of the EUSBSR Action Plan, the Strategy generally guides the thematic orientation of the Interreg Programme. MC members are generally less aware of concrete project contributions to the EUSBSR.

The survey to beneficiaries gives some additional information. The responses from lead partners to the question on their connection to the EUSBSR indicate that a majority has or had regular contact with the EUSBSR PACs. Beneficiaries have been in contact with EUSBSR PACs at different stages of their project. More specifically, about 60% replied that they have been in contact with one or various PACs before or during their application phase, while about 51% replied that they are in regular contact with one or various PACs and coordinate their project implementation and dissemination of results with them. In addition, about 41% replied that they are part of a project platform that is connected to a EUSBSR PA, while 22% replied that their project was designed in close coordination with a PAC.

Figure 6-3 What is your connection to EUSBSR?



Source: own elaboration, based on the beneficiaries' survey, only lead partners responses, n=68, multiple answers were possible hence the % do not add up to 100%.

About 73% of those who responded found the support useful to extremely useful, with about 39% of which finding it extremely useful. Only a minor share (14%) found the support not useful at all[19].

Some beneficiaries describe in the survey their connection to the EUSBSR and how their contribution materialises. Of course, in some specific cases, when one key stakeholder of the EUSBSR[20] forms part of a project, the contribution is direct and comprehensive. In general, the depth of contribution not only depends on the projects but also on the level of engagement of the EUSBSR stakeholders, in particular the PAC organisation or person. Collaboration seems to produce mutual benefits for the EUSBSR and for the project.

Examples of contributions are included here:

[19] This aspect is also analysed in Chapter 12 of this report.

[20] For example, a PAC organisation or a member of a PA Steering Group.

- "*NDPHS (PAC) was involved as a partner throughout the entire project and focused specifically on how the project results could be transferred to the ministerial level in the participating countries. In addition, NDPHS played a key role in communicating and disseminating the project outcomes to relevant stakeholders, and in supporting regional knowledge transfer*."
- *"Engagement of pan-Baltic stakeholders (HELCOM, CBSS, BSSSC) through the PA Ship Operational Group Meetings, - Representation of the projects at events like Maritime Days, EUSBSR Annual Forum, etc., - Dissemination of project outcomes through panel discussions by PAs Transport, Ship and Safe, - Co-creation workshop to identify collaboration opportunities by PA Energy, - Exchanging with the BSRYF Working Group on Transport and Energy, - Improved visibility for the projects by listing on the Policy Area websites."*
- "*Support is primarily coordinated through the lead partner. It involves disseminating our project results via EUSBSR networks (PA Innovation), inviting the consortium to relevant policy dialogues, and supporting the transfer of our circular solutions to other BSR municipalities*."
- "*The PA has recommended events and policymaker organisations / networks to reach out to. They have provided consultation and promised to promote our workshop which we are preparing for EUSBSR. They will attempt to include us in the project village during BSSS Cities and Region day. And they also provided consultation with regards to the RegioAwards*."
- *"We have been working very closely with PA Education and [the PAC] in our other projects before. He gave us knowledge in how to work with the strategy issues. We have also participated at the yearly EUSBSR conference with him in back-to-back meetings."*
- *"Cooperation with PACs can transform project outputs (reports, pilots, tools) into policy-level impact and wider macro-regional uptake."*

6.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the evaluation questions:

EQ 1.10 To what extent, and how, do Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects contribute to the objectives of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)?

The Programme priorities/objectives are aligned with the EUSBSR. Furthermore, the EUSBSR Action Plan is a central reference for the Programme intervention logic. Consequently, it is not surprising that projects are strongly aligned with EUSBSR policy areas. Already at the application stage, IBSR projects are encouraged to consider possible EUSBSR contributions and plan their alignment, being requested to explain their contribution to concrete actions of the Action Plan of the EUSBSR. While there is thematic alignment by design, the actual project contribution to EUSBSR implementation varies across projects.

The project analysis shows that all PAs benefit from IBSR project contributions, showing a strong alignment of the objectives and a clear coherence. Cross-cutting Programme objectives under Priority 1, as well as projects under PO 2.1 contribute to eight different PAs. A strong alignment also emerges under Priority 3, indicating strong thematic coherence between PO 3.2 (Energy transition) and PA Energy, as well as between circular economy projects linked to PAs Bioeconomy and Innovation. Furthermore, Priority 2 has many diverse contribution links to the EUSBSR, in particular to PAs Hazards,

Nutri, Safe, Tourism, Ship, Spatial Planning. Contribution is more centred from PO 3.3 on smart green mobility towards PAs Transport, Tourism and Spatial Planning. PA Innovation benefits mostly from projects under POs 1.1, 1.2 and 3.1.

Contribution from IBSR projects to EUSBSR can take various forms. One mechanism of contribution is through involving EUSBSR PAC organisations as a partner or associated partners in projects. Another way is staying in contact with the EUSBSR PAC and contributing to their work of disseminating projects results, solutions. Popular forms of contribution are to participate in the EUSBSR Annual Forum, which includes concrete thematic workshops or sessions, or to present projects in EUSBSR steering/working groups.

Project platforms funded under Priority 4.1 usually show a very strong contribution to EUSBSR. They act as a bridge by offering collaboration across borders, sectors, and tiers of government. In this sense, they represent a valuable and effective tool to institutionalise the contribution of IBSR project to EUSBSR Policy Areas. This can be the support of PA work in one specific area, such as climate change adaptation of the PA Spatial Planning, cooperation for a joint product, such as a regenerative tourism hub of PA Tourism, or general PA support (e.g. PA Hazard and PA Ship) or direct work cooperation (e.g. PA Energy).

The high contribution level is also confirmed by beneficiaries, with about 60% replying that they have been in contact with one or various PACs before or during their application phase, 51% replied that they are in regular contact with at least one PAC and coordinate their project implementation and dissemination of results with them. In addition, about 41% replied that they are part of a project platform that is connected to a EUSBSR PA, while 22% replied that their project was designed in close coordination with a PAC.

The conclusion is that there is a considerable contribution to EUSBSR objectives and a mutual benefit connection between IBSR projects and the EUSBSR.

7 Participants in the 2021-2027 Programme

This section analyses the evaluation questions related to the participation of different types of organisations and the attraction of newcomers in the 2021-2027 BSR Programme. The analysis was conducted both at Programme level, combining all project types (core, platform and small projects), and, where relevant, through dedicated analyses focusing on small projects.

This chapter refers to the following evaluation questions:

EQ 1.7 What is the interest of different types of organisations in the Programme objectives (including differences between countries)? Who are the main beneficiaries/target groups within the Programme objectives?
EQ 3.8 To what extent did the Programme, with its new project features, manage to attract newcomers, local public authorities and stakeholders representing civil society as project partners? Which project features made the Programme attractive for these organisations?

7.1 Context



This chapter analysed the involvement of different types of organisations in the Programme across core, platform and small projects, as well as newcomer participation. The analysis is based on data extracted on 5 February 2026 from the 2021-2027 programming period and is complemented, where relevant, by comparisons with the 2014-2020 period, beneficiary survey results and interviews with Programme bodies. Unless otherwise specified, the analyses exclude inactive beneficiaries (55 partners) and beneficiaries located outside the Programme area (11 partners from Germany).

7.2 Analysis

First, the analysis focused on the different types of organisations, and then on the attraction of newcomers.

Types of organisations

Overall, public authorities (local, regional and national) stand out as the largest beneficiary group by organisation type, representing 26% (304 beneficiaries) of all beneficiaries. Higher education and research institutions closely follow, accounting for 25% (290 beneficiaries). NGOs (160 beneficiaries) and BSOs (135 beneficiaries) further reinforce the Programme's delivery-oriented profile, reflecting the strong involvement of actors engaged in implementation, stakeholder mobilisation and the uptake of solutions.

Table 7-1 Distribution of organisation types by country

Type of organisation	Denmark	Estonia	Finland	Germany	Latvia	Lithuania	Norway	Poland	Sweden	Total
BSOs	17	21	12	16	5	27	2	12	23	**135**
Education/training centre and school	1	2	1	3	2	0	0	1	4	**14**
EEIG	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	**2**
EGTC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	**2**
Higher education and research institution	17	40	63	30	30	23	5	44	38	**290**
Hospital and medical centre	3	0	2	2	2	0	0	3	3	**15**
Infrastructure and public service provider	8	6	5	8	7	2	0	6	11	**53**
Interest group	2	9	8	5	1	2	0	7	4	**38**
International governmental organisation	0	0	8	0	6	0	0	0	9	**23**
Large enterprise	1	4	1	2	1	3	1	1	1	**15**
Local and regional public authority	22	21	36	28	61	17	9	26	38	**258**
National public authority	4	7	7	4	12	5	2	1	4	**46**
NGO	5	18	11	24	32	21	2	32	15	**160**
Sectoral agency	0	5	7	6	2	4	1	6	8	**39**
SME	5	4	15	17	7	5	0	17	13	**83**
Total	**85**	**137**	**176**	**147**	**168**	**109**	**22**	**158**	**171**	**1 173**

Source: own elaboration based on the Interreg BSR beneficiary database for the period 2021-2027, as of 5 February 2026

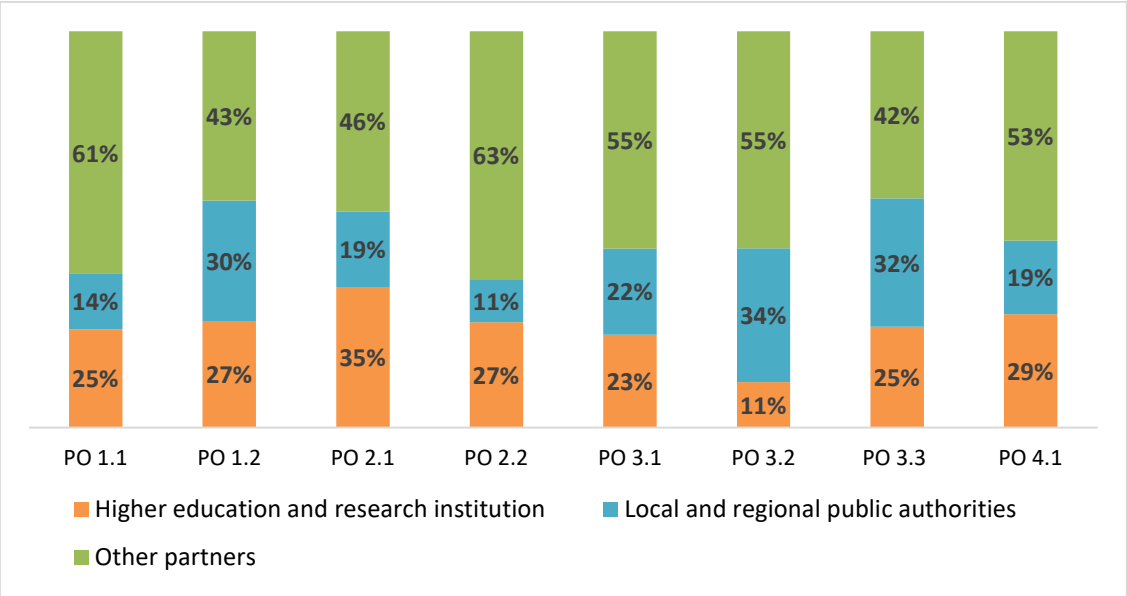
The analysis of organisation types by country highlights both common patterns and national specificities in Programme participation. Across most participating countries, higher education and research institutions represent the largest beneficiary category, particularly in Finland (63), Poland (44), Estonia (40) and Sweden (38), confirming their central role in Programme implementation. Local and regional public authorities constitute the second major category, especially in Latvia (61), Sweden (38) and Finland (36), highlighting the importance of territorial governance actors. NGOs also play a visible role, particularly in Latvia and Poland (32 each), Germany (24) and Lithuania (21). Several country-specific participation profiles nevertheless emerge. Lithuania stands out for the strong participation of BSOs (27), while Latvia combines particularly strong involvement of public authorities and NGOs. Germany displays the most diversified participation profile, with substantial participation from research institutions, public authorities, NGOs, SMEs and BSOs. By contrast, Norway shows a limited participation profile, with only 22 participations overall. This comparatively lower participation of Norwegian organisations may be linked to Norway's status as a non-EU Member State, as Norwegian partners do not benefit from ERDF co-financing and instead rely on national co-financing covering up to 50% of eligible costs

Overall, this suggests that while higher education and research institutions constitute the dominant organisation type across most countries, the relative importance of local and regional public authorities, NGOs, BSOs and SMEs varies considerably between participating countries, reflecting different institutional structures and participation patterns within the Baltic Sea Region.

The participation patterns observed across countries are further illustrated in the table above, which presents the distribution of organisation types by country. The analysis considers all beneficiary participations in approved projects, including repeated participations by the same organisation across multiple projects. As a result, the figures reflect the intensity and composition of participation rather than only the number of distinct organisations involved in the Programme.

Higher education and research institutions represent one of the main beneficiary categories across all Programme objectives, accounting for between 11% and 35% of total participations depending on the PO. Their participation remains relatively stable across most POs, generally ranging between 23% and 29%, but reaches its highest level in PO 2.1 (35%), highlighting the particularly strong attractiveness of sustainable water-related interventions for knowledge-based and research-intensive actors. Their participation is also comparatively high in PO 4.1 (29%), reflecting the importance of knowledge aggregation and capitalisation within project platforms. By contrast, their participation is significantly lower in PO 3.2 (11%), suggesting a more limited role in energy transition interventions compared to other organisational categories.

Figure 7-1 Share of main beneficiary categories across PO (in %)



Source: own elaboration based on the Interreg BSR beneficiary database for the period 2021-2027, as of 5 February 2026.

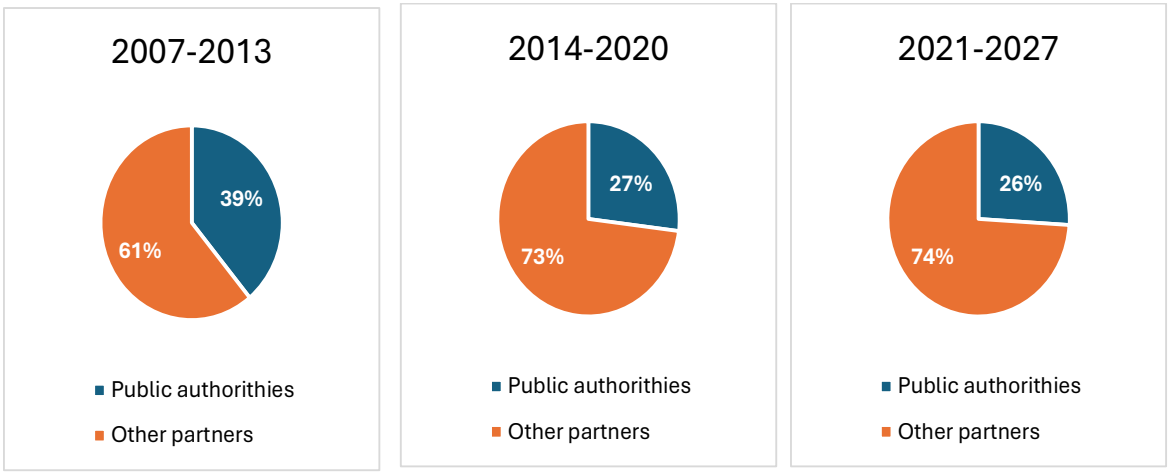
Local and regional public authorities also constitute a major beneficiary category across the Programme, accounting for between 11% and 34% of participations depending on the PO. Their participation is particularly strong in governance-oriented objectives, reaching 34% in PO 3.2, 32% in PO 3.3 and 30% in PO 1.2. This indicates that Programme objectives related to public service delivery, energy transition and mobility rely strongly on public-sector and territorial governance capacities. In contrast, their relative participation is lower in PO 2.2 (11%), suggesting a less central role in blue economy interventions. Together, these two types of organisations account for nearly half of all beneficiary participations across Programme objectives.

A comparison with the findings of the 2014-2020 Interreg BSR Mid-term Evaluation of Programme Impact[21] provides an additional perspective on the role of public authorities in the Programme. When considering local, regional and national public authorities together, public authorities account for 26% of beneficiary participations in the 2021-2027 Programme.

This share is almost unchanged compared to the 2014-2020 period (27%), suggesting a stable overall level of participation of public authorities across the two programming periods. However, it remains significantly lower than in 2007-2013, when public authorities represented 39% of all beneficiaries. This indicates that, compared to earlier programming periods, the Programme has progressively attracted a more diversified beneficiary base involving a broader range of non-public actors. It should be noted that the comparison across programming periods considers local, regional and national public authorities together, whereas the PO-level analysis presented above focuses specifically on local and regional public authorities.

[21] https://interreg-baltic.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2018.12.20_FINAL_BSR_midtermevaluation_finalreport.pdf

Figure 7-2 Comparison of the share of public authorities between Interreg BSR periods



Source: 2014-2020 BSR Mid-term evaluation of Programme impact

Source: Interreg BSR 2021-2027 data

While the previous analysis provided an overview of the distribution of organisation types across participating countries at Programme level, a more granular analysis at the Programme objective level allows for a deeper understanding of participation patterns. Examining the distribution of organisation types by country within each PO helps identify whether certain categories of beneficiaries are more prevalent in particular thematic areas. Detailed tables show the full distribution of beneficiary participations by organisation type and country for each PO. The analysis focuses on the most relevant participation patterns and country-specific trends.

Under **PO 1.1 (Resilient economies and communities)**, a total of 222 beneficiary participations are recorded across participating countries. The distribution of organisation types reveals a relatively diversified participation structure, with higher education and research institutions and BSOs jointly representing the largest beneficiary categories (55 beneficiaries each), followed by NGOs (33) and local and regional public authorities (31). Across countries, a relatively consistent pattern emerges in which higher education and research institutions and BSOs dominate participation, although with some variation in emphasis. Higher education and research institutions are particularly prominent in Finland and Lithuania, while BSOs show especially strong participation in Estonia, Sweden and Lithuania. NGOs are comparatively more visible in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Overall, PO 1.1 is characterised by a balanced participation of research, business support and civil society actors, reflecting the multi-stakeholder nature of interventions aimed at strengthening resilient economies and communities.

Under **PO 1.2 (Responsive public services)**, a total of 138 beneficiary participations are recorded. Compared with PO 1.1, participation is more concentrated around public-sector actors, with local and regional public authorities emerging as the dominant organisation type (42), followed closely by higher education and research institutions (37). This pattern is observed across most participating countries, particularly in Latvia (10), where public authority participation is especially strong. Higher education and research institutions remain well represented, especially in Finland, Estonia and Sweden, whereas BSOs (11) and NGOs (15) play a more limited role. Overall, participation under PO 1.2 appears more

strongly centred on public-sector actors, reflecting the governance-oriented nature of interventions focused on responsive public services.

Table 7-2 POs under Priority 1: Distribution of organisation types by country

Type of organisation	Denmark		Estonia		Finland		Germany		Latvia		Lithuania		Norway		Poland		Sweden	
Programme Objective	PO 1.1	PO 1.2	PO 1.1	PO 1.2	PO 1.1	PO 1.2	PO 1.1	PO 1.2	PO 1.1	PO 1.2	PO 1.1	PO 1.2	PO 1.1	PO 1.2	PO 1.1	PO 1.2	PO 1.1	PO 1.2
Business support organisation	7	2	9	2	6	0	5	1	1	1	8	5	1	0	7	0	11	1
Education/training centre and school	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
EEIG	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
EGTC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Higher education and research institution	4	3	7	6	15	10	5	2	5	3	10	1	1	2	6	4	2	6
Hospital and medical centre	2	1	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	2
Infrastructure and public service provider	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Interest group	1	0	2	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
International governmental organisation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
Large enterprise	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Local and Regional public authorities	1	3	4	4	5	4	4	5	7	10	1	4	4	3	4	5	1	4
National public authority	1	1	3	2	0	0	1	0	1	3	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
NGO	0	0	3	3	4	1	3	4	6	2	7	1	1	0	7	4	2	0
Sectoral agency	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	1	0	0
Small and medium enterprise	0	1	1	0	2	3	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
Total	**18**	**12**	**30**	**18**	**36**	**20**	**23**	**15**	**23**	**21**	**30**	**11**	**9**	**5**	**31**	**17**	**22**	**19**

Source: own elaboration based on the Interreg BSR beneficiary database for the period 2021-2027, as of 5 February 2026.

Under **PO 2.1 (Sustainable waters)**, a total of 158 beneficiary participations are recorded across participating countries. The distribution of organisation types reveals a participation structure strongly dominated by higher education and research institutions, which represent by far the largest beneficiary category (56 participations). This pattern is consistently observed across most participating countries, with particularly strong participation in Poland, Finland, Estonia and Latvia. Local and regional public authorities constitute the second most represented organisation category (30 participations), with a notable presence especially in Sweden, Latvia and Finland, highlighting the strong territorial and governance dimensions of water-related interventions. NGOs (23 participations) and infrastructure and public service providers (15 participations) also play a visible role, suggesting that PO 2.1 combines scientific expertise with civil society involvement and operational implementation capacities. Overall, PO 2.1 is characterised by a strong concentration of research institutions, reflecting the collaborative and knowledge-intensive nature of interventions focused on sustainable water management.

Under **PO 2.2 (Blue economy)**, a total of 113 beneficiary participations are recorded. While higher education and research institutions remain the largest beneficiary category (30 participations), participation appears more balanced than under PO 2.1. Higher education and research institutions remain particularly prominent in Poland and, to a lesser extent, in Sweden, Estonia and Germany. Compared with PO 2.1, PO 2.2 shows a relatively stronger participation of national public authorities (16 participations), suggesting a greater relevance of strategic planning and regulatory frameworks in blue economy interventions. Economic actors are also more visible, notably through SMEs (13 participations) and BSOs (10 participations), with participation spread across several countries rather than concentrated in a few. Overall, PO 2.2 presents a more diversified participation profile, reflecting the more cross-sectoral and market-oriented nature of blue economy development.

Table 7-3 POs under Priority 2: Distribution of organisation types by country

Type of organisation	Denmark		Estonia		Finland		Germany		Latvia		Lithuania		Norway		Poland		Sweden	
Programme Objective	PO 2.1	PO 2.2	PO 2.1	PO 2.2	PO 2.1	PO 2.2	PO 2.1	PO 2.2	PO 2.1	PO 2.2	PO 2.1	PO 2.2	PO 2.1	PO 2.2	PO 2.1	PO 2.2	PO 2.1	PO 2.2
Business support organisation	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	1	3	2	0	1	0	0	1	0
Education/training centre and school	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
EEIG	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
EGTC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Higher education and research institution	3	2	8	3	10	3	5	3	7	2	4	3	2	0	12	10	5	4
Hospital and medical centre	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Infrastructure and public service provider	3	1	2	0	1	0	0	1	4	0	1	0	0	0	3	1	1	4
Interest group	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	2
International governmental organisation	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Large enterprise	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Local and Regional public authorities	4	1	2	1	5	3	1	1	6	3	1	0	0	0	2	0	9	3
National public authority	0	2	0	2	3	4	0	2	2	2	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	3
NGO	1	1	2	0	2	0	2	2	3	2	5	1	0	0	5	3	3	0
Sectoral agency	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Small and medium enterprise	0	3	0	1	0	1	3	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	2	3	3	3
Total	**11**	**13**	**14**	**9**	**27**	**14**	**13**	**16**	**24**	**11**	**15**	**9**	**3**	**2**	**28**	**17**	**23**	**22**

Source: own elaboration based on the Interreg BSR beneficiary database for the period 2021-2027, as of 5 February 2026.

Under **PO 3.1 (Circular economy)**, a total of 235 beneficiary participations are recorded across participating countries, making it the largest Programme objective in terms of the number of beneficiaries. The distribution of organisation types reveals the most diversified and relatively balanced participation structure across the Programme, with higher education and research institutions representing the largest beneficiary category (55 participations), closely followed by local and regional public authorities (51 participations) and NGOs (46 participations).

Across participating countries, no single organisational profile clearly dominates participation. Higher education and research institutions are particularly strongly represented in Finland, Sweden, Latvia and Germany. Local and regional public authorities also show strong participation, especially in Latvia, Denmark, Finland and Sweden, reflecting the important role of territorial actors in integrating circular economy principles into local and regional strategies. NGOs constitute another major beneficiary group, with particularly high participation in Germany, Latvia, Sweden and Lithuania, highlighting the important contribution of civil society actors to stakeholder mobilisation and community-level implementation. Economic actors are also strongly represented, notably through SMEs (29 participations) and BSOs (21 participations). SMEs are particularly visible in Poland, Germany and Sweden, while BSOs are most represented in Estonia, Germany and Denmark.

Overall, PO 3.1 stands out for its particularly balanced participation across a broad range of organisation types, reflecting the systemic nature of circular economy transitions, which require coordinated engagement from research institutions, public authorities, civil society and market-oriented actors.

Table 7-4 POs under PO 3.1: Distribution of organisation types by country

Type of organisation / Programme Objective	Denmark PO 3.1	Estonia PO 3.1	Finland PO 3.1	Germany PO 3.1	Latvia PO 3.1	Lithuania PO 3.1	Norway PO 3.1	Poland PO 3.1	Sweden PO 3.1	Total
Business support organisation	3	5	2	3	1	3	0	2	2	21
Education/training centre and school	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
EEIG	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
EGTC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Higher education and research institution	3	5	15	7	8	2	0	4	11	55
Hospital and medical centre	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Infrastructure and public service provider	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	3	8
Interest group	0	4	4	2	0	1	0	1	0	12
International governmental organisation	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
Large enterprise	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	4
Local and Regional public authorities	7	6	7	3	13	5	1	2	7	51
National public authority	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
NGO	2	3	3	11	11	6	1	3	6	46
Sectoral agency	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	4
Small and medium enterprise	1	0	4	6	2	3	0	8	5	29
Total	**17**	**26**	**38**	**33**	**39**	**23**	**2**	**21**	**36**	**235**

Source: own elaboration based on the Interreg BSR beneficiary database for the period 2021-2027, as of 5 February 2026.

Under **PO 3.2 (Energy transition)**, a total of 166 beneficiary participations are recorded across participating countries. The distribution of organisation types reveals a participation structure strongly dominated by local and regional public authorities, which represent by far the largest beneficiary category (56 participations). This dominance is observed across several participating countries, with particularly strong participation in Latvia, Poland, Sweden, Germany and Finland, confirming the central role of territorial governance actors in PO 3.2.

BSOs constitute the second most represented organisation category (24 participations), with participation spread across several countries, particularly Sweden, Lithuania, Denmark, Finland, Germany and Poland, reflecting the importance of mobilising industry and supporting the adoption of innovative energy solutions across economic sectors. Higher education and research institutions and sectoral agencies each account for 19 participations, with particularly strong participation in Sweden and Estonia, highlighting the importance of technical expertise, applied research and specialised sectoral knowledge in supporting energy system transformation. Infrastructure and public service providers also play a relevant role (10 participations), especially in Estonia, Finland, Germany and Latvia, whereas NGOs remain comparatively less represented (14 participations).

Overall, PO 3.2 is characterised by a strong concentration of governance and technical actors, with participation patterns across countries reflecting the strategic and policy-driven nature of energy transition processes.

Table 7-5 POs under PO 3.2: Distribution of organisation types by country

Type of organisation / Programme Objective	Denmark PO 3.2	Estonia PO 3.2	Finland PO 3.2	Germany PO 3.2	Latvia PO 3.2	Lithuania PO 3.2	Norway PO 3.2	Poland PO 3.2	Sweden PO 3.2	Total
Business support organisation	3	2	3	3	1	4	0	3	5	24
Education/training centre and school	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	3
EEIG	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
EGTC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Higher education and research institution	0	4	2	3	2	3	0	1	4	19
Hospital and medical centre	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Infrastructure and public service provider	1	2	2	2	2	0	0	0	1	10
Interest group	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	4
International governmental organisation	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Large enterprise	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	4
Local and Regional public authorities	4	1	6	7	16	4	0	9	9	56
National public authority	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
NGO	0	2	0	1	5	0	0	5	1	14
Sectoral agency	0	4	1	3	0	2	0	3	6	19
Small and medium enterprise	0	1	4	2	2	0	0	1	0	10
Total	**8**	**20**	**19**	**23**	**32**	**14**	**0**	**24**	**26**	**166**

Source: own elaboration based on the Interreg BSR beneficiary database for the period 2021-2027, as of 5 February 2026.

Under **PO 3.3 (Smart green mobility)**, a total of 71 beneficiary participations are recorded across participating countries. The distribution of organisation types reveals a participation structure primarily driven by local and regional public authorities (23 participations) and higher education and research institutions (18 participations).

Table 7-6 POs under PO 3.3: Distribution of organisation types by country

Type of organisation / Programme Objective	Denmark PO 3.3	Estonia PO 3.3	Finland PO 3.3	Germany PO 3.3	Latvia PO 3.3	Lithuania PO 3.3	Norway PO 3.3	Poland PO 3.3	Sweden PO 3.3	Total
Business support organisation	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Education/training centre and school	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
EEIG	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
EGTC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Higher education and research institution	0	4	4	1	2	0	0	3	4	18
Hospital and medical centre	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Infrastructure and public service provider	0	1	1	3	1	1	0	1	2	10
Interest group	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	4
International governmental organisation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Large enterprise	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Local and Regional public authorities	1	2	2	5	3	2	0	4	4	23
National public authority	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
NGO	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	5
Sectoral agency	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Small and medium enterprise	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	5
Total	**2**	**9**	**11**	**12**	**8**	**4**	**0**	**10**	**15**	**71**

Source: own elaboration based on the Interreg BSR beneficiary database for the period 2021-2027, as of 5 February 2026.

Local and regional public authorities represent the largest beneficiary category, with particularly strong participation in Germany, Poland and Sweden, confirming the central role of territorial governance actors in PO 3.3. Higher education and research institutions constitute the second most represented organisation category, with particularly strong participation in Estonia, Finland and Sweden, highlighting the importance of research and innovation in developing smart mobility solutions, including digital and low-emission transport systems. Infrastructure and public service providers also play a relevant role (10

participations), particularly in Germany and Sweden. Their relatively strong representation compared with the overall size of this PO highlights the operational dimension of mobility interventions and the importance of actors involved in the implementation of transport-related solutions. Other organisation types show more limited participation, including NGOs (5 participations), SMEs (5 participations) and BSOs (2 participations).

Under **PO 4.1 (Project platforms)**, a total of 70 beneficiary participations are recorded across participating countries. The distribution of organisation types reveals a participation structure primarily driven by higher education and research institutions (20), followed by NGOs (15) and local and regional public authorities (13). Higher education and research institutions represent the largest beneficiary category, with particularly strong participation in Finland, Germany, and Poland, followed by Estonia. NGOs constitute the second most represented organisation category, with particularly strong participation in Estonia and Poland.

Table 7-7 POs under PO 4.1: Distribution of organisation types by country

Type of organisation / Programme Objective	Denmark PO 4.1	Estonia PO 4.1	Finland PO 4.1	Germany PO 4.1	Latvia PO 4.1	Lithuania PO 4.1	Norway PO 4.1	Poland PO 4.1	Sweden PO 4.1	Total
Business support organisation	0	1	0	2	0	2	0	0	2	7
Education/training centre and school	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
EEIG	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
EGTC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Higher education and research institution	2	3	4	4	1	0	0	4	2	20
Hospital and medical centre	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Infrastructure and public service provider	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Interest group	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
International governmental organisation	0	0	3	0	2	0	0	0	1	6
Large enterprise	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Local and Regional public authorities	1	1	4	2	3	0	1	0	1	13
National public authority	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	3
NGO	1	4	0	1	2	1	0	4	2	15
Sectoral agency	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Small and medium enterprise	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Total	**4**	**11**	**11**	**12**	**10**	**3**	**1**	**10**	**8**	**70**

Source: own elaboration based on the Interreg BSR beneficiary database for the period 2021-2027, as of 5 February 2026.

Local and regional public authorities represent the third largest beneficiary group, with notable participation in Finland and Latvia. Their participation is fully aligned with the intervention logic of PO 4.1, as one of the core objectives of project platforms is to facilitate the uptake and integration of project results into the daily work of public authorities and other regional stakeholders. International governmental organisations also represent a visible beneficiary category, particularly in Finland and Latvia. Although limited in number, their participation reflects the importance of pan-Baltic coordination and cross-border governance structures in supporting the transfer and strategic use of project results at macro-regional level.

Overall, the participation structure under PO 4.1 reflects the knowledge-transfer and capitalisation-oriented nature of project platforms, with strong involvement of actors specialised in coordination, dissemination and policy uptake rather than direct operational implementation.

MC members highlighted a strong participation of public authorities across the Programme, particularly municipalities, cities and regional authorities. Members from Finland notably stressed the active role of regional councils and municipalities, while Norwegian members underlined the strong participation of national directorates and municipalities. Several MC members nevertheless observed that universities and research institutions remain highly represented, particularly in Sweden and Germany, although some interviewees noted a gradual shift towards more implementation-oriented partnerships involving public authorities and other actors. Several MC members also pointed to an improving balance between academia and implementation actors. Norwegian members stressed efforts to avoid "stand-alone academic participation" and to encourage the involvement of organisations able to implement results domestically. Latvian representatives noted that the introduction of core and small projects changed partner roles, with universities increasingly contributing to testing solutions and broader partnerships rather than focusing only on methodology development. Despite these developments, several interviewees pointed to persistent imbalances in participation. German MC members referred to the continued predominance of universities and larger cities with stronger administrative capacities, while Danish members considered that NGOs and civic actors should be more strongly involved. Smaller municipalities and NGOs were frequently identified as facing administrative and capacity-related constraints limiting their ability to assume coordination roles.

Focus on newcomers

The following analysis focuses on newcomers by country and different types of organisations. The role of small projects in attracting different types of organisations and newcomers is analysed in Chapter 9. Further information regarding the implementation of SCOs and their role in possibly attracting newcomers is provided in the dedicated Chapter 11.

Definition: In the context of this analysis, a beneficiary is considered a newcomer if no participation in the 2014-2020 Programme could be identified for the same organisation (for higher education institutions and public authorities, this refers to the level of the specific department, faculty or administrative unit).

This resulted in a total of 911 unique beneficiaries analysed for newcomer identification. Differences between the newcomer shares identified in this analysis and those reported by the Programme should therefore be understood as resulting primarily from differences in methodology, reference period and unit of analysis, rather than inconsistencies in the underlying data. The analysis compares the 854 individual entities (1,288 partners) involved in 137 projects[22] during the 2014-2020 programming period with the 911 entities participating in 115 projects from the calls of the 2021-2027 programming period[23].

[22] According to the Final Programme Evaluation of 2014-2020 (December 2022), which assessed only priorities 1-3 which encompassed three types of projects: regular projects, extension stage projects, and project platforms. Seed money projects and Coordination of macro-regional cooperation projects under priority 4 are therefore not taken into consideration.
[23] Each institution was counted only once, regardless of its involvement in multiple projects. Additionally, to correct inconsistencies in spelling, manual data cleaning was performed to standardise institution names in their original language. Separate analyses were also conducted for small projects.

Methodological note

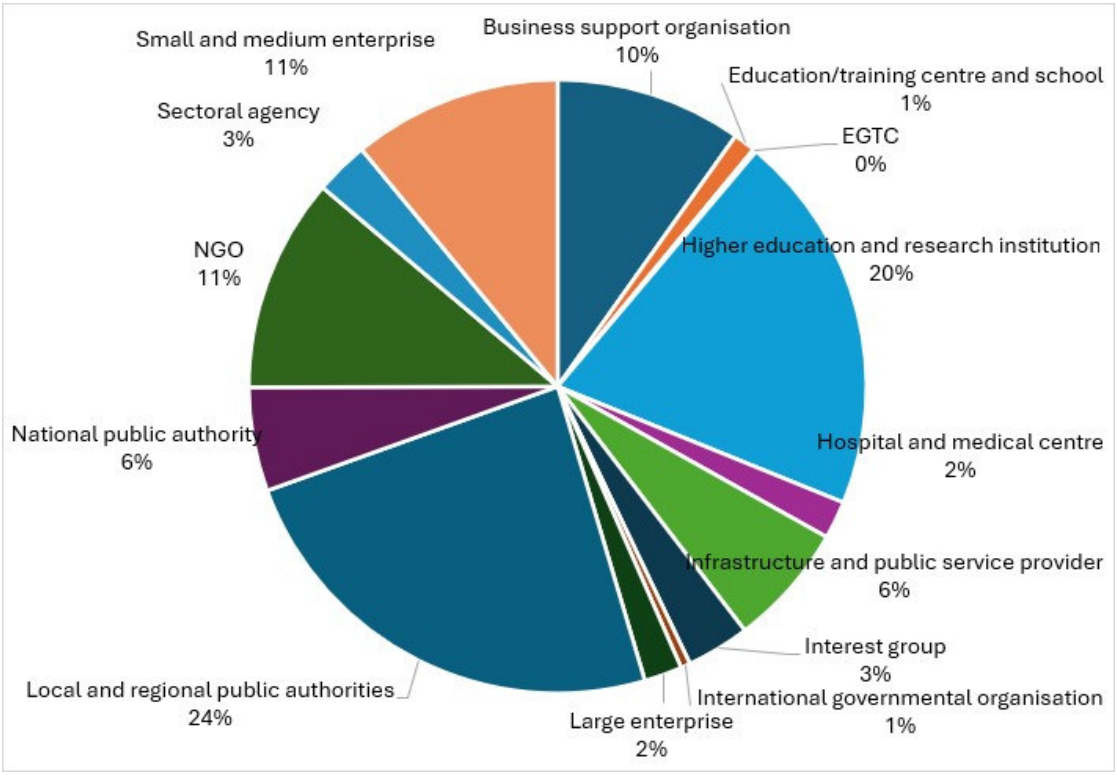
It has to be noted that alternative methodologies to identify and quantify "newcomer participation" could be applied, for example, using a different counting of organisations (e.g. based on their general name or VAT number) or based on beneficiaries' self-declarations in the application form, specifically the question: "Has this organisation ever been a partner in project(s) implemented in the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme?" However, alternative methodologies also lead to different implications and to different results. For example, the question in the AF implies that the respondent is aware of the 2014-2020 participation in IBSR of his/her organisations. The question rather refers to participation across all previous programming periods rather than exclusively to the 2014-2020 period, meaning that an organisation might identify as "returning beneficiary" even if the participation related to 2007-2013, and not to 2014-2020. This means that the use of different methodologies will lead to different results in the newcomer analysis, even to considerable differences.

For this evaluation, the analysis of newcomers is based on a comparison between beneficiaries involved in the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 programming periods. A beneficiary is considered a newcomer if no participation in the 2014-2020 Programme could be identified. It has to be noted that for higher education institutions and public authorities, the analysis was conducted not only at organisation level but also **at the level of the specific department□faculty or administrative unit** involved. Consequently, an organisation that participated in the previous programming period through one department may still be classified as a newcomer if a different department or organisational unit participates for the first time in 2021-2027. Finally, duplicate entries were removed, meaning that the same organisation (or organisational unit) was counted only once, even if participating in multiple projects. This analysis is based on data extracted from the Interreg BSR beneficiary database as of 5 February 2026.

The analysis indicates that **more than half of beneficiaries across all project types (66%) are newcomers in the sense of the applied definition**. More specifically, out of 911 beneficiary entities, 603 are identified as newcomers. From a geographical perspective, newcomers are distributed across all Programme countries, suggesting that organisational renewal is widespread across the Programme area rather than concentrated in a limited number of countries. The highest numbers of unique newcomer organisations are observed in Sweden (97), Germany (89) and Poland (85), while Finland (77) and Latvia (72) also show a strong presence of newcomers.

The main finding is that public authorities (including local, regional and national authorities) account for 30% of newcomers, compared with 26% in the overall beneficiary population. By contrast, higher education and research institutions represent 20% of newcomers, while accounting for 25% of all beneficiaries. This suggests that, although research and higher education institutions remain a central beneficiary group, their participation relies comparatively more on organisations with previous Programme experience than on newly entering organisations. Conversely, SMEs account for 11% of newcomers compared with 7% of the overall beneficiary population, indicating a greater capacity of the Programme to attract new private-sector actors.

Figure 7-3 Share of main beneficiary categories among newcomers across PO (%)



Source: own elaboration based on the Interreg BSR beneficiary database for the period 2021-2027, as of 5 February 2026.

A more detailed analysis highlights differences across organisation types. Local and regional public authorities constitute the largest category of newcomers, accounting for 24% of all newcomers (145 beneficiaries). They are particularly concentrated in Sweden (25), Latvia (23), and Germany and Poland (19 each), suggesting a strong attractiveness of the Programme for territorial governance actors in these countries.

National public authorities account for a further 5.5% of newcomers (33 beneficiaries). Taken together, public authorities at local, regional and national level represent almost 30% of all newcomers, confirming the Programme's strong appeal to public-sector organisations. Higher education and research institutions constitute the second-largest category, representing 20% of newcomers (121 beneficiaries). They are particularly well represented in Finland (21), Sweden (20), and Germany and Poland (17 each), confirming the continued importance of research and knowledge institutions within the Programme. NGOs (11.3%), SMEs (11%) and BSOs (10%) also account for a substantial share of newcomers. NGO participation is particularly notable in Poland (14), Latvia (11) and Germany (10), while SMEs are especially concentrated in Germany (16) and Finland (14). BSOs are most strongly represented in Denmark (12), Sweden (11) and Lithuania (10).

Among the new project features introduced in the 2021-2027 Programme, small projects deserve particular attention. They were specifically designed to lower entry barriers to transnational cooperation by reducing project size and complexity, thereby facilitating access for newcomers, smaller

organisations and local actors. As such, they provide a particularly relevant lens for assessing whether the Programme succeeded in attracting a broader range of beneficiaries, especially local and regional public authorities and civil society organisations. The analysis (fully presented in Chapter 9) shows that small projects appear to have facilitated the participation of local and regional public authorities, NGOs and SMEs in several Programme objectives.

7.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the evaluation questions:

EQ 1.7 What is the interest of different types of organisations in the Programme objectives (including differences between countries)? Who are the main beneficiaries/target groups within the Programme objectives?

The analysis of organisation types highlights that public authorities (local, regional and national) stand out as the largest beneficiary group, representing 26% (304 beneficiaries) of all beneficiaries. Higher education and research institutions follow, accounting for 25% (290 beneficiaries). NGOs (160 beneficiaries) and business support organisations (135 beneficiaries) further reinforce the Programme's delivery-oriented profile.

Country-level differences reveal distinct participation patterns. Local and regional public authorities are especially prominent in Latvia, Sweden and Finland. Higher education and research institutions are particularly represented in Finland, Poland, Estonia and Sweden. Lithuania stands out for the strong participation of business support organisations, while Germany shows the most diversified participation profile, combining substantial involvement of research institutions, public authorities, NGOs, SMEs and business support organisations.

Important differences emerge across Programme objectives. PO 1.1 shows a relatively balanced and diversified participation structure, with strong involvement of higher education and research institutions, business support organisations, NGOs and public authorities. PO 1.2 is more strongly centred on public-sector actors, particularly local and regional public authorities.

PO 2.1 sees a strong presence of higher education and research institutions, reflecting the knowledge-intensive nature of sustainable water interventions, while PO 2.2 presents a more diversified and market-oriented composition, with stronger participation of national public authorities, SMEs and business support organisations.

PO 3.1 records the most diversified participation profile, with a relatively balanced presence of higher education and research institutions, local and regional public authorities, NGOs, as well as SMEs and business support organisations. By contrast, PO 3.2 shows the strongest concentration of local and regional public authorities, while business support organisations, higher education and research institutions, and sectoral agencies also play a relevant role. PO 3.3 is primarily characterised by the participation of local and regional public authorities and higher education and research institutions.

PO 4.1 (project platforms) involves a smaller number of organisations and is primarily composed of higher education and research institutions, NGOs and public authorities.

EQ 3.8 To what extent did the Programme, with its new project features, manage to attract newcomers, local public authorities and stakeholders representing civil society as project partners? Which project features made the Programme attractive for these organisations?

The analysis indicates that more than half of beneficiaries across all project types (66%) are newcomers in the sense of the applied definition.[24] In the context of this analysis, a beneficiary is considered a newcomer if no participation in the 2014-2020 Programme could be identified for the same organisation (for higher education institutions and public authorities, this refers to the level of the specific department, faculty or administrative unit).

From a geographical perspective, newcomers are distributed across all Programme countries, suggesting that organisational renewal is widespread across the Programme area rather than concentrated in a limited number of countries.

The Programme managed to attract all types of organisations among the newcomers. Similar to the overall participation of different beneficiaries, local and regional public authorities (24% of newcomers) and higher education and research institutions (20% of newcomers) are the dominant groups. However, also stakeholders representing the civil society as project partners, such as NGOS (11%) and interest groups (3% of newcomers) could be attracted to a certain degree.

The feature of small projects contributed to diversifying the profile of organisations attracted. The analysis (fully presented in Chapter 9) suggests that they have facilitated the participation of local and regional public authorities, NGOs and SMEs in several Programme objectives.

[24] In the context of this analysis, a beneficiary is considered a newcomer if no participation in the 2014-2020 Programme could be identified for the same organisation (for higher education institutions and public authorities, this refers to the level of the specific department, faculty or administrative unit).

8 The long-term effects of the interventions from the previous Programme period (2014-2020)

This Chapter analyses the durability and long-term benefits of interventions from the previous Programme period (2014-2020).

This chapter refers to the following evaluation questions:

EQ 2.1 For the 2021-2027 Programme objectives, which represent a continuity to the 2014-2020 Programme (namely 2021-2027 Programme objectives 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 3.3): What has been the durability after the 2014-2020 projects' end, in terms of projects outputs and results including institutional capacities?
EQ 2.2 To what extent were outputs and results of projects from the 2014-2020 period considered and used in projects of 2021-2027? How were they used in projects of different Programme objectives (some examples)?

The analysis is based on case studies on projects from the 2014-2020 BSR Programme in six different thematic fields and included a comparison across case studies to find similar patterns and draw general conclusions, despite some methodological limitations. In addition, the survey asked 2021-2027 Programme beneficiaries, specifically those who had already participated in the 2014-2020 Programme, how the outputs and results of their past projects had been used since then.

8.1 Context



The analysis aimed to assess the long-term effects of the interventions from the previous Programme period. Assessing the long-term effects of interventions means assessing the durability of the projects, their results and impacts. There were several methodological limitations, mostly connected to the attribution gap and the increasing influence of external factors on observed changes over time. This means, not all changes observed today can be attributed to the past BSR projects[25], at least it is difficult to find evidence to prove this direct connection in midst of other external factors, such as other projects, national funding, changes in political priorities, geopolitical fluctuations. To overcome these challenges, a theory-based evaluation approach using comparative case studies contribution analysis[26] has been applied. Contribution analysis re-constructs the intervention logic of the selected projects and verifies the complete "causal pathway" of project activities → project results → Programme outputs → contribution to Programme objectives → contribution to change in the region through creation of new or strengthened institutional capacities. Within this approach it is not possible to "quantify" the use of outputs and results for all 2014-2020 projects. However, it allows to get insights in the patterns and mechanisms of continuity, durability and use of results.

To answer the evaluation questions, six case studies on projects from the 2014-2020 BSR Programme in six different thematic fields were conducted to find out more about the long-term use of project results

[25] The challenge of causal attribution has been discussed widely in literature, for example here: Rogers, P. (2014). Overview: Strategies for Causal Attribution, Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation 6, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence. https://www.betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Overview_Strategies_for_Causal_Attribution_ENG.pdf

[26] https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/evaluations/quality-guidance-contribution-analysis-practice/quality-guidance-contribution-analysis

and pathways of project outputs and benefits and to identify similar patterns and draw general conclusions, despite the methodological limitations presented above.

Each case study relied on desk research, web-based search, semi-structured stakeholder interviews (generally two per case study) and the elaboration of a structured report. The case studies were on:

- 2014-2020 SO 1.3 "**Innovation – in particular social innovation**" relating to 2021-2027 POs 1.1 and 1.2 "Resilient economies" or "responsive public services" with projects: BaltSe@nioR & BaltSe@nioR 2.0, UrbCulturalPlanning, and Healthy Boost.
- 2014-2020 SO 2.1 "**Clear Waters**" relating to 2021-2027 PO 2.1 Sustainable Waters with projects: CWPharma and CW Pharma 2, Best and project platform: BSR WATER.
- 2014-2020 SO 2.2 "**Energy efficiency**" relating to 2021-2027 PO 3.2 "Energy transition" with projects: Co2mmunity and Energize Co2mmunity, as well as ACT NOW.
- 2014-2020 SO 2.4 "**Climate change adaptation**" relating to 2021-2027 PO 2.2 Blue Economy: projects BalticLINes and project platform: Blue Platform.
- 2014-2020 SO 3.4 "**Clean-Shipping**" relating to 2021-2027 PO 2.2 "Blue Economy" with projects: ECOPRODIGI and EXOPRODIGI.
- 2014-2020 SO 3.5 "Environmentally friendly **urban mobility**" relating to 2021-2027 PO 3.3 "Smart green mobility" with projects: SUMBA and SUMBA+.

8.2 Analysis

The analysis shows findings at different levels, namely at the level of individual projects and the comparison across projects. In the text below, first, the insights from the 2014-2020 project case studies are presented with concrete examples of what are long-term effects of projects and how they have been used. Second, insights from the beneficiary survey shade further light on the use of project results from 2014-2020. Third, the comparative analysis examines specific questions about the use of 2014-2020 project results in 2021-2027 projects as well as the impact pathways and long-term benefits of 2014-2020 projects.

Case study analysis of 2014-2020 projects



The analysis of the case studies shows similar patterns of how projects outputs and results have been and are still being used. However, the specific chain of past project – use of project results – new projects – impact at local and regional level – policy impact varies in the different thematic fields.

Social innovation

Outputs and results from 2014-2020 projects on social innovation have been integrated into the 2021-2027 programming period, serving as foundational references, direct methodologies, and networking resources for new initiatives. Several projects from the 2021-2027 cycle explicitly build upon the work of their predecessors.

The results of BaltSe@nioR & BaltSe@nioR 2.0 are currently used as a reference for projects under Policy Objective (PO) 1.1 "Resilient economies and communities". Specifically, the SmartAging project directly refers to these results, while the KidsLikeUs project uses the list of Baltic Sea Region municipalities and public institutions established during the previous period to facilitate co-creation and testing. UrbCulturalPlanning also serves as a key reference for PO 1.1 projects. The 2021-2027 project BSR Cultural Pearls directly utilises its results, and the Liveability project refers to it as well. Additionally, the small-scale project Baltic UKH cites the UrbCulturalPlanning method and toolbox as a primary source of inspiration. A direct spin-off project of Healthy Boost (based on its methodology and conceptual tools) is the (Swedish Institute funded) project “Economy of Well-being of People”, coordinated by NDPHS (PA Health) and Association Norden Sweden – Föreningen Norden i Sverige (PA Education) of the EUSBSR. This project used the model for cross-sectoral health promotion of Healthy Boost and developed it further. Interestingly, NDPHS was not a project partner of Healthy Boost but still recognises its value for its work contributing to the work of the EUSBSR PA Health.

The digital and methodological outputs of earlier projects remain active resources. The Healthy Boost Digital Toolbox is hosted on the Interreg BSR portal and serves as a resource for 2021-2027 projects focused on "Responsive Public Services". Similarly, the Urban Toolkit of UrbCulturalPlanning and various gaming tools continue to be used by practitioners and city managers to explore models for urban social innovation. The cultural planning methodology developed in UrbCulturalPlanning is being applied in new contexts, such as the RuralCulturalPlanning initiative in Denmark, Latvia, and Lithuania, which adapted urban methods for rural settings.

Examples for the reuse of projects results are:

- Physical Tools and Training: The Age Simulator Suit, originally developed in the 2014-2020 period, is currently used by Satakunta University (Finland) as a training service to help SMEs test new product designs for the 2021-2027 period.
- Methodological Transfer: The cultural planning methodology developed for urban environments was successfully adapted for rural settings through the RuralCulturalPlanning initiative, ensuring the core ideas continue to evolve in new contexts.
- Institutional Leadership: Key partners like Satakunta University and Poznań University maintain leading roles in new "smart ageing" projects, ensuring that specialised knowledge from the past is transferred to new regional organisations.
- Policy and Stakeholder Networking: Organisations such as the NDPHS use knowledge from earlier projects (like Healthy Boost) to develop flagship platforms and connect past project partners to new initiatives within the current EUSBSR framework.

The 2014-2020 projects in this area have created a legacy of increased capacity and long-term policy change in at least three ways:

- Increased Municipality Engagement: The work of BaltSe@nioR 2.0 increased the sensitiveness of municipalities toward accessibility issues, leading to a higher willingness for these institutions to engage in 2021-2027 projects like KidsLikeUs.

- Policy Standards: The Healthy Boost model for cross-sectoral cooperation has been integrated into the long-term urban health policies of cities like Turku and Poznan. Furthermore, its outputs are cited as a blueprint for the "Health in All Policies" (HiAP) movement and have influenced the development of flagship platforms within the EUSBSR.
- Permanent Infrastructure: Results also persist through established entities like the Centre for Artistic City Development (KunstMacht) in Guldborgsund and permanent model public spaces in various countries, which continue to transfer project methods and showcase senior-friendly designs.

Clear waters

The analysis shows that the analysed 2014-2020 BSR projects have generated substantial and lasting impacts, particularly where results were translated into practical tools, embedded in institutional practices, or linked to policy frameworks. However, continuation within the Programme is uneven, with stronger evidence of conceptual and methodological reuse than of direct transfer of specific outputs.

A central finding is that durability across programming periods is highest where project outputs supported concrete implementation and decision making. CWPharma produced structured tools, technical guidance and operational models that reduced uncertainty for authorities and utilities. This enabled a transition from pilot activities towards real-world application, including wastewater treatment investments, improved industrial discharge management and more systematic monitoring practices. As a result, many outputs have influenced practices and investments beyond the project context.

Institutional embedding is a key factor explaining this continuity. Where results were integrated into administrative routines, organisational capacities and ongoing platforms, their effects have persisted into the current Programme period. Cooperation models between municipalities, industries and regulators, as well as monitoring and inspection practices, have continued as part of regular operations. Similarly, the Baltic Smart Water Hub provides an example of continued access to validated solutions through a stable institutional host, supporting knowledge transfer beyond individual projects.

The projects have also contributed to shaping policy frameworks at regional and European level. By linking technical results to HELCOM processes and broader EU policy developments, particularly in relation to micropollutants and wastewater treatment, the interventions helped move key issues from project-based experimentation to policy agendas. This has created favourable conditions for subsequent projects, which can focus on implementation and compliance rather than on problem definition.

At Programme level, continuity into the 2021 to 2027 period is evident but selective. A limited number of projects show clear links to earlier interventions through technological refinement, methodological consolidation or policy alignment. These projects build on established approaches such as advanced wastewater treatment, risk-based prioritisation and integrated water management. However, many projects demonstrate only thematic alignment, without explicit reuse of tools, models or cooperation frameworks developed in the previous period.

Across the analysed interventions, durability is strongest where:

- Outputs were operationalised into structured tools (CWPharma guideline → fitness check).
- Results were linked to physical infrastructure investments (BEST).
- Outputs were embedded into routine governance practices (BEST cooperation models).
- Capitalisation outputs were assigned to a post-project host organisation (BSR WATER platform).
- Findings were linked to macro-regional policy frameworks (CWPharma Action Plan; BSR WATER → HELCOM).

Energy efficiency

The case study identified several ways in which the outputs and results of the three 2014-2020 projects have been taken up within the current Programme period under PO 3.2 Energy transition. These take different forms: institutional capacity embedded in partner organisations, sustained transnational networks, open tools and guidance still in active use, ongoing policy advocacy, and – as discovered through this research – two ongoing 2021-2027 IBSR projects that explicitly build on the results of Co2mmunity and Energize Co2mmunity. StartSun (PO 3.2, 2023–2026), which is piloting solar energy communities across BSR countries, and Enercracy (PO 3.2, 2025–2028), which is embedding energy community and prosumer approaches into municipal Energy and Climate Plans, were both identified during the research process as projects that reference Co2mmunity and Energize Co2mmunity as predecessors and share significant partner overlap with them. These projects are concrete evidence of how 2014-2020 results have been taken up within 2021-2027, but they represent one channel of uptake among several – not the exclusive or predetermined frame of comparison for this case study.

Co2mmunity and Energize Co2mmunity (both under SO 2.2 Renewable Energy in 2014-2020) have produced results that remain in use in adapted forms beyond the project lifecycle. The RENCOP (Renewable Energy Co-operative Partnership) model – the central conceptual and organisational output of Co2mmunity – continues to inform how community energy projects are structured and managed across several BSR contexts, even where it is no longer referred to by that name. Country-specific community energy handbooks, produced in national languages for all eight partner countries, remain publicly available and are reported to be referenced in discussions by national stakeholders. Policy recommendations from a RENCOP White Paper fed into sustained discussions on regulatory barriers; in Finland, these discussions preceded a legislative change in early 2026 removing a key structural barrier for energy communities, though direct attribution to the project is not possible. Beyond specific tools and documents, the transnational partnership itself has proven durable: partners described it as particularly strong and long-lasting, and most continued active cooperation and informal exchange well after project closure.

ACT NOW (SO 2.3 Energy Efficiency) built capacity in nine municipalities across the BSR through Local Energy Efficiency Work Groups (LEEGs), a self-assessment tool, an online learning platform, and a manual for translating energy plans into investments. These tools are open-access and designed for replication. Participating municipalities made tangible progress in revising their energy action plans and developing investment-ready projects. Analysis of ACT NOW is based on desk research only, as no dedicated interview was conducted for this project – a limitation noted in the methodology.

The long-term effects of Co2mmunity and Energize Co2mmunity are visible across multiple dimensions: in the deepened institutional expertise of organisations such as TREA and GNF that have carried the topic forward across successive projects; in the practitioner network seeded in Estonia that remains active in community energy work; in the continued use and updating of guidance materials; and in the sustained policy engagement that has contributed to regulatory discussions at national level. Three ongoing or recently completed 2021-2027 projects under PO 3.2 were identified explicitly referencing ACT NOW in their application forms: Easy Energy ("Easy Energy Efficiency solutions for public buildings and small companies in the BSR", ongoing 2023–2026), which names the ACT NOW learning platform as a resource being used in its training Programme; Flip-EC ("Flipped Energy Concept to Flip Climate Change", ongoing 2025–2028), which explicitly builds on the ACT NOW learning platform and the LEEG concept; and RenoWave ("One-Stop-Shop extended model to increase the multi-apartment building stock renovation in the BSR", completed 2023–2025), in which the Magistrat of the City of Bremerhaven – ACT NOW's lead partner – participates as a project partner. ACT NOW's contribution to long-term capacity in energy planning at local authority level can be interpreted as a thematically complementary layer, strengthening the enabling conditions for the more advanced energy transition under IBSR PO 3.2.

Blue growth

The overall objective of the BalticLINes project (2016–2019), under SO 2.4 in the 2014-2020 BSR Programme, was to increase transnational coherence of shipping routes and energy corridors in Maritime Spatial Plans in the Baltic Sea Region. The outcomes and long-term effects can be categorised as technical (e.g. BASEMAPS and its continuation and development by HELCOM), analytical (e.g. the analysis of shipping and energy planning guidelines and scenarios), governance-related (e.g. recommendations and their implementation), capacity-building (e.g. the MSP Challenge and its implementation), and Programme capitalisation (e.g. the work of the Capacity4MSP platform).

The BalticLINes generated several results that remain relevant and in use beyond the project's lifetime. This is primarily evident in the continued operation of technical tools, the adoption of methodological approaches in planning processes, and the enhancement of institutional capacities and cooperation networks in maritime spatial planning. The most tangible example of this is the BASEMAPS transnational maritime spatial planning data catalogue, which was originally developed within the BalticLINes project. BASEMAPS continues to operate under HELCOM governance and is maintained by the Baltic Sea Region MSP Data Expert Sub-Group. Participating countries regularly update the platform, which serves as an operational tool for exchanging spatial data related to maritime spatial planning across the Baltic Sea Region.

In addition to technical outputs, the project produced methodological guidance that continues to inform planning practices. The practical guides on the designation of shipping corridors and offshore energy infrastructure provide maritime spatial planning authorities with step-by-step procedures and have supported national planning processes and discussions within the HELCOM–VASAB MSP Working Group. Although there is no quantified evidence of formal adoption in national legislation, interviews and documentation suggest that these guidelines have influenced planning discussions and analytical approaches.

BalticLINes also contributed to capacity building and institutional cooperation. The project strengthened the network of maritime spatial planning authorities and sector stakeholders across the Baltic Sea Region. This cooperation continues through established governance structures, such as the HELCOM–VASAB Maritime Spatial Planning Working Group, and ongoing professional networks among planners and experts. The continued use and development of the MSP Challenge simulation tool demonstrates the lasting relevance of the project's outputs for training and stakeholder engagement.

Outputs and experiences from BalticLINes have been used and further developed in several initiatives following the lifetime of the project. In particular, the Interreg project platform Capacity4MSP (2019–2022) built on the results of multiple MSP-related projects, including BalticLINes. Through this platform, guidance material, user support and knowledge exchange activities helped disseminate project outcomes among MSP authorities and practitioners. Other examples include the Baltic Sea2Land project (2023–2025), which builds on previous MSP cooperation and planning methods to address land–sea interactions and integrate harmonised datasets into BASEMAPS-linked tools. Similarly, references to BalticLINes outputs appear in the Blue Supply Chain project.

Beyond Interreg, the project's results have also been adopted in EU-level initiatives funded under EMFAF, including the Maritime Spatial Planning Assistance Mechanism, which is supported by DG MARE. These initiatives continue to promote knowledge exchange and capacity building in maritime spatial planning across European sea basins.

These examples demonstrate that BalticLINes is part of a wider project value chain in which the results of earlier projects are reused, adapted, and developed further in subsequent cooperation initiatives and policy frameworks.

Figure 8-1: BalticLINes in the broader project value chain / ecosystem



Source: own elaboration supported by NotebookLM

Overall, BalticLINes' results are most evident in institutional embedding, shared methodologies, and continued cooperation rather than directly measurable regulatory changes.

Clean shipping

The ECOPRODIGI (Eco-efficient digitalised maritime transport) project focused on demonstrating how digital technologies can support more environmentally sustainable maritime operations. The EXOPRODIGI project focused on extending and applying the developed digital solutions in real operational environments. The project worked closely with shipping companies, ports and technology providers to test and refine digital eco-efficiency solutions in commercial shipping operations. Both projects aimed to accelerate the digital transformation of maritime transport and related industrial processes.

The analysis shows that the ECOPRODIGI and EXOPRODIGI projects have generated strong and lasting impacts on the digital transformation of maritime transport in the Baltic Sea Region. Their main contribution lies in demonstrating that digital technologies such as data platforms, sensors, modelling tools and decision-support systems can significantly improve both operational efficiency and environmental performance in shipping. A key finding is the high level of durability of project outputs. Unlike purely conceptual initiatives, both projects developed practical tools that were tested in real operational environments. The ECOPRODIGI–EXOPRODIGI sequence demonstrates high durability due to its combination of technological pilots, operational testing and strategic road mapping. Evidence from stakeholder input confirms that several digital solutions and concepts developed in ECOPRODIGI and EXOPRODIGI have not only been maintained but further developed and scaled in commercial applications. In particular, digital performance monitoring solutions developed and piloted during the projects have been integrated into the product portfolios of major maritime technology providers. Companies such as Logimatic (now part of RINA), Vessel Performance Solutions (acquired by GTT), and Lauritzen (now BW Epic Kosan) have continued to develop these solutions after the project end. These solutions have reached significant market uptake. For example, the Sertica system (RINA/Logimatic) is currently used by more than 100 companies and over 3,000 vessels. Solutions developed by VPS (now part of GTT) are deployed across a large global fleet, with several thousand vessels using performance monitoring functionalities. This demonstrates that project outputs have evolved from pilot-level tools into widely used commercial applications in the maritime sector. Beyond digital performance monitoring, shipyard digitalisation solutions such as 3D scanning and digital modelling have also been applied in ongoing industrial operations. For instance, Western Baltija Shipyard and Western Baltic Engineering continue to use these approaches in shipbuilding and conversion projects, contributing to process optimisation and emissions reduction. In addition, some solutions have diffused beyond the maritime sector, with process optimisation approaches being applied in industries such as construction, where similar complexity in production processes exists.

The use of 2014–2020 outputs in the 2021 to 2027 IBSR projects is multiple. The projects Baltic Sea e-Nav, MaDaMe and ORMOBASS show a clear continuity in the underlying logic of digitalisation, notably the emphasis on integrated data flows, interoperable systems and data-driven decision-making in maritime operations. At the same time, the focus of interventions has evolved. While ECOPRODIGI and EXOPRODIGI concentrated on operational eco-efficiency (e.g. vessel performance monitoring, cargo optimisation, shipyard processes), the current projects apply similar digital principles to adjacent

domains such as navigation services, maritime data exchange and navigation resilience. This reflects a scaling-up and system-level extension of earlier approaches, moving from company-level optimisation towards regional digital infrastructures and services. Evidence from stakeholder input further suggests that the continuation of ECOPRODIGI and EXOPRODIGI results has been particularly strong outside the Interreg framework, notably through follow-up national research and innovation initiatives (e.g. Danish projects RoRoGreen, ShippingLab and ShippingLab Green) and continued project development at national and international level. These initiatives build on similar themes of digitalisation of maritime operations, cargo handling and maintenance planning.

Environmentally friendly urban mobility

Under SO 3.5 of the 2014–2020 BSR Programme, SUMBA (Sustainable Urban Mobility and Commuting in Baltic Cities) ran from October 2017 to March 2021. The project was led by the City of Hamburg, Borough of Altona, with 12 partners and 37 associate partners across ten pilot regions in seven countries. It contributed to the EUSBSR Horizontal Action Climate. SUMBA's primary objective was to address car-dominated commuting by developing tools that help urban and transport planners assess, plan and integrate intermodal mobility solutions into transport plans and policies. SUMBA+ ran from April to December 2021, a nine-month extension stage led by the Municipality of Växjö.

SUMBA and SUMBA+ have produced durable long-term effects primarily at the institutional and strategic level. The clearest impact chains trace from analytical work in SUMBA – commuting studies, benchmarking, transport modelling – through formally adopted Commuting Master Plans, into SUMBA+'s concrete measures, and onward to urban interventions still visible today.

The planned two-stage structure (SUMBA = planning; SUMBA+ = implementation) is itself a durability mechanism. Beyond this, the HUPMOBILE project (2019–2021) – running partly in parallel with a shared Hamburg-Altona partner – extended the effective life of SUMBA's work into corporate mobility management, last-mile logistics, and integrated transport systems. Two micro-depots for last-mile delivery developed through this chain are still operational today.

No direct named continuation has been identified in the 2021–2027 IBSR, though thematic continuity under PO 3.3 "Smart green mobility" is clear. ‘SUMPS for BSR’ (2023-2026) seems to be a similar project, however, while both SUMBA and SUMPs for BSR are initiatives tackling urban transport emissions, they are fundamentally distinct in their scope and target areas. SUMBA was a project focused on suburbs of larger cities and their functional areas and regional commuting, whereas SUMPs for BSR is a project designed to help small-to-mid-sized cities build comprehensive frameworks for inside city boundaries, emphasising walking and cycling.

In Växjö (SE), SUMBA's commuting study and CMP were fed into the municipality's scheduled Transport Plan renewal, integrating them into a formal planning document. The SUMBA+ circulation plan led to summer street implementations ongoing since 2024. In Hamburg-Altona (DE), a neighbourhood forum established through SUMBA's cooperative process continues to operate at technical and political level beyond the project's end. In Tartu (EE), the bicycle library concept was taken forward as a permanent, publicly operated municipal service.

The Bicycle Library Cookbook – a deliberately designed knowledge transfer publication – documents three models of varying maturity to enable replication by cities outside the partnership. Other cities have been inspired to establish their own schemes. The bicycle library concept has spread beyond the SUMBA+ partnership in Sweden, after project partners have been approached. Kalmar municipality runs an active initiative — though the extent to which this can be directly attributed to SUMBA rather than the wider diffusion of the concept in Sweden cannot be confirmed from available sources. In Riga (LV), SUMBA functioned as a catalyst for cross-boundary metropolitan transport planning that had not previously existed at this scale, intended as a contribution to the city-region's SUMP process, though longer-term effects on that process are not confirmed.

Based on the case study evidence, several patterns were observed that explain the durability of project results.

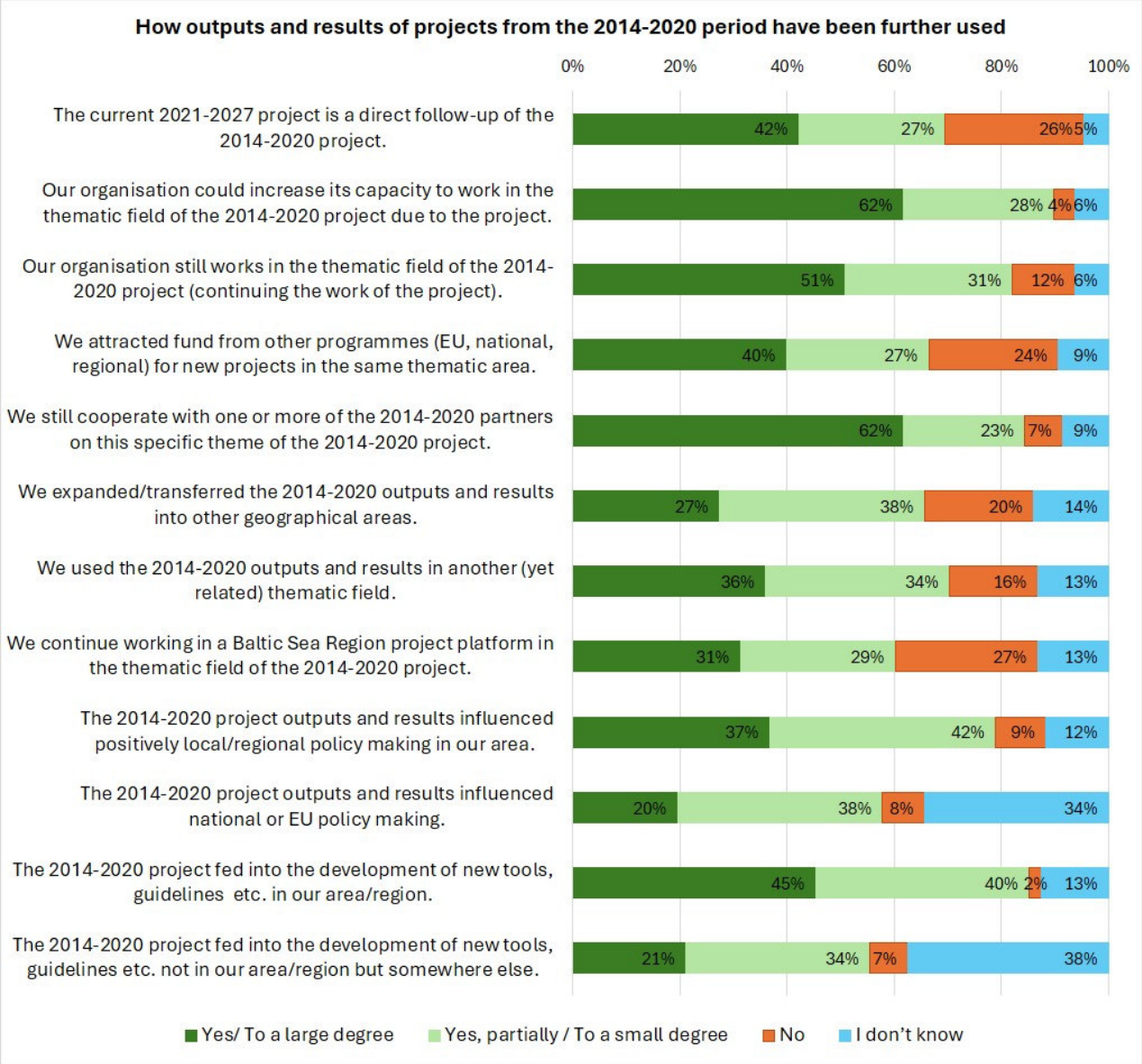
- Deliberate use of existing institutional processes. It was considered effective to embed outputs in already ongoing planning processes instead of creating new documents. Växjö's scheduled Transport Plan renewal provided an institutional window that the project team actively exploited. This avoids parallel planning, allowing outputs to influence formal planning without additional institutional cost.
- The planned separation of planning (SUMBA) and implementation (SUMBA+) allowed the partnership to move from strategy to piloted measures in a structured way. Without SUMBA+, most CMPs would have remained unimplemented strategic documents.
- HUPMOBILE, a partly parallel and partly subsequent project with shared partners, extended the effective lifetime of SUMBA's work well beyond formal closure, into currently operational infrastructure (micro-depots, active ITS testing). The impact chain from 2017 to today is traceable.
- The Hamburg-Altona neighbourhood forum is the clearest example: an inter-municipal exchange platform that emerged from SUMBA's working methods and now serves its members independently. Continuity from 2017 through to today is reported by the Hamburg-Altona partner.
- The Bicycle Library Cookbook is a strong example of deliberate packaging for replication – practical, concrete, and documenting three models at different maturity levels to lower the barrier for other cities.
- CoBiUM (Interreg South Baltic Programme) co-funded the Växjö commuting study alongside SUMBA, extending the reach and credibility of a single output. Designing complementary cross-Programme activities increases the effective return on individual project investments.

Beneficiaries' view on the use of 2014-2020 project results

One question in the survey asked to beneficiaries who participated already in 2014-2020 about how the results of their past projects are now used. 128 of 335 respondents (38%) answered this question.

The replies show the positive trend to use the results of past projects in different ways. The most frequent uses are the “increased capacity in the organisation due to the project” and the “on-going cooperation with past project partners on the topic”. This confirms the effect on institutional capacities and networking.

Figure 8-2 Use of 2014-2020 project results



Source: own elaboration, based on the beneficiaries’ survey (n=128)

85% of surveyed regional partners confirm that previous projects fed directly into creating new tools and guidelines in their regions, with 45% stating this occurred to a "large degree" and 40% to a "small degree".

82% indicate that their organisation, at least partially, still works in the thematic field of the 2014-2020 project (continuing the work of the project).

Adaptability is high, with 70% of respondents indicating they successfully repurposed previous outputs and results within different, yet related, thematic fields.

Nearly four-fifths of partners (79%) report that 2014-2020 project results had a positive, direct influence on local or regional policymaking in their area.

Qualitative feedback shows that these projects have not only built internal organisational capacity but have also paved the way for results to be integrated into new, larger-scale projects targeting policy impact at the BSR and EU levels.

Examples of the use of 2014-2020 outputs and results, mentioned in the beneficiary survey are:

- *"In the case of our organisation, there were 2 projects, where one project organised a central heating system in a small village to test the potential of a low-temperature heating systems. In second project we developed a SECAP for the municipality until 2030 and created an accurate data recording system to determine the microclimate indicators of the premises and the performance indicators of the heating system."*
- *"NonHazCity 1 and 2, both from the previous funding Programme, were nominated for the Regiostar award in 2023 as well as for the Communication award in 2020. Out of these projects a larger initiative has been started, the "Chemicals Household check", the "Chemicals Ambassadors" with Funding from EU LIFE, EU Erasmus+ as well as German NGO grant, and with partners from France, Austria, Portugal, Greece, Czech Republic, Hungary, Netherlands. The original NonHazCity idea of Chemicals release from urban lifestyle goes further."*
- *"For us as a municipality it was a valuable learning from the Blue Platform Project that in order to make real impact locally we need tangible projects - physical demonstrations and showcases to raise awareness and interest in aquaculture - for the whole value chain."*
- *"One of the most important outcomes was the strengthening of transnational networks across the Baltic Sea Region, which continue to serve as a foundation for cooperation in CEforestry and other initiatives. The 2014–2020 experience also enhanced our competence in transnational project management, stakeholder communication, and policy dialogue. Overall, the most valuable legacy of the 2014–2020 period is not only specific technical outputs, but also the trust-based cooperation structures, knowledge exchange mechanisms, and increased strategic positioning within the Baltic Sea Region bioeconomy community."*
- *"We continue working on the sustainable public procurement of food and catering in Interreg BSR 2021-2027, and have attracted funding for this topic from the Horizon Europe Programme."*
- *"Two Waste Water Treatment Plants are upgrading in DK based on the results of the project (invest > EUR 20 Million)."*
- *The series of SUBMARINER Blue projects culminating in the Blue Platform INTERREG project, were key to our role as coordinator of the Mission Ocean Lighthouse in the Baltic and North Sea region. (note of the evaluators: funded by JPI Oceans)".*

Mechanisms of how project results are made durable

The analysis of survey results and project case studies shows how 2014-2020 outputs and results have been used and built upon. Reuse of project results happens mostly through three types of mechanisms:

1. Sequential use of project results: foundation for follow-up or spin-off projects that deepen or extend the original scope.
2. Internal and peer adoption: outputs integrated into the ongoing work of former project partners and their networks.
3. External spillover: use by third-party actors and in broader policy processes.

Lessons learned on the **mechanisms** of how project results are made durable are, for example:

- Translation of project results into structured, transferable implementation tools, rather than stand-alone reports.
- Practical demonstration and peer learning of practitioner organisations or particular expert units within larger organisations (e.g. municipalities or service providers).
- Durability was strongest where outputs were embedded into existing administrative or operational routines, rather than relying on voluntary continuation.
- Some projects show that durability is strongest when governance improvements are combined with physical investments, combining hard and soft measures.
- A key mechanism is the sequential development of projects, each addressing the gap or next stage identified in the previous one.
- Project platforms demonstrate another key mechanism, especially when capitalisation leads then to permanent structures, such as the SUBMARINER network, the Scandria®Alliance or the Baltic MSP Planners' Forum.
- Another important factor is the existence of stable professional networks and the long-term engagement of individual experts. Many individuals involved in thematic fields that continue to work in projects or with solutions have worked on this topic for many years, often across multiple projects and initiatives.
- Another critical mechanism was the deliberate linkage of project results to macro-regional and EU policy processes, linking technical outputs to policy frameworks. The close involvement of the key Baltic Sea governance structures, i.e. HELCOM, VASAB, NDPHS or other EUSBSR tools such as PAC, PA websites or Steering Groups, were essential for the uptake, dissemination and continuation of project outputs. They also connect the operational practice with the political agenda.
- Sometimes the durability of project results was positively influenced by changes and formalisation in European and national legislation.
- Scientific articles and the participation in larger thematic events also create durable effects and increases significantly the outreach of project results. In the same line the involvement of

European networks or thematic organisations in projects helps to disseminate results, even if this effect is weaker than for Baltic Sea organisations which are also linked to the EUSBSR.

Success factors for durability and reuse

Durability of project outcomes depends on both the quality of the project's outputs and their integration within institutional structures, regulatory frameworks, and long-term professional networks. Key **success factors for durability and reuse** have been identified:

- Embedding results in organisations and governance processes helps.
- Institutional anchoring and routine integration are more important than temporary project networks.
- Alignment with ongoing policy reform processes increases the structural relevance of project outputs and extends their lifespan beyond project closure.
- Projects that combine infrastructure, operational practice and governance reform create mutually reinforcing durability mechanisms.
- Outputs that reduce uncertainty and transaction costs for target groups are more likely to be reused. When project results become practical decision-support instruments, they continue to function beyond the project.
- Policy advocacy as a sustained parallel activity.
- Knowledge accumulation across successive projects. Follow-up projects that consolidate and operationalise earlier outputs significantly increase the likelihood of long-term impact.
- Durable knowledge platforms require post-project institutional ownership.
- Seeing operational solutions in practice is more effective than written guidance alone in triggering investment decisions.

Hampering factors

Negative factors hampering durability have also been identified:

- Staff turnover. The departure of the original project coordinator in a given organisation is a clear example of individual-dependency risk. Effects depend on people as much as institutions. When key individuals leave, institutional memory and momentum are at risk.
- Dependence on consultants. While external experts can help implementing a project or producing outputs, the extensive use of experts to produce key results reduces ownership and prevents to build internal institutional capacities.
- Limited municipal administrative capacity. Some projects cannot be continued outside a project context not for lack of interest or funding, but for lack of available staff. Competing priorities and political cycles create real barriers to follow-through.
- Discontinued availability of information: Several project websites (outside the Interreg BSR website), which hosted additional project results, are no longer accessible – a practical reminder

that digital infrastructure on project-specific domains rarely outlasts the funding period. Key documents might be available through partner organisations.

- Unfavourable national-level policy context. Political priorities can change. This is a structural constraint beyond any project's control.
- Tool or technology obsolescence. Sometimes the developed solutions do not fit anymore due to new technologies, or AI use. This is a structural constraint beyond any project's control.

The findings point to a pattern in which long-term impact is achieved through cumulative learning and gradual scaling rather than direct replication.

Use of 2014-2020 project results in 2021-2027 projects

The extent to which 2014-2020 project results are used in this current period varies across thematic fields, ranging from direct institutional embedding and tool reuse to more indirect conceptual and methodological influence. The analysis indicates that the most successful instances of uptake occurred when project outputs were integrated into permanent governance structures or aligned with emerging regulatory requirements.

In several fields, specific tools developed in the previous period are currently operational or serve as the direct technical foundation for new projects:

- The AdvIQwater project builds directly on the technological and methodological framework established by CWPharma, specifically its advanced wastewater treatment (AWT) optimisation concepts and risk-based substance prioritisation. APRIORA also operationalises CWPharma's monitoring results into a GIS-based decision-support system.
- The StartSun and Enercracy projects explicitly reference Co2mmunity and Energize Co2mmunity as their predecessors, carrying forward the RENCOP model for engaging citizens in energy communities.
- The HUPMOBILE project (2019–2021) extended the effective life of SUMBA's work.
- The results of BaltSe@nioR & BaltSe@nioR 2.0 are currently used as a reference for projects SmartAging project and KidsLikeUs project.

Another form of using project results is the evolution of experimental pilots into tools for regulatory compliance:

- Around the topic of PFAS and Wastewater, the EMPEREST project represents a transition from demonstration-oriented piloting to structured support for implementation. It takes the AWT technologies piloted in CWPharma and scales them to address the new regulatory challenge of PFAS in alignment with the revised Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive.

The conceptual use of methodologies and intervention logics of previous projects have also been observed. This is the case for the following examples.

- Current projects like Baltic Sea e-Nav and MaDaMe share the underlying logic of digitalisation and data-driven decision-making from ECOPRODIGI, even if there is little evidence of direct transfer or systematic reuse of the specific tools or platforms.
- The "source-control" logic from water projects like BEST has been conceptually transferred to NonHazCity (NHC3), which applies the principle of preventive action to urban construction and municipal procurement rather than industrial wastewater.
- UrbCulturalPlanning with its participatory methodology served as a key reference for the 2021-2027 project BSR Cultural Pearls and the Liveability project. Additionally, the small-scale project Baltic UKH cites the UrbCulturalPlanning method and toolbox as a primary source of inspiration.

The most pervasive form of use across all fields is the retention of knowledge within the participating organisations:

- Healthy Boost with its model for cross-sectoral health promotion was an inspiration for several spin-off projects coordinated by the EUSBSR PA Health. The increased expertise and networking of experts and organisations also led to a significant increase in the number of health-related projects in the IBSR Programme in 2021-2027.
- Platform Capitalisation: The Baltic Smart Water Hub remains a permanent regional interface for over 100 validated solutions, hosted by the Union of the Baltic Cities, ensuring that practitioners have continued access to project results regardless of current funding cycles.
- The Interreg project platform Capacity4MSP (2019–2022) built on the results of multiple MSP-related projects, including BalticLINes.

Impact pathways and long-term benefits

Across all analysed fields, a comparable impact pathway is observable, moving from project-specific experimentation to structural regional transformation and policy impact:

Project Results (Generation of Tools): The process begins with the creation of specific, usable outputs that address immediate technical or social gaps. Examples include digital tools like the Age Simulator Suit, technical data such as maritime spatial datasets in BASEMAPS, and analytical frameworks like Commuting Master Plans. These results were then operationalised into permanent routines or integrated into new projects. In fields like Clean Shipping, digital pilots were absorbed into commercial product portfolios (e.g. Sertica systems now used on over 3,000 vessels). In Urban Mobility, pilot projects like bicycle libraries evolved into permanent municipal services like "Velorent" in Tartu.

Contribution to Programme objectives: The chain moves from local outcomes to larger strategic goals by linking project evidence to EU, national and macro-regional policy frameworks. For example, "Clear Waters" projects used scientific data to inform the revision of the EU Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, while "Blue Growth" initiatives aligned maritime planning with European-wide energy transition goals.

Impact on Society and Economy: The final stage manifests as systemic change. Projects contributed to a change in regional policies, e.g. to the silver economy being officially written into Regional Smart Specialisation Strategies. In energy efficiency, it resulted in over EUR 7 million in investment-ready

projects. The results generated by the CWPharma project directly influenced multi-million-euro investments in advanced treatment plants in cities such as Berlin, Linköping, and Kalundborg. In Växjö, recommendations for sustainable commuting led to the annual implementation of a summer street Programme, creating pedestrianized public spaces. Pornainen municipality is currently incorporating energy community infrastructure directly into its land-use planning and business development zones.

This structural logic ensures that short-term project activities are institutionalised to provide long-term systemic influence and structural capacity for the Baltic Sea Region. The figure above shows a schematic overview on the logical sequence of impact.

The **long-term benefit of project results** has been analysed across various thematic areas in the Baltic Sea Region, illustrating how project outputs have evolved into long-term institutional and societal changes. The analysis evaluated a wide range of thematic areas, examined in the project case studies, including Social Innovation, Clear Waters, Energy Efficiency, Blue Growth, Clean Shipping, and Urban Mobility across five core dimensions of impact. These dimensions measure how projects move beyond temporary interventions to create permanent knowledge, improved governance, resource efficiency, financial sustainability, and transnational cooperation[27].

Figure 8-3 Impact Pathway of 2014-2020 initiatives on Clear Waters



Source: Own elaboration using Google Gemini

The in-depth analysis shows that projects from the 2014-2020 Interreg BSR Programme clearly contributed to all impact dimensions (as defined for the 2014-2020 Programme).

[27] They reflect the five impact dimensions that were used for the Monitoring of institutional capacity in the evaluations of the 2014-2020 BSR Programme.

Dimension 1: Enhanced Institutionalised Knowledge and Competence, focuses on how expertise is permanently embedded within organisations. In the field of social innovation, tools like the VR Service Simulator and Age Simulator Suit have moved from project outputs to permanent features in higher education in Finland and Poland to train healthcare staff. Another example is how environmental agencies and wastewater utilities gained significant operational experience in monitoring and modelling that remained within the institutions after the projects concluded.

Dimension 2: Improved Governance Structures and Organisational Set-up, measures the transition from temporary pilots to permanent policy and institutional frameworks. Examples of contribution of projects results can be found related to energy efficiency. The ACT NOW project established Local Energy Efficiency Work Groups (LEEGs) as sustained governance structures that coordinate energy planning across different municipal departments. In the area of blue growth, a core achievement was the institutional embedding of project-based tools, such as the BASEMAPS data catalogue, into permanent transnational structures like HELCOM.

Dimension 3 describes the impact achieved through tools that diagnose inefficiencies and lower the costs of future innovation via **more efficiency of resources and tools**. In the field of urban mobility projects cities exploited "institutional windows" by feeding project outputs directly into already scheduled planning processes, such as Växjö's transport plan update, avoiding the administrative costs of parallel planning. Furthermore, the development of transferable digital prototypes (e.g. the Deckmaster application) allowed other maritime operators to implement efficiency measures without starting from scratch in the clean shipping field.

Dimension 4 is on Better Ability to Attract New Financial Resources. This dimension highlights how projects leverage past success to secure follow-up funding or commercial validation. Here, social innovation projects helped that industrial partners like Junet Ltd leveraged project research to develop and market "senior-friendly" furniture collections, proving the economic value of the initial research. The CWPharma results directly influenced the design and construction of full-scale wastewater treatment infrastructure in Denmark, Sweden, and Germany.

Dimension 5 tracks the creation of durable networks and the anchoring of results in international and transnational frameworks. Highly relevant contribution was observed in this field, for example, a core group of organisations in the field of energy efficiency maintained a sustained partnership across four successive projects, using the Interreg framework to address increasingly complex stages of the energy transition. Moreover, methodologies such as the MSP Challenge have been successfully transferred to other sea basins, including the North Sea and the Atlantic, demonstrating their transnational versatility.

The analysis demonstrates that the most successful projects are those that align their outputs with existing institutional needs and regulatory cycles. By moving from project-based experimentation to structural implementation, initiatives ensure that project results are turned into long-term effects.

8.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the evaluation questions:

EQ 2.1 For the 2021-2027 Programme objectives, which represent a continuity to the 2014-2020 Programme (namely 2021-2027 Programme objectives 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 3.3): What has been the durability after the 2014-2020 projects' end, in terms of projects outputs and results including institutional capacities?

The case study analysis demonstrated that project results have significant durability, driving lasting local and regional policy impacts by being actively reused after their official lifecycle ends. The case studies showcase how project result of 2014-2020 projects (in the thematic fields of 2021-2027 POs 1.1, 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 3.3) have been used and how they have leveraged further action and impact. Beneficiary survey data reveals that the vast majority of participants successfully used past project results in their region and in the current work.

There is a wealth of examples how project results have been used after the project life a) forming the basis of follow-up or spin-off projects that deepen or extend the original scope, b) inspiring integration in routines and peer adoption when outputs were built into the ongoing work of former project partners and their networks, and c) allowing policy embedding in broader policy processes and external spillover use by third-party actors.

Durability of 2014-2020 project results is considerable. The analysis shows that 2014-2020 IBSR projects have generated substantial and lasting impacts, particularly where results were translated into practical tools, embedded in institutional practices, or linked to policy frameworks.

Examples for durability are:

- The results generated by the **CWPharma** project directly influenced multi-million-euro investments in advanced treatment plants in cities such as Berlin, Linköping, and Kalundborg.
- Digital performance monitoring solutions developed and piloted during **ECOPRODIGI** and **EXOPRODIGI** have been further developed and integrated into the product portfolios of major maritime technology providers.
- In Växjö (SE), **SUMBA's** commuting study and the Commuting Master Plan were fed into the municipality's scheduled Transport Plan renewal, integrating them into a formal planning document. The SUMBA+ circulation plan led to summer street implementations ongoing since 2024.
- In Hamburg-Altona (DE), a neighbourhood forum established through **SUMBA's** cooperative process continues to operate at technical and political level beyond the project's end.
- **BalticLINes** contributed to capacity building and institutional cooperation. the project's results have also been adopted in EU-level initiatives funded under EMFAF, including the Maritime Spatial Planning Assistance Mechanism, which is supported by DG MARE.
- The **Healthy Boost** model for cross-sectoral cooperation has been integrated into the long-term urban health policies of cities like Tartu, Jelgava, Turku and Poznan. Furthermore, its outputs

are cited as a blueprint for the "Health in All Policies" (HiAP) movement and have influenced the development of flagship platforms within the EUSBSR.

- The UNESCO Policy Monitoring Platform features the **UrbCulturalPlanning** toolkit as a "proven method for urban social innovation," making it a global reference for city planners in the Creative Cities Network far beyond Europe.
- Finland amended its energy legislation in early 2026 to permit electricity sharing across land parcel boundaries without a licensed network operator – removing a key structural barrier to community energy. **Co2mmunity** partners, engaged in sustained advocacy on this issue from the project period onwards, communicating the barrier to members of parliament and ministry officials.

Key success factors for durability and reuse have been, for example, the alignment with ongoing policy reform processes, the combination of infrastructure, operational practice and governance activities within projects, and policy advocacy. Operational solutions in practice are more effective than written guidance alone in triggering investment decisions and embedding results in organisations. Furthermore, institutional anchoring and routine integration help to increase durability, as well as durable knowledge platforms, and knowledge accumulation across successive projects. The findings point to a pattern in which long-term impact is achieved through cumulative learning and gradual scaling rather than direct replication.

EQ 2.2 To what extent were outputs and results of projects from the 2014-2020 period considered and used in projects of 2021-2027? How were they used in projects of different Programme objectives (some examples)?

2014-2020 project results have been widely used in 2021-2027 IBSR projects, as shown by the comparative analysis of case studies. The analysis indicates that the most successful instances of uptake occurred when project outputs were integrated into permanent governance structures or aligned with emerging regulatory requirements.

Beneficiary survey responses reveal a high share of confirmative replies to positive effects on local and regional policy-making in the project partner region. For example 85% of the responses (n=128) confirm that "*the 2014-2020 project fed into the development of new tools, guidelines etc. in our area/region*", at least partially. 70% of respondents indicate, at least partially, that they "*used the 2014-2020 outputs and results in another (yet related) thematic field*". 79% of respondents confirm, at least partially, that "*the 2014-2020 project outputs and results influenced positively local/regional policy making in our area*".

In several fields, specific tools developed in the previous period are currently operational or serve as the direct technical foundation for new projects. Several current projects used successful technical outputs from the 2014-2020 period as direct launchpads.

Evidence shows concrete examples illustrated by the survey findings and qualitative patterns on use of 2014-2020 project results in 2021-2027 projects:

- The foundational senior-focused designs from BaltSe@nioR & BaltSe@nioR 2.0 now serve as active reference points for next-generation initiatives like the SmartAging and KidsLikeUs projects.

- UrbCulturalPlanning with its participatory methodology served as a key reference for the 2021-2027 project BSR Cultural Pearls and the Liveability project.
- The AdvIQwater project builds on the technological and methodological framework established by CWPharma.
- APRIORA takes CWPharma's raw monitoring results and translates them into a highly practical GIS-based decision-support system.
- EMPEREST takes the AWT technologies piloted in CWPharma and scales them up, addressing the new, strict regulatory challenges of PFAS in alignment with the revised Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive.
- Current projects like Baltic Sea e-Nav and MaDaMe share the underlying logic of digitalisation and data-driven decision-making from ECOPRODIGI.
- StartSun and Enercracy explicitly carry forward the RENCOP model (originally established by Co2mmunity and Energize Co2mmunity) to continue engaging citizens in local energy communities.
- HUPMOBILE continued the urban mobility planning work started under SUMBA, ensuring the longevity of those planning results.

9 The 2021-2027 Programme new features – Small projects

This section presents the analysis of the role and performance of small projects in the IBSR Programme 2021-2027.

This chapter refers to the following evaluation question:

EQ 3.1 What is the performance of small projects compared to core projects (e.g. in which topics do small projects work well, and are there topics where they do not? What is distinctive about small projects' achievements/results compared to core projects' achievements/results?) How did small projects attract different types of organisations and newcomers compared to core projects?

The analysis was conducted in March 2026 based on information from the first two small project calls, analysis of small projects, interviews with Programme bodies and the beneficiary survey. As the third call was still in the decision-making process, the 28 small projects[28] approved under it are not reflected in this analysis.

9.1 Context



Small projects were introduced in the current programming period to complement the traditional core project format. They were designed to be a more flexible and accessible cooperation instrument with smaller budgets, shorter implementation periods, and a focus on practical outputs. They were expected to enable experimentation, support the development of practical solutions and encourage the participation of smaller organisations and newcomers in transnational cooperation.

The Programme manual defines small projects as instruments for developing practical and durable outputs and solutions, which align with Programme objectives. Operationally, small projects differ from core projects mainly through their shorter duration (up to 24 months), smaller budget (up to EUR 500,000) and simplified administration. They are intended to lower the barriers to entry for transnational cooperation and reduce financial and administrative risks, particularly for smaller public authorities, NGOs, and associations. Interviews indicate that small projects are often more focused, less complex, and less frequently embedded in broader strategic agendas than core projects.

9.2 Analysis

As of February 2026, there were 30 small projects in the IBSR 2021-2027 Programme, covering 17 finalised projects from Call 1 and 13 from Call 2. In March 2026, a further 28 projects were selected for funding.

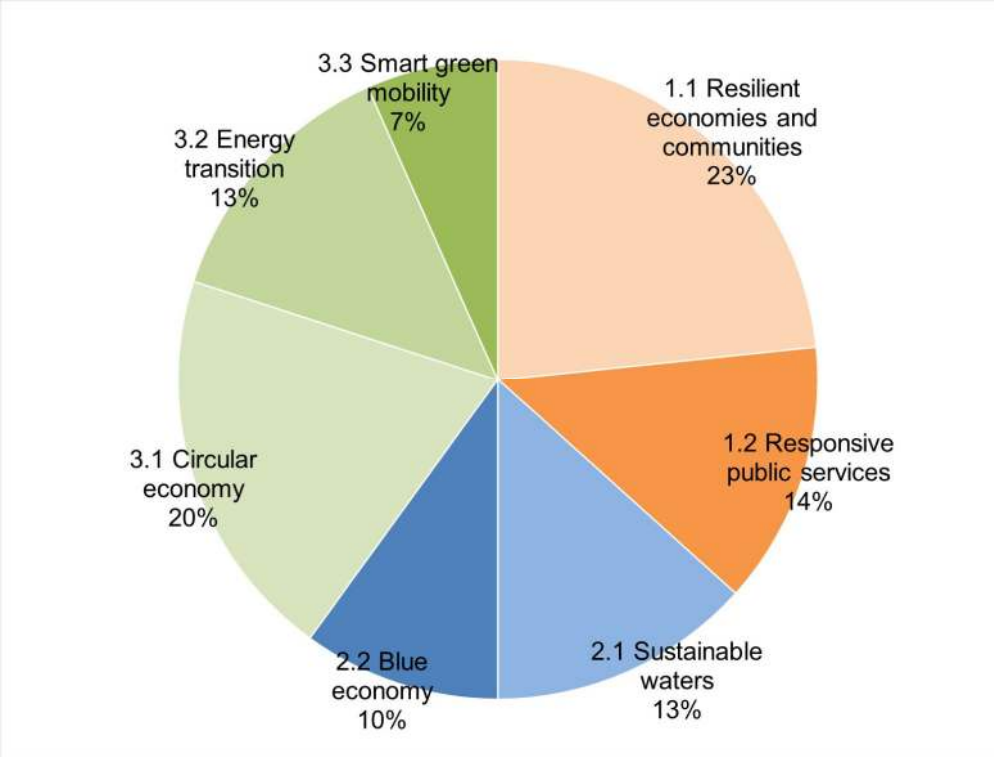
Overall, 183 applications (100 alone for the last Call) were received under the IBSR 2021-2027 Calls for small projects, indicating a high level of interest in small projects among potential beneficiaries.

[28] See https://interreg-baltic.eu/top-news/boarding-complete-last-projects-selected-for-funding/

By February 2026, the first 17 small projects had been finalised. With total co-financing of EUR 6.4 million from the European Regional Development Fund, the projects brought together 113 partners from all nine Programme area countries.

Thematically, small projects cover all Programme objectives.

Figure 9-1 Small Projects in IBSR 2021-2027 per PO



Source: own elaboration based on project database Feb. 2026

PO 1.1 (Resilient economies and communities) and 3.1 (Circular economy) stand out, accounting for 23% and 20% of all small projects, respectively. PO 3.3 (Smart Green Mobility) has the lowest number of small projects (7%). Small projects are not evenly spread across the Programme objectives, in terms of both funded projects and the total number of applications (i.e. funded projects plus rejected and inadmissible applications). Nevertheless, the small projects that have received funding demonstrate that this type of project activity can be meaningful under all Programme objectives.

Some patterns emerge concerning the country of origin of the lead partners of small projects. The most finalised and contracted small projects have their lead partners in Germany (7), Finland (6) and Poland (5). The fewest lead partners are found in Denmark and Norway (1 each). The most rejected and inadmissible small project applications were from lead partners in Poland (19 failed and 5 successful), followed by Latvia (8 failed and 4 successful) and Lithuania (7 failed and 1 successful). The countries with the best success rates, i.e. the best ratios of successful to failed

applications, are Norway (0 failed and 1 successful)[29], Germany (3 failed and 7 successful) and Finland (5 failed and 6 successful).

Analysis of outputs and solutions from small projects suggests an emerging typology, which is not so different compared to the solutions produced by core projects:

- **Toolkits guidelines and playbooks** that provide step-by-step support for practitioners. Examples include the Sustainable Public Meal Toolkit+ (StratKIT+), procurement guidance (ChemClimCircle) and the bio-industrial symbiosis toolkit (Blue-Green Bio Lab). These are all designed for direct use in administrative and operational contexts.
- **Roadmaps and strategic frameworks**, such as the Baltic Biogas Business Roadmap (BEST ACE) and the Joint Action Plan for boating tourism (BaltSusBoating 2030), which aim to align stakeholders and reduce uncertainty in emerging sectors.
- **Digital tools and data platforms**, including matchmaking databases and mobile applications, which enable new forms of access, coordination and service delivery. Examples include the iBEC tool (integrated biological effects assessment tool) (BEACON), mobile application to support refugee labour market integration etc. (ProsperBSR), and a database of companies and residue glass fibre waste types (GlassCircle).
- **Cooperation models and governance frameworks**, for example, those relating to lake protection or refugee labour market integration, seek to institutionalise cross-sectoral and transnational collaboration, e.g. a model for transnational cooperation for local authorities (Lakes connect),
- **Pilot-tested methods and demonstrations** to validate approaches and support their transferability are used by many projects, e.g. BaMuR, StratKIT+, BSR Food Coalition, AdvIQwater, TRUST ALUM and URBAN TESTBEDS.JR.

Taken together, these outputs and solutions can be characterised as 'soft but operational'. While they do not involve major investments, they are explicitly designed to influence real-world practices, decision-making processes, and governance arrangements.

Prosper BSR addressed refugee labour market integration. Rather than focusing on a single output, the project combined several interlinked components: training Programmes for BSOs; the creation of transnational support networks; and the development of a mobile application to facilitate matching and communication. This combination reflects the understanding that integration challenges are systemic and require coordinated responses across institutional levels. The outcome is not merely a set of tools, but an evolving support ecosystem that can be adapted and expanded in various national contexts. The project shows how small projects can act as laboratories for integrating digital innovation, capacity building, and governance change.

StratKIT+ illustrates of how a structured toolkit can evolve into an operational instrument embedded in public service provision. Building on earlier work (Interreg-BSR project StratKIT (2019-2021) and the StratKIT Platform), the project expanded the Sustainable Public Meal Toolkit+[30] to create a

[29] The interviews refer to a limited mobilisation in Norway due to budget constraints.

[30] https://www.sustainable-public-meal.eu/en/

comprehensive set of tools covering procurement, menu planning, logistics, and crisis response. These tools were not developed in isolation; they were tested through more than twenty pilot activities in different countries, enabling partners to adapt them to various administrative systems and cultural contexts. Consequently, the toolkit transitioned from guidance to practice, with municipalities and catering providers integrating its elements into their procurement processes and daily operations. Importantly, the project also addressed resilience, for instance by developing solutions for maintaining meal provision during crises. This links sustainability objectives with service continuity.

AdvIQwater provides a clear example of how scientific and technical knowledge can be translated into operational solutions. The project focused on advanced wastewater treatment methods to address emerging pollutants, such as pharmaceuticals and heavy metals. Through transnational cooperation, different treatment technologies were tested, combined and evaluated under real-world conditions. The results were consolidated into practical guidelines that utilities and authorities can apply directly. Importantly, the project has already prompted water utilities to plan for full-scale implementation, demonstrating a relatively direct pathway from research and experimentation to infrastructure-related decision-making. This example highlights the role of small projects in bridging the gap between innovation and application, particularly in technically complex fields.

BaMuR brought together five partners, including three museums, from Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden to explore innovative ways for cultural and heritage institutions, offering visitors more opportunities to engage actively. The project developed a toolbox for Resilient Museums, Heritage and Cultural Institutions offering practical examples and guidance on strengthening institutional resilience through governance, digital sustainability, and economic sustainability. To test some of the key solutions that have been identified and suggested for improving the resilience of museums in the Baltic Sea area, three pilots were implemented in three museums participating in the project, Estonian War Museum, Museum of Västervik and Forum Marinum. Due to the limited scope of the current project, the pilots assessed and tested a limited sample of solutions. The emphasis has nevertheless been on solutions addressing some of the main issues identified during the previous phases of the project. In the report, the work done with all the three pilots, the results achieved, and their progress through the peer review process is jointly discussed and evaluated.

Small vs. core projects

As of late February 2026, the thematic focus of small and core projects is broadly similar. For objective 3.1 (Circular Economy), the proportion of small projects is slightly higher (32%). The same applies to objectives 2.2 (Blue Economy) and 3.3 (Smart Green Mobility), with 30% and 29% of projects being small projects, respectively. For objective 3.2, 'Energy Transition', the proportion of small projects is the lowest (25%).

Higher education and research institutions, as well as regional public authorities, are, in absolute terms, often lead partners of small projects. When looking at small versus core projects by type of lead partner, NGOs, sector agencies and intergovernmental organisations show above-average representation as lead partners in small projects, although the total number is still minor.

The distribution of lead partners for small projects is imbalanced across countries. In Norway, Poland, Latvia and Estonia, the proportion of lead partners for small projects compared to core projects is above average. Conversely, in Denmark, Lithuania and Germany, the proportion of lead partners on small projects is below average.

With regard to partnership dynamics, the picture is mixed. Small projects do not appear to have a fundamentally different profile of participating organisations. The proportion of organisations without previous Interreg Baltic Sea Region experience is similar in small and core projects. Conversely, small projects seem to attract a relatively high proportion of experienced lead partners, suggesting that the format is used not only by newcomers, but also by established organisations that value the opportunity to trial ideas in a smaller, more focused environment. So, while small projects may lower entry barriers to some extent, they do not automatically shift participation towards small or civic actors. Indeed, the analysis of rejected and inadmissible applications shows, NGOs and local public authorities continue to experience relatively high rates of application failure and are less likely to lead approved projects.

Performance of small projects

At this point in time, the performances of small projects and core projects cannot be compared, given that small projects, due to their shorter duration are logically more advanced than core projects.

Comparing the target values of indicators (considering that small projects do not have the obligation to use all indicators, but can concentrate on some of them), one small project produces on average 0.5 jointly developed solutions, while a core project produces 1.7. One small project would have on average a result of 0.5 solutions taken up or upscaled, while a core project would have 1.7. Even for the indicators that also small projects have to use, the planned performance is much higher for core projects, which is of course logical given that small projects are shorter and smaller in size. Where one small project involves on average 12.9 organisations cooperating across borders, a core project plans to involve 26.2. One small project aims on average to increase capacities in 37.1 organisations, while core projects would do so in 74.6 organisations.

Small projects have shorter lifespans and many of them are already completed or advanced in their implementation and often focus on outputs that can be delivered relatively quickly. In February 2026, small projects had already reached between 68% and 119% of their target values across the five considered indicators, whereas core projects had only reached between 0% and 2%[31]. This is particularly evident for jointly developed solutions, pilot actions, and upscaled solutions, where small projects have already reached or exceeded their targets.

Comparing the performance of small and core projects requires some caution, as the two types of projects normally differ in size, scope or depth. As the analysis has shown, small projects tend to be more focused, shorter in duration, and somehow more experimental in character. In contrast, core projects are designed to address broader systemic challenges through larger partnerships, longer implementation periods, and more comprehensive intervention logics. Therefore, performance cannot

[31] This comparison of indicator achievement is of course not meaningful, as it contrasts projects at very different stages of implementation. Many small projects have already been completed, while none of the core projects have been finalised yet. A comparison based on indicator achievement is therefore not possible at this stage.

be judged only by the volume of outputs or current indicator delivery; it must also take into account the different functions of both formats within the Programme architecture.

Small projects appear to play to their strength when generating very specific practical, operational and transferable outputs. Across the portfolio, they predominantly produce toolkits, manuals, playbooks, roadmaps, training formats, cooperation models and pilot-tested approaches. These outputs are often designed for immediate use by municipalities, public authorities, NGOs, SMEs and intermediary organisations. In this sense, small projects seem especially effective in settings where large-scale investment or institutional transformation is not the main need, but rather the development of usable methods, better coordination, increased institutional capacity, and testing new approaches under real-world conditions. While their results are often 'soft', they are operationally relevant and are already being adopted by project partners and associated organisations in many cases. Despite being smaller or shorter, small projects can even have wide policy impacts.

Policy impact of BEACON[32]

In the project BEACON, public authorities and governmental organisations develop harmonised methods to assess contamination in the Baltic Sea waters, sediment and biota. The project concluded in 2024. It contributed together with other projects to the work of the HELCOM sub-team of the regional Expert Group on hazardous substances focusing on biological effects who looked for effect-based methods in the integrated chemical-biological monitoring and assessment frameworks for the Baltic Sea region. The result was the development of a regional platform, using support from several joint projects, namely “Application of biological effects methods in monitoring and assessment of contaminants in the Baltic Sea” (BEACON) (INTERREG BSR), “New approaches in determining the impacts of chemical pollution to protect the biodiversity of the Baltic Sea” (Detect2Protect) (BIODIVERSA+), and “HELCOM Biological Effects of Contaminants” (H-BEC) (NEFCO Baltic Sea Action Plan Fund). Moreover, to complement this thematic project cluster, a new Study Group named SGEFF was established with the target of harmonising and updating guidelines, jointly in the HELCOM and OSPAR regional sea areas. The scene thus has been set for recommendations on harmonised procedures to be implemented at municipal, national or regional levels with the aim of establishing foundations for a long-term practical approach to addressing pollution in the Baltic Sea ecosystem.

Core projects, by contrast, appear better suited to addressing broader, more ambitious structural agendas. Their intervention logic is generally more comprehensive, their partnerships are larger and their target values per project are substantially higher across all output and result indicators. This suggests that core projects remain the Programme’s main instruments for systemic change, large-scale policy development, and complex transnational interventions. However, current achievement rates mainly reflect differences in maturity and implementation tempo rather than actual comparative impact.

Small Projects attracting specific organisations and newcomers

Small projects involve a total of 180 beneficiaries and show a relatively diverse participation structure, although higher education and research institutions account for one-third of all participations (60).

[32] Based on https://interreg-baltic.eu/project-posts/beacon/beacon-as-part-of-the-baltic-sea-biological-effects-cluster-activities/

Looking at the lead partners 14 out of the 30 involved in small projects are returning beneficiaries from the 2014-2020 programming period, while 16 of 30 are newcomers.

Participation is particularly concentrated in Latvia (34), Sweden (33), Poland (27) and Finland (24). Local and regional public authorities combined also represent a significant share of beneficiaries (38 participations), highlighting the continued importance of territorial governance actors in smaller-scale projects. At the same time, other organisation types are also well represented, notably NGOs (22 participations), BSOs (15), SMEs (14) and sectoral agencies (11), indicating that small projects also attract civil society, business-oriented and specialised technical actors. This suggests that small projects may provide more accessible entry points for a broader range of organisations, beyond the traditional core beneficiaries of the Programme.

With regard to **newcomers in small projects**, the 180 registered beneficiaries, after being cleaned from duplicates, correspond to 174 unique beneficiaries. Among these 174 unique beneficiaries, 117 are identified as newcomers (67%). This share is broadly comparable to the overall Programme average (66%), suggesting that the main added value of small projects lies less in increasing the overall share of newcomers than in influencing the profile of organisations attracted. Important differences nevertheless emerge across Programme objectives in terms of the profile of newcomers attracted.

Table 9-1 Distribution of newcomers by organisation type across POs in small projects (%)

Organisation type	PO 1.1	PO 1.2	PO 2.1	PO 2.2	PO 3.1	PO 3.2	PO 3.3	Total (all POs)
BSOs	19%				4%	7%		6%
Education/training centre and school					4%			1%
EEIG								
EGTC					4%			1%
Higher education and research institution	27%	35%	36%	46%	32%	7%	18%	29%
Hospital and medical centre		6%						1%
Infrastructure and public service provider					4%	7%		2%
Interest group				8%		7%		1%
International governmental organisation						7%		1%
Large enterprise					4%			1%
Local and Regional public authorities	15%	35%	9%	8%	24%	21%	27%	21%
National public authority	8%	12%	18%				9%	6%
NGO	15%		18%	15%	16%	7%	27%	14%
Sectoral agency	8%	6%		23%		14%		7%
SME	8%	6%	18%		12%	14%	18%	10%

Source: own elaboration based on Interreg BSR beneficiary database 2021-2027.

PO 1.1 shows a highly diversified newcomer profile. Higher education and research institutions represent the largest group (27%), followed by BSOs (19%), while local and regional public authorities and NGOs each account for 15% of newcomers. This suggests that small projects under this objective

were attractive to a relatively broad range of innovation, public and civil society actors. PO 1.2 appears particularly attractive for territorial governance actors, with higher education and research institutions and local and regional public authorities each accounting for 35% of newcomers. This indicates a strong involvement of both research-oriented and public governance stakeholders.

PO 2.1 records the lowest share of newcomers overall (46%), suggesting that this objective may be less accessible to first-time participants. The newcomer profile remains relatively fragmented, with higher education and research institutions accounting for 36%, while national public authorities, NGOs and SMEs each represent 18%. PO 2.2 is the most strongly dominated by higher education and research institutions, which account for 46% of newcomers, followed by sectoral agencies (23%). This points to a more specialised and less diversified newcomer profile compared to other objectives.

PO 3.1 stands out as the most balanced and diversified objective in terms of newcomer participation. Higher education and research institutions account for 32% of newcomers, followed by local and regional public authorities (24%), NGOs (16%) and SMEs (12%). This objective appears particularly successful in attracting a balanced mix of research, public, civil society and economic actors. PO 3.2 presents a more mixed profile. Local and regional public authorities account for 21% of newcomers, followed by sectoral agencies and SMEs (14% each). While the overall number of newcomers remains moderate, the distribution suggests some openness to different stakeholder profiles. Finally, PO 3.3, although based on a limited number of beneficiaries, shows the highest relative concentration of local and regional public authorities and NGOs, each representing 27% of newcomers. This suggests that, within small projects, this objective may have been particularly effective in attracting territorial public actors and civil society organisations.

Overall, while the share of newcomers in small projects remains broadly comparable to the Programme average, the analysis suggests that certain Programme objectives, especially PO 1.2, 3.1 and PO 3.3, were more effective than others in attracting local and regional public authorities and civil society organisations.

Survey results suggest that small projects are primarily perceived as an accessible entry point into Interreg cooperation, particularly for smaller or less experienced organisations. Among the 69 respondents participating in small projects, 26 indicated that they had not participated in the 2014-2020 Interreg Programme, while 28 reported previous participation. The proportion of respondents without previous Interreg Baltic Sea Region experience is similar for both small and core projects (32% and 34%, respectively). However, there are differences among those with previous experience. The proportion of respondents who have been lead partners in the past is higher for those currently engaged in small projects (25%) than for those in core projects (16%). This suggests that small projects are also an interesting option for experienced lead partners to try something new.

Respondents highlighted several **complementary motivations** for participating in small projects. One of the most frequent motivations was the intention to use small projects as a preparatory step towards a future Core Project. Several respondents also highlighted the opportunity to test more experimental approaches with other organisations, as well as the possibility to implement practical solutions already developed in previous programming periods in new local contexts.

Another important motivation relates to accessibility and capacity building. A significant number of respondents indicated that small projects represented a first opportunity to participate in an Interreg project and to learn how the Programme works. Respondents also frequently mentioned their interest in smaller-scale participation, shorter project duration and quicker results, suggesting that the lighter and more flexible format of small projects was perceived as attractive. Several respondents emphasised the practical and transfer-oriented dimension of small projects. Examples included adapting tools developed in previous Core Projects to local contexts, transferring methodologies to new target groups, and disseminating project results more broadly.

The responses also highlight the role of small projects in facilitating participation from less experienced or smaller actors. Some beneficiaries indicated that the format was particularly suitable for organisations or local stakeholders with limited experience in Interreg projects, especially small towns or rural actors that might hesitate to participate directly in larger Core Projects. The lighter and more accessible format of small projects was therefore perceived as a way to reduce barriers to participation and build confidence in transnational cooperation.

The analysis shows (see also Chapter11) that it is especially the combination with the use of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs), that contributed to lower barriers to entry Interreg, particularly for smaller public authorities, NGOs, and associations. Increased newcomer participation compared to the previous programming period is clearly supported by SCOs and simplified reporting. Survey results confirm that SCOs significantly reduced administrative burden by eliminating the need to verify and justify individual expenditure items. In addition, beneficiary responses show that the perception that there are fewer administrative capacity requirements because of the simplified procedures, facilitates access for newcomers.

However, survey responses also suggest that this perceived accessibility is partly constrained by administrative challenges. In the survey to beneficiaries, five out of 29 responses to the open text section on possible improvements to small projects mentioned that the administrative workload is perceived as disproportionate to their scale, despite being simplified by SCOs and easier reporting. Some few respondents highlighted the obligations for Lead Partners in relation to reporting, the need to provide numerous detailed clarifications, and the significant responsibilities placed on them. These requirements were described as particularly challenging for smaller organisations, such as NGOs or newcomers, which often lack dedicated administrative capacity.

Based on the overall set of responses, most responses perceive small projects as an entry point into Interreg cooperation and as a flexible instrument for experimentation, networking and preparation for larger cooperation initiatives.

The survey results indicate a generally strong willingness among small project participants to continue participating in future Interreg BSR projects. A majority of respondents (47 out of 69) expressed interest in applying for a future Core Project. Among them, 27 respondents indicated that Core Projects already fit their organisation better than small projects, while 20 respondents stated that the experience gained through a small project made them feel ready to participate in a larger project. At the same time, 17 respondents declared that they would likely apply again for a Small Project, considering this format better adapted to their organisational capacities and easier to manage. Only 5 respondents indicated

that future participation was not very likely. The survey results suggest that small projects are mainly perceived as instruments for strengthening cooperation dynamics within the Baltic Sea Region. Respondents frequently associated their projects with building trust that could lead to further cooperation initiatives and with initiating and maintaining networks that are important for the Interreg BSR. These two dimensions appear consistently among the most valued contributions of small projects. Bringing the Programme closer to citizens is also regularly highlighted as an important contribution, although generally to a lesser extent. In contrast, allowing a swift response to unpredictable and urgent challenges appears less central in respondents' perceptions of the role played by small projects. Overall, the results indicate that small projects are primarily valued for their capacity to support networking, trust-building and the consolidation of long-term cooperation structures across the Baltic Sea Region.



MC members generally expressed a positive perception of small projects, particularly regarding their role in attracting newcomers and widening participation in the Programme. Lithuanian, Latvian, Danish and German MC members highlighted that small projects provide an entry point into transnational cooperation for smaller municipalities, local public authorities, NGOs and organisations with limited Interreg experience. Danish and Latvian respondents notably stressed their usefulness for developing partnerships, networking and preparing future core projects.

Several MC members also distinguished small projects from core projects in terms of expected results and scale of impact. Danish and German members considered that core projects are more suitable for achieving substantial thematic or policy-related results, while small projects mainly support experimentation, networking and entry into the Programme. Finnish MC members similarly questioned the long-term impact of small projects due to their limited duration and budget. Some limitations were nevertheless identified. Norwegian and Polish MC members stressed that small projects are not always perceived as truly "small", as co-financing requirements and administrative obligations may still represent barriers for smaller organisations and civic actors. Norwegian members specifically highlighted the 50% national co-financing requirement as a factor limiting participation of Norwegian partners. Country differences also emerged regarding uptake. Finnish MC members reported strong demand and a high share of newcomers in small projects, while Lithuania raised concerns regarding the limited possibility for newcomers to transition towards core projects once funding is already committed.

Regarding newcomers, MC members generally considered the Programme attractive, particularly through small projects, networking opportunities and thematic relevance. Latvian and Finnish respondents specifically highlighted the positive role of small projects in lowering entry barriers and attracting new organisations. However, several barriers were repeatedly identified across countries, including co-financing requirements, administrative complexity, pre-financing obligations and difficulties in finding suitable partners. Norwegian and Danish respondents particularly stressed financial constraints, while German respondents highlighted the need for intensive guidance for newcomers and the complexity of procedures. Country-specific differences also emerged. Finland considered the Programme attractive due to its thematic focus, cooperation substance and co-financing rate, while Estonia highlighted the increasing geographical coverage and growing participation of new organisations. In Germany, the establishment of an NCP was perceived as improving accessibility for newcomers.

9.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the evaluation questions:

EQ 3.1 What is the performance of small projects compared to core projects (e.g. in which topics do small projects work well, and are there topics where they do not? What is distinctive about small projects' achievements/results compared to core projects' achievements/results?) How did small projects attract different types of organisations and newcomers compared to core projects?

Small projects cover all Programme objectives. From the perspective of the number of projects per PO, small projects work well in all topics. However, there are more under POs 1.1 and 3.1, with less small projects under POs 2.2 and 3.3. Analysis of outputs and solutions from small projects follows a typology, which is not so different compared to the solutions produced by core projects. Comparing the performance of small and core projects requires some caution, as the two types of projects normally differ in size, scope or depth. Small projects have shorter lifespans and many of them are already completed or advanced in their implementation and often focus on outputs that can be delivered relatively quickly.

Small projects have the capacity to deliver tangible and practical outputs corresponding to their budget and duration. The projects frequently generate toolkits, guidelines, roadmaps, training materials and other operational outputs that support stakeholders in implementing new practices. Performance of small projects is satisfying. In February 2026, small projects of the first two calls had already reached between 68% and 119% of their target values across the five considered indicators.

Comparison with core projects in terms of achievements is difficult, as many core projects are still under implementation with 17 small projects already finalised. Also, the type of project is too different for a simple comparison. For the indicators that also small projects have to use, the planned performance is much higher for core projects, which is of course logical given that small projects are shorter and smaller in size. Where one small project involves on average 12.9 organisations cooperating across borders, a core project plans to involve on average 26.2. One small project aims on average to increase capacities in 37.1 organisations, while core projects would do so in 74.6 organisations.

Regarding partner organisations, small projects provide a somewhat more accessible entry point for organisations that are new to the Programme, including organisations such as NGOs, interest groups and local public authorities. The evidence does not indicate a clear shift in participation towards significantly smaller actors such as NGOs or civil society organisations. At the same time, there was a strong interest from these types of organisations (NGOs and local public authorities) in small projects. The analysis suggests that certain Programme objectives, especially PO 1.2, 3.1 and 3.3, were more effective than others in attracting local and regional public authorities and civil society organisations. However, as can be seen by the high rate of failed applications, these organisations face challenges presenting successful applications. Overall, small projects broaden participation to some extent but remain strongly used by organisations that already have experience with transnational cooperation.

One of the advantages of small projects is their simplified administrative framework compared to core projects. While the smaller scale and shorter duration, in addition to the use of simplified cost options (SCOs) for all cost categories, can indeed reduce complexity, interview and survey results indicate that Interreg administrative and financial requirements still present barriers for potential participants (i.e. general administrative requirements, not specific to IBSR).

Small projects are diverse in terms of their achievements and beneficiaries apply for them for a variety of reasons. This diversity is seen as a strength in line with the programme's flexibility. As small projects receive sufficient applications and achieve their targets, this diversity is a useful complement to the core projects. Core projects remain better suited to broader systemic agendas, stronger policy leverage and longer-term interventions. The two instruments therefore appear less as substitutes and more as complementary formats.

10 The 2021-2027 Programme new features – Focus on pilots and on testing of solutions

This section examines the effectiveness of the Programme's 2021-2027 focus on developing and testing tangible solutions through practical pilots.

The chapter refers to the following evaluation questions:

EQ 3.2 Does the focus on pilots and on testing of solutions lead to more tangible results compared to 2014-2020 projects? Are the solutions tested and adjusted through pilots better usable for the addressed target groups, compared to the majority of outputs developed by 2014-2020 projects? In which way are pilots crucial for increasing the capacities of the target groups?
EQ 3.3 Which were the most effective mechanisms and practices of transfer and uptake of solutions? Did they differ depending on the target groups or thematic objective?

A thematic case study was conducted to examine this focus in IBSR projects. This covered qualitative project analysis and analysis of responses from the beneficiary survey. Given the mandatory intervention logic for core projects, the study focuses particularly on this type of projects. However, contributions from small projects were also included in the qualitative analysis and survey, as they partially applied the approach of pilots and solutions.

10.1 Context

In 2021-2027, the Programme frames core projects around a sequence of preparing solutions, piloting and evaluating them, and then transferring them. Small projects are encouraged to develop practical and durable outputs and solutions for identified challenges in the region. However, unlike core projects, developing a full solution is not strictly obligatory. At the same time, testing and running pilots is not mandatory for small projects. However, partners are fully permitted to conduct pilot activities, such as testing small-scale practical solutions, local management schemes, or public involvement measures. Unlike standard core projects, small projects have a simplified setup. They implement only one Work Package (WP) for their main implementation phase. However, evidence shows that also numerous small projects actively work/have worked on solutions and even on pilot actions and testing activities. Because solutions and pilots are optional options for small projects, and projects are still being implemented, it is difficult to present concrete figures on solutions and pilots implemented by small projects.

There is a rich diversity of solutions and pilots, many projects use specific methods for the evaluation and transfer of pilots. Solutions are understood as tangible and durable outputs addressing a clearly identified challenge of specific target groups. The are the main result developed by a project to address a shared transnational challenge. It is intended to be transferable and usable by organisations beyond the project partnership. Solutions can include:

- methodologies and guidelines;
- governance and cooperation models;
- policy recommendations;

- digital tools and platforms;
- technical systems or prototypes;
- educational/training Programmes;
- business support models;
- decision-support tools;
- harmonised standards and procedures.

Projects[33] not only develop solutions but also test, validate, improve and prepare them for wider uptake by target organisations. Pilots test and validate solutions under real-life conditions to improve and optimise them before final transfer and dissemination. Pilots may involve one or several organisations acting as test sites. Pilots are used to:

- verify whether a solution works in practice;
- identify necessary adaptations;
- collect evidence of effectiveness;
- demonstrate feasibility to future users;
- support transfer and mainstreaming.

The built-in production of solutions and pilots for all core projects ensures that the Programme produces a high number of solutions (at least one per project) which have been tested under real-life conditions. Pilots are not separate ends in themselves, but the testing phase of a solution under practical conditions, with feedback used for adjustment before transfer and wider use.

According to the Programme requirements, the three work packages of core projects need to be aligned with the focus on solutions and pilots. Certain requirements are linked to the different work packages and phases of projects.

WP1 Preparing solutions: *The aim of this work package is to develop solutions addressing the challenges that the* ***target groups*** *face. […]*

WP2 Piloting and evaluating solutions: *The aim of this work package is to pilot, evaluate and adjust solutions. Applicants should plan one or several pilots to validate the usefulness of the solutions prepared in work package 1. […] By the end of this work package implementation of the solutions should be ready to be transferred to the target groups in work package 3.*

WP3 Transferring solutions: *Work package 3 should communicate and transfer the ready solutions to the target groups not only inside the project partnership, but also to other organisations that were so far not connected closely to the project. Applicants should plan at least one year to transfer the solutions to target groups. […] Applicants should describe the activities which keep the solutions functional after the*

[33] This is true for core projects but also for many small projects. As mentioned, the development of solutions is not obligatory in small projects. However, partners in small projects can pilot, for example, practical solutions or measures in a particular field or actions for citizens involvement. In fact, many approved IBSR small projects develop or have already developed solutions (piloted outputs).

end of the project and plan necessary human and financial resources for that process. These activities will be carried out in the post project phase.[34]

This approach differs from 2014–2020 mainly in the way project results are structured. Earlier projects followed more their individual project intervention logic and were described through specific outputs and results. In 2021–2027 these elements are bundled more explicitly into a solution that is to be tested and then transferred. The rationale for this design is closely linked to the Programme's intervention logic. The focus is on results that are visible, usable and transferable, and on strengthening the capacity of target groups through active involvement in developing, testing and taking up solutions. This reflects a shift towards tangible and durable outputs, with solutions, pilot activities, transfer and uptake forming key elements of the Programme's theory of change.

The Programme logic also requires projects to identify target-group needs before applying, rather than using the first project phase mainly for analysis of specific needs. Transfer is built in as an obligatory component from the start, with the expectation that the solution is ready early enough for transfer activities to begin well before project closure. This requires applicants to think on the specific needs and challenges of their target groups from the start. The pilots should be transnationally connected and involving the target group in each case. The transfer of tested solutions should be detailed and specific than a general dissemination at the end of a project. This shift in the logic of project activities is rather fundamental.

10.2 Analysis

In a thematic case study for this evaluation, the focus on solutions and tested pilots has been examined to identify relevant examples of solutions, pilots and methodologies for testing and transferring them to target groups. The analysis was based on two complementary approaches. First, beneficiary perception was analysed in a survey of beneficiaries. Second, the content of a sample of projects (mostly core projects, but also some small projects that produced tested solutions) was analysed more in detail, with equal coverage of all Programme objectives under Priorities 1 to 3.

Beneficiaries' perception and understanding of solutions and pilots

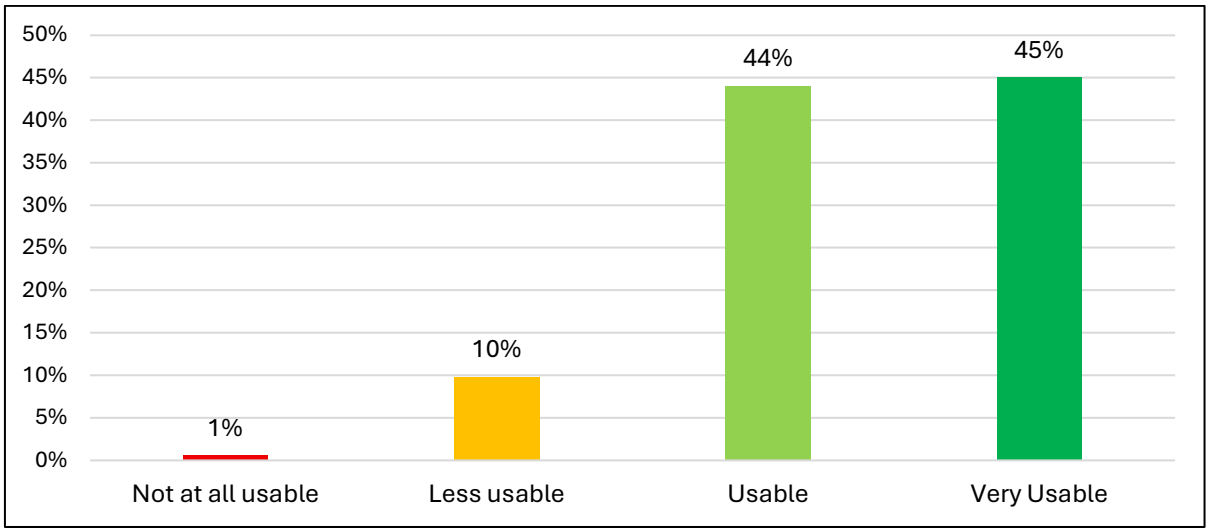
The shift in the Interreg Baltic Sea Region 2021–2027 Programme towards a focus on solutions and pilots is generally perceived as leading to tangible and usable results. Approximately 89% of beneficiaries who responded to this question (n=317) believe that pilots produce solutions that are usable for target groups, with 45% finding them "very usable".

Beneficiaries report that pilots are essential because they allow target groups to experience a solution in practice rather than just reading about it. This makes the results more credible and easier to adopt. Pilots are seen as a mechanism for capacity building by converting conceptual innovation or concepts into observable practice. The beneficiary survey also allows detecting if the new focus of the Programme contributes to more tangible results than in previous programming periods. The basic concepts of "solution" and "pilot" and the testing logic are well understood by beneficiaries. 83% of respondents

[34] Programme Manual (version 8.0 as of June 2024 – online version), D.1.2 – Core Project Factsheet

(n=323) find it is easy to work with the “solution-pilot logic”. This indicates that there is a good understanding of the logic.

Figure 10-1 In how far are pilots producing target-group-usable solutions?



Source: own elaboration based on beneficiary survey for this evaluation (n=317)

The majority of project partners easily manages to engage target groups. Most survey respondents find it easy to involve target groups in preparing (58%) and testing solutions (55%). However, 45% of respondents find it difficult to involve them in testing solutions in pilots. This indicates that work with target groups is one of the aspects that might hamper effective project implementation in some projects.

Most of the survey respondents find it easy (rather or very) to plan or implement pilots. However, challenges remain for many projects. While the identification of pilot sites and the technical and infrastructure implications are less challenging, legal/regulatory aspects and raising co-funding is rather difficult for more than half of the respondents.

Open responses by the beneficiaries to the survey reveal further insights into how they perceive the focus on pilots and solutions. A recurring theme is that pilots allow target groups to "see, feel, and smell" solutions rather than just reading about them on paper. Pilots test theoretical assumptions in real situations, identifying technical constraints and environmental factors that are invisible during the planning phase. Many contributors emphasise that pilots are valuable even when they fail or contradict initial assumptions. Testing in real institutional or urban settings allows for the elimination of "bugs" and the adjustment of user-experience barriers, such as friction caused by mandatory app registrations. Pilots serve as a powerful communication tool to build trust and demonstrate feasibility to sceptics. For innovative topics like drone usage or aquaculture, "demo" plants and trials are necessary to explain complex concepts and gain stakeholder buy-in. Pilots are viewed as a blueprint for future sites, helping to minimise financial risk for organisations exploring innovation. In some cases, they are seen as a prerequisite for large investments. High relevance is placed on active involvement of target groups from the start. This ensures solutions are tailored to the actual needs and capacities of the end-users, such as SMEs or local authorities. Despite their value, engaging target groups can be difficult if they are not financially compensated for their participation or if the project’s "Interreg wording" makes it difficult to fit with their daily reality.

Across MC members, there is a strong consensus that the increased emphasis on piloting, testing solutions and implementation is one of the defining and most positively perceived changes in the Interreg Baltic Sea Region 2021-2027 Programme. Interviewees generally agreed that the shift from knowledge exchange to more concrete, solution-oriented projects had strengthened the Programme's credibility, resulting in projects with more tangible and communicable outcomes. Several respondents noted that this creates a stronger proof-of-concept approach, facilitating capitalisation and attracting further national or local funding. Many interviewees emphasised the importance of pilot actions as a means of testing and validating solutions across countries prior to wider implementation. The mandatory pilot work package in core projects was widely appreciated. Some also observed improvements in institutional capacity and service quality resulting from practical testing and experimentation. Interreg was seen as providing organisations with a valuable "safe space" to innovate, experiment and learn, particularly for less experienced organisations.

At the same time, nearly all interviewees stressed that it is still too early to assess the full effects of this new approach. As most core projects are still under implementation, evidence on the quality of pilot activities, their results, and their long-term impact remains limited. While early impressions are positive, respondents repeatedly cautioned that a more robust assessment will only be possible once projects have been completed. Respondents also identified several conditions that need to be put in place to make the approach equally effective for all projects. Target groups need to be equally involved in all participating countries of a project. Scaling up successful pilots often depends on political commitment and access to larger funding sources beyond the Programme to ensure the update and transfer of solutions. Measuring longer-term outcomes, particularly capacity building, networking and the sustained use of knowledge after project completion, was also considered difficult. Some interviewees also suggested that MC members would benefit from more direct exposure to project implementation through project presentations and other opportunities to observe results first-hand, which of course is in their own hands.

Mechanisms and practices of transfer and uptake of solutions

The analysis of projects and the open responses in the beneficiary survey allow to draw conclusions on the most effective mechanisms and practices of transfer and uptake of solutions.

According to the beneficiary survey, the most effective mechanisms for involving target groups and ensuring the transfer of solutions include early co-creation, practical demonstrations through piloting, and the development of structured, accessible knowledge tools. The projects emphasise that involving target groups from the very beginning of a project is crucial for building ownership and ensuring solutions meet real needs. Engaging stakeholders in discussions, workshops, and living lab formats helps them understand the solutions and increases the likelihood of long-term adoption.

Projects often use participatory workshops and focus groups involving specific end-users like municipal staff, educators, or SMEs to ensure the results are grounded in their daily realities. One-to-one dialogues and "twinning" partners, where dedicated organisations meet regularly to discuss tool usefulness, have proven highly effective.

Demonstrating feasibility through action is frequently cited as the strongest "proof-of-concept" for potential replicators. Testing solutions in real institutions or business environments allows stakeholders to evaluate applicability within their own contexts. Physical demonstrations, study visits, and "storytelling events" allow target groups to see, feel, and experience the solution firsthand. Using full simulation tests or specialised testbeds (such as for maritime technologies or wastewater treatment) provides the technical data necessary for industrial-scale uptake.

To facilitate the "plug-and-play" adoption of solutions, projects must translate complex results into user-friendly formats. Developing step-by-step implementation guides, methodological manuals, and "roadmaps" makes it easier for practitioners to replicate results. Training and mentoring are key. Targeted training sessions, webinars, and "train-the-trainer" activities build local capacity. Direct mentoring and consulting are noted as particularly effective for ensuring stakeholders can apply the developed solutions. Digital learning tools and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are specifically highlighted as mechanisms to build local capacity. These tools enable entities outside of the original project, such as other municipalities, to understand and adopt tested solutions more easily.

Durability is achieved by integrating project results into existing structures and policies. Rather than just transferring a single tool, effective projects transfer an entire operational model and embed it into existing support ecosystems or innovation hubs. Cooperating across local, regional, and national governance levels helps integrate outcomes into broader development plans and strategies.

Working with multipliers in the different regions, i.e. BSOs, professional networks, and clusters, allows these entities to act as multipliers, embedding solutions into their regular service offerings.

The role of communication is critical. Using short videos, multilingual materials, and digital platforms helps tailor messages to different stakeholders and increases visibility. Videos of pilot activities have proven to be highly effective for "broadcasting" solutions, often gathering a large number of views and increasing general awareness of the project's results. While in-person events are valued, digital media and websites are often cited as working best when combined with public events and workshops to ensure information is widely available and easily digestible.

Public procurement serves as a "lever" for sustaining and scaling project solutions by embedding them into official strategic requirements. Procurement is used to steer environmental and social performance at a strategic level. By integrating project-derived criteria into tenders, public authorities can ensure that the standards developed during a pilot become the baseline for future contracts. Projects contribute to this process by providing the concrete guidance and specific criteria for product groups or services that public authorities need to "green" their procurement effectively.

While the mechanisms for the transfer and uptake of solutions were largely recurrent across the Programme, specific patterns and variations emerge depending on the type of project and the nature of target groups. This means that no strict pattern of mechanisms and practices per thematic objective could be observed but rather depending on the type of project. Thus, a distinction was observed based on the **type of intervention** being performed:

Governance and Social Projects (mostly under PO 1.1., 1.2, but also under 3.1, 3.2 and other POs): These tended to produce "softer" outputs, such as methodological frameworks, cooperation formats, charters, or training Programmes. Mechanisms for transfer were mostly linked to training Programmes, manuals and guidelines, and defined cooperation frameworks, supported by digital platforms in some cases. For example, "Liveability" (PO 1.2) used neighbourhood "testbeds" to turn an abstract design philosophy into observable practice for city administrations.

Technical and Environmental Projects (to be found mostly under PO 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 3.3 but also 3.1): These typically focused on pilots applying new technologies or experimental methods or implementation practices, such as testing specific physical technologies, tools, or infrastructures (e.g., wastewater treatment or biomass processing). In this case, the physical demonstrations, monitoring of results of experimental methods or processes, study visits and related communication are the most relevant mechanisms for transfer. Sometimes recommendations and lessons for public authorities, for example on how to create regulatory frameworks for new practices or steer via public procurement were also produced.

Complex Domains and new Value Chains (mostly to be found under PO 2.2, 3.2 and 3.3): In fields like maritime navigation, circular economy approaches, ports, or hydrogen value chains, the projects, solutions and pilots address combinations of target groups or rather “ecosystems” of target groups. Here, primary transfer mechanisms are cross-actor coordination, operational models, Decision Support Systems, cooperation protocols, and engagement workshops and dissemination via thematic networks or regional innovation/competence hubs. In these cases, the coordination among different actors itself is the "capacity" being built and transferred, as no single actor could achieve the result alone.

In general, the approach to transferring needs is tailored to the specific requirements of the target groups addressed.

- NGOs, local and regional public authorities, including municipalities. The most effective mechanism for this group is 'social proof', i.e. seeing a peer organisation (such as a 'follower' city) successfully implement a solution. Manuals, training programmes and presentations of toolbox solutions on dedicated platforms or portals are also widely used. Tools that reduce the 'entry cost' for planning, such as digital simulators, are also highly effective.
- SMEs and business organisations: For these groups, transfer mechanisms focused on digital platforms, manuals, technical validation and economic feasibility were used. Mechanisms such as 'plug-and-play' operational models were employed to facilitate adoption by businesses that lacked the resources for extensive R&D.
- Large infrastructure and service providers and larger enterprises: These target groups usually have a strategic interest in participating in projects, integrating project solutions into their internal R&D and innovation units. Solutions are often tested in regulatory sandboxes, testbeds, or on experimental sites in situ. Simulations can take place in parallel with digital tools and modelling. Transfer to similar organisations occurs through thematic networks and multipliers, as well as through the presentation of pilots and solutions at larger national or EU-level events.

Experience from beneficiaries shows that they found it sometimes more difficult to engage target groups that were not project partners (or even associated partners). Here communication and dissemination tools are important, as well as the use of multipliers, e.gl. pan-Baltic organisations, EUSBSR PACs,

sectoral associations, national or EU networks. For external groups, projects have to find the right tone of voice and provide direct incentives or clear benefits to overcome their reluctance to participate in pilots.

How pilots increase the capacities of the target groups



Project analysis shows that projects address a diverse array of target groups across the public and private sectors with their pilots, focusing on bridging the gap between conceptual innovation and practical implementation. Examples of specific target groups can be specific units and professionals in local or regional authorities, agencies or service providers, healthcare providers, such as hospitals, clinics, and rehabilitation professionals, along with patients, agricultural stakeholders, specifically farmers, agricultural advisory services, and environmental authorities, food system actors, including public canteens, food producers, and distributors, energy and transport groups, such as citizen-led energy communities, haulage companies, and spatial planners, general citizens engaged in climate and energy initiatives.

Many projects address a combination of different target groups, for example, officials responsible for civil protection, who work alongside civil society organisations to better coordinate crisis responses or wastewater treatment operators together with local authorities and with agricultural end-users to implement water-reuse schemes. Some projects focus on emerging technologies and new industry sectors, therefore addressing a more complex “ecosystem” of target groups. An example is the preparation of hydrogen value chains who address airport operators, airlines, and aviation regulators to prepare for hydrogen-powered air transport, while haulage companies and refuelling station developers need to work with spatial planners to create hydrogen refuelling networks for hydrogen trucks.

Through pilots IBSR projects transform concepts, models and methodologies into practical organisational and technical capacities, enabling target groups to move from ad-hoc responses to documented, repeatable, and tested practices. Examples of projects show which capacities are addressed by pilots.

For example, local and regional authorities responsible for civil protection learn to integrate spontaneous civil-society support into structured disaster planning, building a shared digital language for resource coordination. Local authorities and city administrations learn to adopt public-interest design as a repeatable discipline for local development and urban revitalisation. Municipalities increase their analytical capacity to produce and update climate action plans in-house using digital simulators. Citizens and local associations and interest groups gain the regulatory and financial templates necessary to turn vague aspirations for energy communities into executable projects. In healthcare and environmental management, capacities are increased by bridging the gap between new technology and operational reality. Healthcare providers gain regulation-aware experience with AI virtual assistants. Water treatment operators and agricultural authorities acquire the capacity to run water-reuse schemes, utilising IT-based monitoring and practical on-field measurement to justify large-scale adoption. For maritime and navigational services, projects build the technical production capability for next-generation charts and the administrative-political capacity to deploy interoperable digital services across national borders. Port environments learn to coordinate material flows and circular procurement. Airports and regulators acquire the operational know-how for the entire hydrogen-aviation chain, while regional authorities gain spatial planning tools to coordinate transnational hydrogen refuelling networks.

To increase the capacities of various target groups, the projects utilise a range of training and knowledge transfer methods, technical instruments, organisational methods, and regulatory frameworks. A primary focus is transforming temporary or ad-hoc actions into permanent organisational habits. This is addressed with training and organisational changes, creating new routines or developing easy-to-follow routines via check lists or protocols. Some projects provide high-tech tools to help authorities and industries modernise their operations. Capacity is also built by creating and improving routines of how different entities work together. Engaging target groups ensures that new methods do not remain one-off project results. This "institutionalisation" ensures that the capacity to innovate remains within the organisation long after the pilot concludes.

10.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the evaluation questions:

EQ 3.2 Does the focus on pilots and on testing of solutions lead to more tangible results compared to 2014-2020 projects? Are the solutions tested and adjusted through pilots better usable for the addressed target groups, compared to the majority of outputs developed by 2014-2020 projects? In which way are pilots crucial for increasing the capacities of the target groups?

In 2021–2027, the Programme frames core projects around a sequence of preparing solutions, piloting and evaluating them, and then transferring them. Small projects are encouraged to develop practical and durable outputs and solutions for identified challenges in the region. However, unlike core projects, developing a full solution is not strictly obligatory.

The shift in the Interreg Baltic Sea Region 2021–2027 Programme towards a focus on solutions and pilots is generally perceived as leading to tangible and usable results. Approximately 89% of beneficiaries who responded to this survey question (n=317) believe that pilots produce solutions that are usable for target groups, with 45% finding them "very usable". Beneficiaries report that pilots are essential because they allow target groups to experience a solution in practice rather than just reading about it. This makes the results more credible and easier to adopt.

There is a strong consensus among MC members that the increased emphasis on piloting and testing solutions, as well as their implementation, is one of the most defining and positively perceived changes to the 2021-2027 Programme. Interviewees generally agreed that the shift from knowledge exchange to more concrete, solution-oriented projects had strengthened the Programme’s credibility, resulting in projects with more tangible and communicable outcomes.

In general it can be concluded that project results and solutions from 2021-2027 projects are more tangible and usable than in 20214-2020 because they are explicitly structured to be tested and refined in real-world conditions. The current approach requires identifying target-group needs before applying, whereas earlier projects often used the first phase of the project for basic analysis. This ensures the final solution is tailored to actual end-user capacities from the start.

Projects address with their pilots a diverse array of target groups across the public and private sectors, focusing on bridging the gap between conceptual innovation and practical implementation. Through pilots IBSR projects transform concepts, models and methodologies into practical organisational and technical capacities, enabling target groups to move from ad-hoc responses to documented, repeatable, and tested practices. To increase the capacities of various target groups, the projects utilise a range of

training and knowledge transfer methods, technical instruments, organisational methods, and regulatory frameworks. Engaging target groups ensures that new methods do not remain one-off project results. This "institutionalisation" ensures that the capacity to innovate remains within the organisation long after the pilot concludes. Pilots provide a “safe space" for target groups to gain experience with emerging technologies. Pilots help convert spontaneous or ad-hoc responses into documented, durable processes and shared coordination frameworks.

EQ 3.3 Which were the most effective mechanisms and practices of transfer and uptake of solutions? Did they differ depending on the target groups or thematic objective?

Projects use different mechanisms and practices of transfer and uptake of solutions. Projects often use participatory workshops and focus groups involving specific end-users. Testing solutions in real institutions or business environments allows stakeholders to evaluate applicability within their own contexts. Physical demonstrations, study visits, and "storytelling events" are relevant activities. Full simulation tests or specialised testbeds provide technical data necessary for industrial-scale uptake. Working with multipliers, as well as using videos, multilingual materials, and digital platforms help tailor messages to different stakeholders and increase visibility. Public procurement is an effective mechanism to steer environmental and social performance at a strategic level.

While the mechanisms for the transfer and uptake of solutions were largely consistent throughout the programme, specific patterns and variations emerged depending on the type of intervention performed. Governance and social projects tended to produce "softer" outputs, such as methodological frameworks or participatory action. Mechanisms for transfer were mostly linked to training schemes. Technical and environmental projects focused more on pilots applying new technologies and experimental methods. In this case, physical demonstrations, monitoring of results of experimental methods or processes and study visits are the most relevant mechanisms. Projects in complex domains and addressing new value chains address combinations of target groups or rather “ecosystems” of target groups. Here, primary transfer mechanisms are cross-actor coordination, operational models, Decision Support Systems, cooperation protocols and regional innovation/competence hubs.

Transfer approaches are tailored to the specific needs and capacities of the target groups. For NGOs and local and regional public authorities, peer-to-peer learning and social proof are particularly effective, complemented by manuals, training, dedicated platforms and accessible digital planning tools. For SMEs and business organisations, transfer focuses on practical and easily adoptable solutions, supported by digital platforms, technical validation, economic feasibility assessments and plug-and-play models that minimise the need for extensive R&D. Larger enterprises and infrastructure or service providers typically engage more strategically, integrating solutions into their own R&D and innovation activities and testing them through regulatory sandboxes, testbeds, pilot sites and simulations. Wider transfer is then supported through thematic networks, multipliers and the presentation of successful pilots at national and EU-level events.

11 The 2021-2027 Programme new features – Simplified Cost Options (SCOs)

This Chapter analyses the use of simplified cost options (SCOs) in the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027. This chapter refers to the following evaluation questions:

EQ 3.5 How much has the use of SCOs reduced the administrative burden for the project partners related to project implementation (e.g. budget planning, reporting of costs, internal documentation, etc.)?
EQ 3.6 How effectively have SCOs accelerated the verification and payment processes compared to real cost reimbursement methods?
EQ 3.7 What challenges have arisen in using SCOs, and how can they be improved?

A dedicated thematic case study was conducted to assess the uptake and practical application of SCOs by the Interreg BSR Programme in the 2021-2027 programming period. The case study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis to capture both programme-level practices and beneficiary experiences. The evidence base includes programme databases, beneficiaries' surveys, semi-structured interviews with programme bodies, and a review of programme documentation. This triangulated approach provides a robust understanding of how SCOs are implemented in practice and their effects on programme management and delivery.

11.1 Context



Building on the provisions of the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR), the 2021-2027 Programme expanded the use of SCOs, reducing the need for project partners (PP) to document actual costs across several categories. Their introduction was defined by the MA/JS as a key improvement compared to the previous programming period.

With this, the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027 has significantly expanded the use of SCOs compared with the 2014-2020 period. The Programme makes extensive use of SCOs across all project types, combining lump sums, unit costs and flat rates.

In particular, it applies:

- a lump sum covering preparation costs (different for the different types of projects);
- standard scale of unit costs based on hourly rates to cover for staff costs;
- a flat rate of 15% of the eligible direct staff costs to cover office and administration costs[35];
- a flat rate of 15% of the eligible direct staff costs to cover travel and accommodation costs[36];
- a flat rate of 40% of the eligible direct staff cost to cover all other costs of the operation[37];

[35] Reg. (EU) 2021/1060, Article 54(c)
[36] Reg. (EU) 2021/1059, Article 41(5)
[37] Reg. (EU) 2021/1060, Article 56(1)

- a lump sum based on draft budget to cover the cost of the Strategy Forums (exclusively used under PO 4.2), up to EUR 200,000.

These SCOs are applied in different combinations depending on the type of project. Small projects, project platforms and strategy governance projects rely exclusively on SCOs, whereas core projects combine SCOs with a limited use of real costs (i.e., external expertise and services, equipment, and infrastructure works). As a result, only a small number of cost categories continue to be reimbursed on the basis of real costs, and only within core projects.

The combination of SCOs applied to each project typology is presented in the table below.

Table 11-1 Reimbursement methods per cost category by type of project

<table>
<tr><th></th><th rowspan="2">Core projects</th><th rowspan="2">Small projects</th><th rowspan="2">Project platforms</th><th colspan="2">Strategy governance</th></tr>
<tr><th>Othe projects</th><th>Strategy Forums</th></tr>
<tr><td>Preparation costs</td><td>Lump sum
(up to EUR 24,000 of total eligible expenditure)</td><td>Lump sum
(up to EUR 10,000 of total eligible expenditure)</td><td>N/A</td><td>N/A</td><td rowspan="8">Lump sum
(up to EUR 200,000 of total eligible expenditure)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Staff costs</td><td>Unit cost
(hourly rate per country)</td><td>Unit cost
(hourly rate per country)</td><td>Unit cost
(hourly rate per country)</td><td>Unit cost
(hourly rate per country)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Office and administration costs</td><td>15% flat rate
of the eligible direct staff costs</td><td rowspan="6">40% flat rate</td><td rowspan="6">40% flat rate</td><td rowspan="6">40% flat rate</td></tr>
<tr><td>Travel and accommodation costs</td><td>15% flat rate
of the eligible direct staff costs</td></tr>
<tr><td>External expertise and services costs</td><td rowspan="3">Real costs</td></tr>
<tr><td>Equipment</td></tr>
<tr><td>Infrastructure and works</td></tr>
</table>

Source: own elaboration based on Programme Manual available here: https://interreg-baltic.eu/toolkit/Programme-manual-2021-2027/

The Programme primarily relies on SCOs, most of which are off-the-shelf options[38] provided by the regulatory framework. Their use avoids the need for complex calculations and provides a high degree of legal certainty, as these options are predefined in EU regulations and do not require further justification during audits. As regards staff costs, a tailor-made unit cost was developed by the Programme, requiring the most significant methodological effort.

This required the development of a specific methodology to calculate country-specific hourly rates. The approach relied on historical data from the previous programming period, using median values to derive representative rates for each country. An adjustment of the defined rates was made in 2023 to reflect

[38] Reg. (EU) 2021/1060, Article 53(3)(e)

increases in labour costs and inflation. Updated hourly rates were introduced from the third project call onwards.

Table 11-2 The hourly rate per country for the projects selected for implementation

Country	Hourly rate before 01.01.2024	Hourly rate after 01.01.2024	Currency
Denmark	374	392	DKK
Estonia	29	29	EUR
Finland	36	39	EUR
Germany	48	50	EUR
Latvia	24	26	EUR
Lithuania	22	26	EUR
Norway	546	584	NOK
Poland	92	106	PLN
Sweden	501	534	SEK

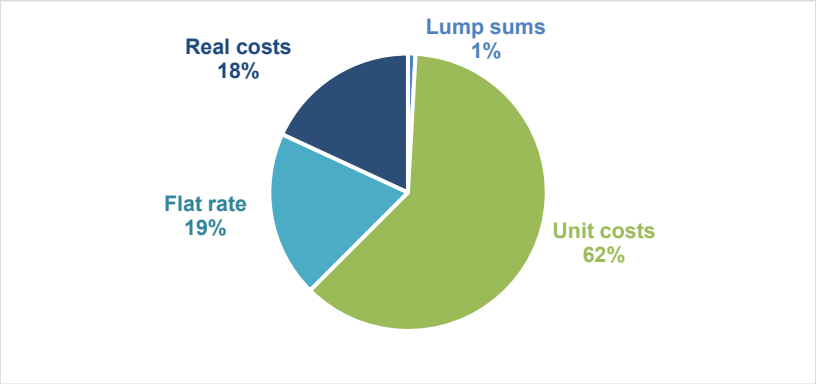
Source: own elaboration based on Programme Manual available here: https://interreg-baltic.eu/toolkit/Programme-manual-2021-2027/

In addition to the simplification achieved through SCOs, the Programme introduced further administrative simplifications in the control and reporting system. Expenditure based on SCOs is no longer subject to national controls but is verified centrally by the MA/JS during project progress monitoring, while real-cost expenditure continues to be checked by national controllers before progress report submission.

Reporting arrangements have also become more flexible. SCO-based expenditure must be declared in each reporting period, ensuring regular reimbursements, whereas real-cost expenditure—representing a minor share—can be reported less frequently. This allows partners to consolidate reports and facilitates faster payments without significantly affecting cash flow.

By February 2026, the use of SCOs in the Programme is extensive. Overall, 82% of the total Programme budget allocated to projects is implemented through SCOs (EUR 231.9 million), while only 18% continues to be reimbursed on the basis of real costs.

Figure 11-1 Budget share per typology of reimbursement method



Source: own elaboration based on data from the Programme's Project database extracted on 5 February 2026

When focusing on core projects - where certain expenditure categories (external expertise and services, equipment, and infrastructure works) still rely on real cost reimbursement - real cost share increases slightly to 21%. Nevertheless, the large majority of funding remains covered by SCOs.

Unit costs account for the largest share of expenditure (62%), reflecting the staff-intensive nature of projects under the IBSR Programme, where staff costs constitute the main budget component. Flat rates represent 19% of the total budget and cover several cost categories. Lump sums account for only a marginal share of the budget (1%).

11.2 Analysis



Interviews with the financial unit of the MA/JS identified **four main drivers** behind the extensive use of SCOs in the Programme:

1. SCOs significantly **reduce administrative burden** by eliminating the need to verify and justify individual expenditure items. Although the CPR made SCOs mandatory only for operations below EUR 200,000, the Programme decided to apply SCOs to the full budget of small projects (approximately EUR 500,000), as the administrative effort would otherwise have been disproportionate to their size.
2. SCOs **allow administrative and financial resources to be redirected towards project implementation and the achievement of results**, rather than financial verification.
3. Simplified procedures **lower the administrative capacity required to participate**, facilitating access for newcomers. This is particularly important for smaller organisations, such as SMEs and NGOs, for which administrative requirements can represent a barrier to participation.
4. SCOs contribute to a **substantial reduction in error rates**. Under traditional cost-based systems, relying on invoices and complex calculations, errors and irregularities were relatively frequent. By contrast, the incidence of such errors under SCOs is reported to be close to zero.

The Programme primarily relies on off-the-shelf SCOs, selected following a review of the regulatory framework, as they avoid complex calculations and provide a high degree of legal certainty. Staff costs were the only category covered through a tailor-made unit cost methodology, requiring the largest initial investment. This was considered justified as staff costs represent the largest share of the budget (62%) and were the most error-prone and complex category to verify due to differences in national systems, offering the greatest simplification potential.

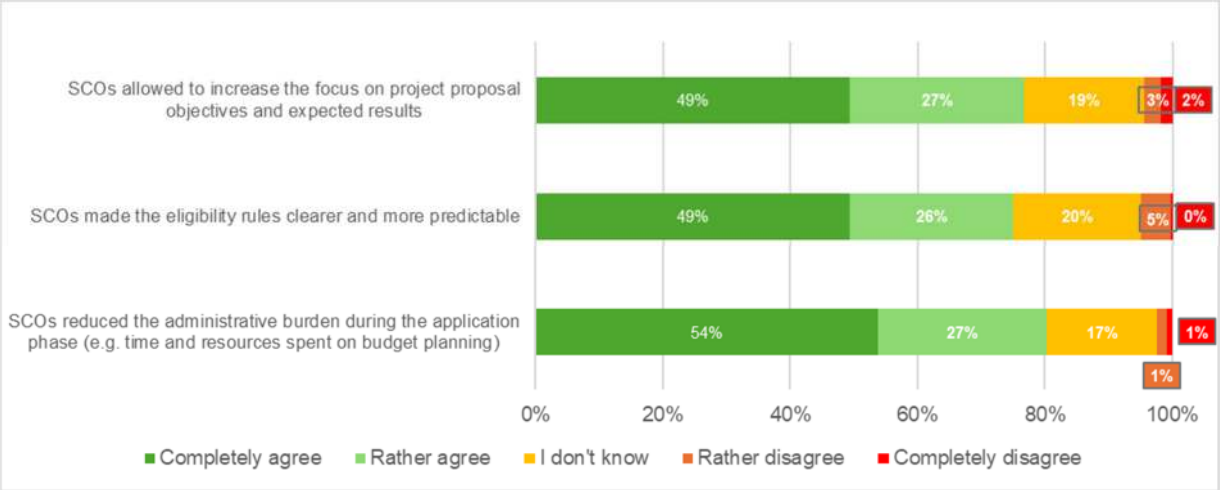
The development of the methodology involved extensive stakeholder consultation and iterative refinement, ensuring both robustness and broad acceptance. The final approach was unanimously endorsed by the MC, with agreement from all participating countries.

Application phase

When SCOs were first introduced, some applicants expressed concerns, particularly regarding the adequacy of standard hourly rates and the transition from traditional cost systems. However, as the rules were clearly defined from the outset and implementation progressed, scepticism gradually decreased and acceptance increased. There is no evidence that SCOs discouraged participation. Overall, participation remains strong, particularly among public authorities, public bodies, and higher education and research institutions, despite most concerns originating from the latter. Increased newcomer participation compared to the previous programming period also suggests a broader attractiveness of the Programme, supported by SCOs, simplified reporting, and Programme design.

Beneficiary survey results (March 2026) confirm a very positive impact of SCOs during the application phase. A large majority of respondents (81% of 335 respondents) agree that SCOs reduced the administrative burden of budget preparation, while 76% report an increased focus on project content and results.

Figure 11-2 Use of SCO during application



Source: own elaboration based on the survey to beneficiaries closed in March 2026 (Question: Compared to real-cost reimbursement methods, how have SCOs affected the way your organisation/department planned the budget during the application stage?)

Similarly, 75% consider that SCOs improved the clarity and predictability of eligibility rules. Qualitative feedback provided in the survey highlights reduced need for detailed calculations, fewer documentation requirements, and significant time savings, allowing beneficiaries to focus more on project content and outcomes.

Negative feedback is limited. Respondents not expressing positive views often selected "*I don't know*", particularly among PPs, who are less involved in administrative tasks than lead partner (LP). However, some points for improvement were raised. For core projects, simplification is only partial, as certain cost categories (external expertise, equipment and infrastructure) still rely on real costs, maintaining a degree of administrative burden. In addition, some beneficiaries raised concerns about the adequacy and

fairness of unit cost rates (less than 10 beneficiaries out of 335), which may not always reflect actual costs and could affect the financial attractiveness of participation for certain organisations or countries.

Further analysis shows that returning beneficiaries report more positive perceptions than newcomers, suggesting that familiarity with SCOs enhances their perceived benefits over time. Similarly, LP consistently report more positive views than PPs, while PPs show higher levels of uncertainty, reflecting their more limited involvement in budget planning. Further details on this are provided in the thematic case study.

Implementation phase



The wider use of SCOs in 2021–2027 has generated significant efficiency gains and contributed substantially to administrative simplification. According to analysis carried out by the MA/JS in March 2026, the average time required for partners to submit progress reports decreased by around 66%, from 114 days in 2014–2020 to 38 days in the current period. This improvement is linked to the wider use of SCOs, reduced documentation requirements, and the centralisation of SCO verification at MA/JS level, with national controllers focusing only on real costs. **Payment timelines** also improved significantly, decreasing by around 44%, from 195 to 111 days between the end of the reporting period and reimbursement.

Shifting the responsibility of verification of SCOs to the MA/JS generated substantial cost savings, particularly in countries with decentralised first-level control systems[39]. The budget allocated by projects to national controls decreased by an estimated 84%, from EUR 8.2 million in 2014–2020 to EUR 1.3 million planned for 2021–2027. Beneficiaries highlighted this as a major advantage of the new system. Simplification was further supported by reduced documentation requirements: for SCO-based expenditure, beneficiaries mainly submit a report of hours and employment confirmation, while flat-rate categories no longer require supporting invoices.



The introduction of SCOs did not lead to a sustained increase in requests for support from the Programme authorities. While targeted support measures such as webinars and tutorials were necessary during the initial phase, reporting became significantly smoother once beneficiaries became familiar with the first reporting cycle.

SCOs also contributed to a substantial reduction in error risks, particularly for staff costs, which had previously represented one of the main sources of irregularities due to complex calculation methods and differences between national systems. Under the current system, errors related to staff costs have been reduced to a minimum, allowing controllers to focus more on higher-risk areas such as procurement, external expertise, equipment, and infrastructure investments. Remaining errors are generally limited to minor administrative mistakes rather than fraud.



Survey results from beneficiaries (March 2026, 335 respondents) confirm these findings. Around 80% of respondents agreed that SCOs reduced the administrative burden associated with financial reporting, notably through lower documentation requirements, simplified

[39] Denmark, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Norway.

procedures, and time savings. Similarly, 77% considered that SCOs reduced the effort required to comply with EU and Programme rules. Qualitative feedback consistently emphasised that simplification allowed beneficiaries to focus more on implementation and project delivery rather than administrative tasks.

The perceived impact on reimbursement speed was more moderate, although still positive overall, with 65% of respondents reporting improvements. Differences emerged between categories of beneficiaries: returning beneficiaries and lead partners generally reported more positive perceptions than newcomers and project partners, likely reflecting greater familiarity with Programme procedures and higher involvement in financial management.

Some challenges remain. A share of beneficiaries considers the standard hourly rates not fully reflective of actual costs (see Table 11-3Table 11-3). Concerns were also raised regarding the 15% flat rate for travel and accommodation under core projects, as travel costs tend to be similar across countries while staff costs – and therefore the flat-rate basis – vary significantly, potentially leading to unequal travel costs reimbursement.

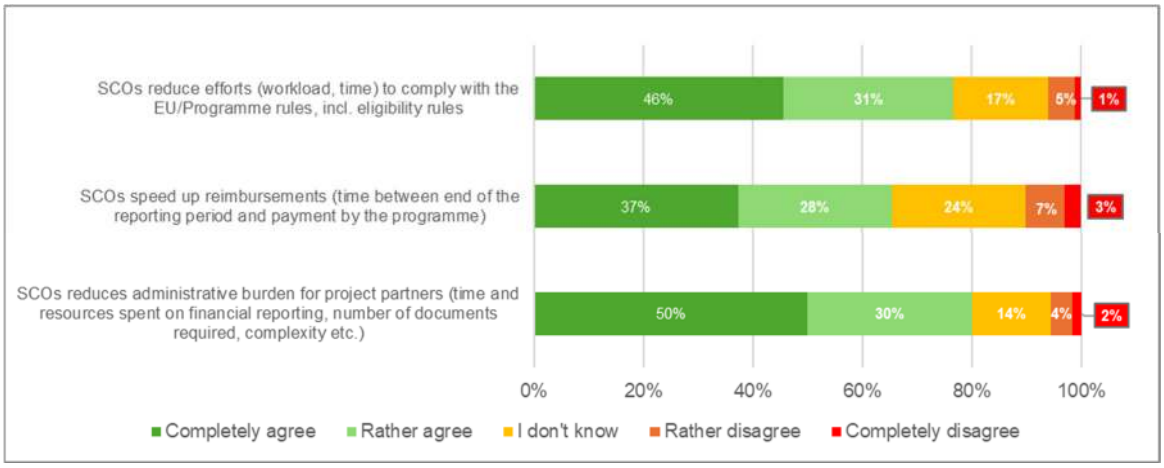
Table 11-3 Beneficiary assessment of standard hourly rate for staff costs reimbursement

Call	Project type	N. of respondents	significantly under-compensates	slightly under-compensates	very close to the actual staff costs	slightly over-compensates	way too much over-compensation
1	**Core projects**	**104**	10%	29%	51%	10%	1%
	Small projects	**47**	13%	23%	49%	13%	2%
2	**Core projects**	**86**	13%	28%	45%	13%	1%
	Small projects	**19**	11%	21%	42%	16%	11%

Source: Programme surveys to beneficiaries (C1, S1, C2, S2) (carried out in 2024)

Despite these limitations, overall satisfaction with SCOs remains high. Surveys conducted by the Programme among beneficiaries of standard and small projects under Calls 1 and 2 confirm that the majority of beneficiaries consider the standard hourly rates to be broadly aligned with actual staff costs, although around 10-13% reported significant under-compensation.

Figure 11-3 Use of SCO during implementation



Source: own elaboration based on the survey to beneficiaries closed in March 2026 (Question: Compared to real-cost reimbursement methods, how have SCOs affected the way your organisation/department deals with financial reporting during project implementation?)

Satisfaction with flat rates is particularly strong: around 94% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the 15% flat rate for office and administration costs, 85–87% with the flat rate for travel and accommodation, and 84–91% with the 40% flat rate covering other costs in small projects. Overall, the evidence suggests that SCOs have substantially simplified Programme management and implementation, while reducing administrative burden, control costs, and error risks.

11.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the evaluation questions:

EQ 3.5 How much has the use of SCOs reduced the administrative burden for the project partners related to project implementation (e.g. budget planning, reporting of costs, internal documentation, etc.)?

The Programme demonstrates a high level of maturity in the use of SCOs, with clear benefits in terms of simplification, efficiency and focus on results throughout the project cycle. This positive assessment is confirmed across all sources consulted – including Programme documentation, beneficiary surveys, and interviews with the MA/JS and MC.

The use of SCOs has substantially reduced the administrative burden for project partners throughout the project cycle. The Programme makes extensive use of SCOs, covering 82% of the total Programme budget allocated to projects as of February 2026. Small projects, project platforms and strategy governance projects rely exclusively on SCOs, while core projects combine SCOs with limited use of real costs for selected expenditure categories.

Evidence from interviews, Programme data and beneficiary surveys consistently indicates that SCOs simplified budget planning, financial reporting and compliance with Programme rules. According to the beneficiary survey conducted in March 2026 (335 respondents), 81% of respondents agreed that SCOs reduced the administrative burden during the application phase, notably through reduced documentation requirements, simpler budgeting and fewer detailed calculations. In addition, 76% reported this allowed

an increased focus on project content and results, while 75% considered that SCOs improved the clarity and predictability of eligibility rules.

During implementation, 80% of respondents agreed that SCOs reduced the administrative burden associated with financial reporting, particularly through lower documentation requirements and simplified procedures. Beneficiaries highlighted significant time savings and reduced bureaucracy, allowing greater focus on project implementation and delivery. Simplification was particularly strong for projects fully implemented through SCOs, where reporting requirements are largely limited to staff-related documentation and flat rates without supporting invoices.

Administrative burden was further reduced through transferring the verification of SCO-covered expenditure to the MA/JS. Project partners in countries with decentralised first-level control systems no longer need to appoint and pay national controllers for SCO-based expenditure, generating substantial cost savings and reducing administrative effort. The estimated budget allocated by projects to national controls decreased by approximately 84%, from EUR 8.2 million in 2014–2020 to EUR 1.3 million in 2021–2027. Beneficiaries identified this as a major advantage of the new system.

EQ 3.6 How effectively have SCOs accelerated the verification and payment processes compared to real cost reimbursement methods?

The use of SCOs has significantly accelerated both verification and payment processes compared to the previous programming period and traditional real-cost reimbursement methods.

According to an analysis carried out by the MA/JS in March 2026, the average time required for projects to submit progress reports decreased by approximately 66%, from 114 days in 2014-2020 to 38 days in 2021-2027. This improvement is linked to the wider use of SCOs, simplified reporting requirements, reduced supporting documentation, and the centralisation of SCO verification at MA/JS level, while national controllers now focus only on real-cost expenditure.

Payment timelines also improved substantially. The average time between the end of the reporting period and reimbursement decreased by around 44%, from 195 days in the previous programming period to 111 days in the current one. More flexible reporting arrangements also contributed to faster reimbursements, as SCO-based expenditure must be reported regularly while real-cost expenditure – representing only a minor share of total costs – can be consolidated and reported less frequently.

Survey results confirm these findings, although perceptions regarding reimbursement speed are somewhat more moderate than the quantitative evidence suggests. Around 65% of beneficiaries reported that SCOs improved the speed of reimbursements. Returning beneficiaries and LP reported more positive perceptions than newcomers and project partners, likely reflecting their greater familiarity with Programme procedures and financial management.

EQ 3.7 What challenges have arisen in using SCOs, and how can they be improved?

The use of SCOs is generally functioning well and has substantially reduced administrative burden, but some minor challenges merit attention, particularly when designing arrangements for 2028-2034. A key issue is ensuring that unit costs remain representative of actual expenditure over time. Standard hourly rates are currently broadly aligned with actual costs, but inflation and changing labour costs could gradually weaken this alignment. Reflection might be needed to see how this challenge can be

addressed, for example through periodic reviews or a structured adjustment mechanism linked to relevant economic indicators. Further challenges concern the design of travel flat rates and remaining reporting requirements. While the 15% travel and accommodation flat rate is highly appreciated by beneficiaries, linking it to staff costs may create inequalities; continued monitoring would therefore be appropriate rather than immediate adjustment.

Further practical simplification could be achieved by reducing the level of detail required in timesheets and providing clearer guidance on calculating and reporting annual working hours.

12 The support to the EUSBSR governance and communication and PAC's support to projects

This section describes the analysis and evaluation of the IBSR 2021-2027 support to the EUSBSR governance and communication under PO 4.2. It provides analysis and answers to the following evaluation questions:

EQ 3.4 How did the EUSBSR (mostly PACs) provide support to the implementation of Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects and transfer of project results to target groups? What did this support lead to?
EQ 4.1 What is the efficiency and effectiveness of the project types for the EUSBSR support (PACs assistance, support to Strategy Point, organisation of the Strategy Forums)?
EQ 4.2 How did PACs support project idea generation? What is the effectiveness of the additional support to PACs for project idea generation and development?

The analysis is based on the review of PO 4.2 projects (i.e. the support to EUSBSR governance), interviews with the Programme bodies, the examination of responses in the survey to beneficiaries as well as on the input and perceptions gathered from EUSBSR PACs and the Baltic Sea Strategy Point via a survey and interviews. It has to be noted that – within the scope of this mid-term evaluation – it was not feasible to conduct an in-depth evaluation of the EUSBSR governance and activities, which would have been necessary to get more detailed insights into effectiveness of the EUSBSR work, supported within the IBSR 2021-2027.

12.1 Context



The EUSBSR pursues three core objectives: saving the sea, connecting the region, and increasing prosperity. To achieve these goals, the Strategy's Action Plan outlines key actions for implementation. These actions are thematically divided into 14 Policy Areas, which are all linked and contribute to achieving these objectives from different angles and in diverse ways.

Implementation of the Strategy relies on coordinated efforts and shared resources, with IBSR being a significant contributor. The PO 4.2, 'Macro-regional governance' supports actions that implement and reinforce the **governance** and **communication** activities of the EUSBSR. These actions are designed to facilitate policy discussions, drive policy changes, and foster networks for developing projects and initiatives within the Strategy's policy areas, all in alignment with the EUSBSR Action Plan. Priority 4 'Cooperation governance' facilitates the following three action strands:

1. ISBR 2021-2027 provides targeted support for the coordinators of the EUSBSR Policy Areas, helping them to plan and implement activities in their respective fields.
2. It supports the organisation of Strategy forums to engage politicians, different levels of governance and civil society to discuss topical issues of the EUSBSR.
3. IBSR 2021-2027 provides support to ensure administrative, communication and capacity building assistance to the national coordinators of the EUSBSR and the Baltic Sea Strategy Point (BSP).

The expectations towards PO 4.2 projects to the macro-regional governance have been described in the Programme Document by saying that:

"*as a result, responsible organisations have the **capacity** to coordinate and communicate the EUSBSR's progress and achievements, and **actively engage** different stakeholders in the region as well as **work on common priorities** of the EU and non-EU countries. The supported actions **strengthen the governance structures** in the EUSBSR and **stimulate policy discussions** in the Baltic Sea region, **build up networks**, **engage and motivate different stakeholders** to plan actions and **secure further funding** for the implementation of the EUSBSR Action Plan. They also **ensure synergies** between EUSBSR stakeholders and stakeholders of other strategies in the non-EU countries of the Baltic Sea region."*



The projects under PO 4.2 amount to a total EUR 12.4 million, of which EUR 9.9 million is ERDF funding. It is 5.3% of the total ERDF and Norwegian funding allocated to the four priorities of the Programme. Please, see the table below.

Table 12-1 Projects under PO 4.2: Support to the EUSBSR

Project/Operation	Total cost of the operation in EUR (rounded)
Support to EUSBSR PA Safe/Ship	1,210,000
Support to SecureCulture Assist	1,209,999
Support to PACINNO-3 (Innovation)	818,750
Support to PASPS (Spatial Planning)	605,000
Support to PA EDU PA HEALTH	1,209,999
Support to PA Transport	604,998
Support to PA Energy	605,000
Support to EUSBSR PAC Tourism	604,684
Support to PA Nutri and Hazards	983,167
Support to PA Bioeconomy	687,500
Baltic Strategy Point	3,249,912
EUSBSR Annual Forum 2023	200,000
EUSBSR Annual Forum 2024	200,000
EUSBSR Annual Forum 2025	200,000
TOTAL	**12 389 010**

Source: BAMOS+ database, as of 24 March 2026.

The largest share of support to the EUSBSR support goes to the support of the Policy Areas. "*The Programme provides funding to EUSBSR PACs to coordinate the policy areas in line with the EUSBSR*

Action Plan. This funding is provided in addition to the own resources of the organisation to coordinate the policy area"[40]. The Programme supports the following PAC activities in their respective policy areas:

1. Coordination and facilitation of actions defined in the EUSBSR Action Plan
2. Stakeholder engagement
3. Development of a roadmap
4. Monitoring and evaluation of progress and achievements
5. Communication
6. Support to project implementation
7. Generation of new projects and work with project idea developers.

Ten IBSR projects under PO 4.2. supporting PACs with the start date on 1 January 2022 have been analysed[41]. Eight out of 14 PAs have been bundled in pairs with one project/operation covering two PAs. Another six PAs have their own separate projects.

On average every 'single' PA PO 4.2 project is of size EUR 605 000 with the exception of PA Bioeconomy amounting to EUR 687,500 and PA Innovation – EUR 818,750. Three out of four 'paired' PA projects are around EUR 1.21 million each, while PA Nutri and Hazards – € 983,167.

In addition to the support to PACs, the IBSR Programme supports also the Baltic Sea Strategy Point (BSP)[42] and the implementation of the EUSBSR Annual Forum[43]. Baltic Sea Strategy Point has an allocation of EUR 3,249,912; the support to the EUSBSR Annual Forum is EUR 200,000 each year[44].

12.2 Analysis

Due to the complexity of the evaluation questions, the analysis is structured in different sub-chapters. First, the activities of EUSBSR stakeholders supported by IBSR projects under PO 4.2 are presented. After that, the work of the EUSBSR PACs during project idea generation is analysed, followed by the analysis of how the EUSBSR (mostly PACs) provide support to the implementation of IBSR projects. The findings allow to draw conclusions on the effectiveness and efficiency of the IBSR support to the governance and communication of the EUSBSR.

Review of EUSBSR PAC activities supported by IBSR

To assess the effectiveness of the support to PACs and to the EUSBSR in general, it is necessary to first understand the complexity of the EUSBSR governance and its activities at different levels. Coordination for each policy area is managed through a structured governance framework, with **PACs** typically representing two to four institutions from different Member States or a transnational organisation. Some areas use a co-coordination model, pairing institutions with complementary strengths.

[40] IBSR Programme Manual, Version 8.0 from 06.06.2024
[41] https://interreg-baltic.eu/projects/
[42] https://eusbsr.eu/about/governance/
[43] https://eusbsr.eu/annual-forum/
[44] https://interreg-baltic.eu/projects/

The PA governance at large is organised via **PA Steering Groups (SGs)** and dedicated work packages of PO 4.2 projects. SGs meet regularly and in some policy areas they are further complemented by thematic sub-groups and interactive meetings that allow more focused and flexible cooperation. The Steering Group also plays a role in aligning activities of the policy areas with respective national and macro-regional priorities and in supervising implementation of the EUSBSR Action Plan which is typically framed as translating the specific Policy Area Action Plan priorities into coordinated activities via thematic actions and project pipelines.

Most PAs work with 'roadmap-like' guidance in work plans, multi-annual activity frameworks, and iterative Action Plan review processes. Existing regional or sector strategies are often referenced as the main strategic anchors, with periodic updates and prioritisation done through Steering Group processes. Some PAs already have previously developed roadmaps or other strategic reference documents. For example, in policy area 'Spatial Planning' there is Regional Maritime Spatial Planning Roadmap 2021-2030[45]. For PA Secure, the Joint Position on Enhanced Cooperation in Civil Protection[46] functions as a long-term strategic framework, complemented by a living document that tracks implementation and future priorities. This combination ensures a dynamic and adaptive strategic direction rather than a fixed roadmap.

Below are a few examples of how PACs coordinate and facilitate implementation of EUSBSR Action plan as described in the PO 4.2 projects and their respective online sites.

- Coordination of PA Energy is organised through a joint macro-regional governance framework aligned with the EUSBSR PA Energy-BEMIP Action Plan[47]. Implementation of the Action Plan is facilitated through structured work packages covering energy market integration, energy efficiency, renewable energy, synchronisation and security of supply. The PA Energy Steering Group plays a central role in decision-making, priority setting and validation of actions.
- PA Spatial Planning has two SGs reflecting the dual focus of the policy area on land-based and maritime spatial planning. The project explicitly aims to ensure continuous coordination between the two Steering Groups: the VASAB Committee on Spatial Planning and Development of the Baltic Sea Region and the HELCOM - VASAB Maritime Spatial Planning Working Group[48].
- There are also 'paired' PAC support projects, such as the one for PA Nutri and PA Hazards. Both Policy Area Coordinators apply for funding jointly and implement their respective mandates in line with the EUSBSR Action Plan. They are organised through a joint but clearly delineated governance structure.



The revision of the 4.2 PAC support projects shows that stakeholder engagement is embedded in all the PO 4.2 projects across all work packages and treated as a core function of PACs. It is being addressed through multiple complementary formats aimed at strengthening dialogue between policy-level representatives, project developers and sectoral stakeholders. For example, in PA Bioeconomy a key mechanism for stakeholder engagement is the

[45] https://vasab.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Regional-Maritime-Spatial-Planning-Roadmap-2021-2030.pdf

[46] https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/joint-position-on-cooperation-in-civil-protection-2022.pdf

[47] https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/infrastructure/high-level-groups/baltic-energy-market-interconnection-plan_en BEMIP means Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan.

[48] https://vasab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PA_Spatial_planning_2023.pdf

BSR Bioeconomy Council, which is explicitly designed to broaden participation beyond policy-makers to include practitioners, researchers and civil society representatives. PA Tourism involves also tourism education institutions and leverages large-scale events like the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum, while PA Nutri organises online seminar series such as the PA Nutri Talks[49]. The stakeholder engagement is organised through SG meetings, sub-groups, interactive meetings and thematic networks, such as, for example, the BSR Network of Volunteer Organisations in PA Secure[50]. The breadth of stakeholder reach varies significantly across policy areas, reflecting their thematic scope. PA Transport, for example, identified synergies with 9 out of 14 EUSBSR policy areas through a mapping exercise, demonstrating transport's highly cross-cutting character and the correspondingly wide range of stakeholder groups and governance levels that its coordination activities must engage.

Monitoring and evaluation are generally embedded in governance and reporting structures of the policy areas. PA Tourism, for example, has a Work Plan which is being monitored and revised via reports on achievements. In most PA areas, progress is tracked through clearly defined deliverables, indicators and periodic reports. For example, PA Innovation plans tracking the progress against output and result indicators linked to macro-regional governance, cooperation and stakeholder engagement. It also plans mid-term and final evaluations[51] and stakeholder surveys to assess relevance, effectiveness and impact. PA Safe and PA Ship reference documentation outputs such as thematic studies including 'Power of the Projects'. Produced together with the SG members this project deliverable gathers success stories on policy impact from projects. PA Education and PA Health, for example, highlight inventories of flagships, outputs/targets, and thematic overviews including inter alia needs assessments in health.

All PAs communicate progress and achievements through a variety of channels. Dissemination occurs via established EUSBSR platforms such as the Baltic Sea Action Point, newsletters, the EUSBSR website, LinkedIn, and other social media as well as through targeted email campaigns and participation in relevant events, conferences, and forums. Digital tools including social media, newsletters (the EUSBSR newsletter reportedly reaches approximately 3,000 recipients), and targeted email serve as complementary channels rather than substitutes for in-person contact.



A survey of EUSBSR PAC organisations, along with two additional interviews, was conducted to find out more about their support for IBSR projects. According to the survey (n=15), the PACs have a wide range of activities to support IBSR projects.

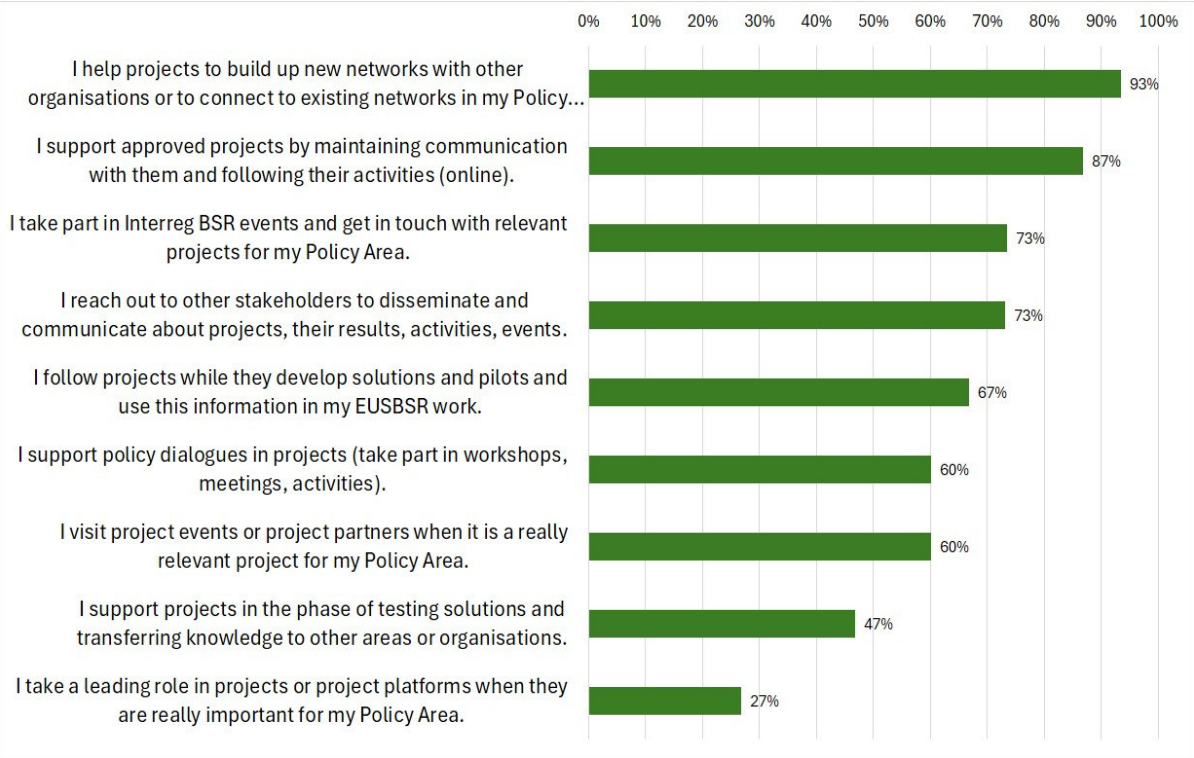
According to the survey responses, 93% of the PACs help projects to build up new networks. 87% support projects by following them and maintaining communication. 73% of PACs take part in IBSR events and reach out to other stakeholders to disseminate project results and activities. 67% of PACs follow projects while working on solutions and pilots. 60% support policy dialogues in projects and/or visit project events. According to the survey, 47% of them also supports projects in the phase of testing solutions and transferring knowledge to relevant target groups. 27% contributes to projects with a leading role in projects or project platforms.

[49] https://interreg-baltic.eu/event/pa-nutri-talks/

[50] https://www.bsr-secure.eu/?post_types=&s=volunteer

[51] https://www.clustercollaboration.eu/sites/default/files/event_calendar/1.CMR_.Eusbsr_kokkonen_malmö_150623_final.pdf

Figure 12-1 Support of EUSBSR PACs to IBSR projects during implementation/capitalisation



Source: own elaboration based on the survey to PAC organisations survey, n=15 (multiple answers were possible)

The IBSR Programme funding to the **Baltic Sea Strategy Point** is granted through a project. The Strategy point (via the organisations setting it up) provide administrative support to the group of National Coordinators of the EUSBSR. They support capacity building of the stakeholders of the EUSBSR. They coordinate communication including running the EUSBSR website and other communication tools. The Strategy point was set up by the Centrum Balticum Foundation, Finland, as the lead partner, in cooperation with the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, Germany. It is supported by the Eastern Norway County Network as an associated organisation. The IBSR Programme provides the primary financing backbone for the Strategy Point, covering approximately 80% of BSP operational costs alongside co-financing from Centrum Balticum Foundation and the City of Hamburg.

At the operational level, the support model functions well, according to interviews. The Strategy point project is deliberately designed with broad scope, enabling internal budget reallocation without formal project amendments – a flexibility that reduces administrative friction and allows the BSP to respond to shifting priorities without bureaucratic delay. The relationship with the MA/JS is characterised as direct, pragmatic, and cooperative, with responsive handling of queries and proactive communication of open calls and Programme developments to PACs.

The IBSR Programme provides funding for the organisation of the **EUSBSR Strategy Forums**, usually arranged every year. The Programme funding is granted through a project for each Strategy Forum and amounts to up to EUR 160,000 from the ERDF. The EUSBSR Strategy Forum is a meeting place for organisations implementing the EUSBSR and other stakeholders. Usually, organised as a conference

the Strategy Forum communicates the work of the EUSBSR, its objectives and its achievements to policymakers, public authorities, and to a wider audience. It stimulates policy discussions and disseminates results. It provides stakeholders with a networking occasion and helps actively engage them in the planning and implementation of the EUSBSR action plan.

According to the Baltic Sea Strategy Point and to some of the past annual forum organisers the Programme's financial contribution to the EUSBSR Annual Forum being EUR 160,000 ERDF with a minimum EUR 40,000 own contribution is not sufficient to cover the real costs of organising a Baltic Sea region-level political event but is rather a contribution. Accumulated inflation of 30-35% since the last funding needs assessment in 2014 has significantly worsened the situation to rely on additional resources. The BSP contributes with substantial informal co-financing: staff time estimated at approximately EUR 20,000 per forum, alongside provision of website infrastructure and registration platform management absorbed from its own project budget.

EUSBSR PAC support during project idea generation



According to the EUSBSR PAC organisations and the PAC projects, project generation is a core and explicitly financed as part of all projects. All PACs describe support to project idea generation as one of the main functions. Recurring instruments include regular project development roundtables and idea-generation workshops, matchmaking and co-creation events, bilateral meetings with project developers and assistance with partner search. According to PAC survey and interviews, all PACs revise project ideas and sometimes get in touch with applicants. However, PACs also admit, that they do not have time and resources to get in touch with all project ideas promotors and applicants. When PACs have time and identify relevant projects for their PA, they offer ad-hoc meetings, written support or other support via brainstorming sessions, application-writing workshops and shared online workspaces. For some more strategic projects, there is more thorough guidance for project development via online meetings and email.



The **survey and interviews to PACs** reveal that, during the project idea generation and development stage, the work of PACs is two-fold. On the one hand, they are strongly involved in project idea generation (not only for IBSR 2021-2027) within their PA field. Normally, this involves also developing ideas and schemes for projects to be later submitted as IBSR applications. On the other hand, during IBSR application phases, PACs receive also relevant references to project ideas (which they were not aware of before) that might be relevant to their PA. Regarding those, most PACs focus on reactive activities such as reviewing project ideas, giving advice and sending feedback to applicants on how to better align with the PA, but sometimes also using proactive activities like meetings, proposing refined activities or encouraging submissions. PACs indicate that limited resources and time allow them only to have a more passive approach, with concentrating proactively on only a limited number of projects and ideas. Hands-on support during application drafting is less common, highlighting a clear boundary between strategic guidance and operational involvement.

In contrast, PACs universally prioritise helping applicants align their ideas with EUSBSR objectives, underscoring their core role: ensuring projects genuinely serve the EUSBSR priorities, not co-writing applications. Responses reflect a community that is actively and systematically engaged in building project pipelines by organising idea-generating workshops across Baltic Sea Member States, facilitating

stakeholder forums, running matchmaking activities and initiating project platforms – not only for IBSR projects.

PACs demonstrate that a structured, multi-channel approach yields measurable results. The below examples derived of the EUSBSR PAC survey as well as also from other sources such as the application forms and PA LinkedIn pages suggest that where PACs invest consistently in stakeholder engagement and idea facilitation. Their work on project idea generation and support to applicants addresses not only IBSR 2021-20207 but also other Interreg Programmes and other funding sources such as Erasmus+, the Swedish Institute, HORIZON, CEF or ESF+. They adopt a broader view on needs, challenges and opportunities that can be addressed by funded projects. This broader view of the PAC work is useful. It helps to create synergies of IBSR projects with other funding streams and contributed to the sustainability and impact of IBSR results. PAC add specific value to project ideas because they know the overall funding and project landscape in specific policy areas beyond what IBSR projects alone would capture.

This has been confirmed by revising the project portfolio of the different EUSBSR PA.

- PA Tourism Coordinators describe an extensive pipeline, having supported more than 26 project ideas and applications over three years across IBSR and other EU Programmes. Their portfolio spans funded projects such as Bike Across the Baltic, ClineDest and BASCIL Light in the Dark, alongside pipeline concepts in regenerative tourism, data-driven destination management and climate adaptation. The initiation of the platform project RegenT further demonstrates a deliberate, long-term approach to capitalising knowledge and anchoring strategic priorities in the region.
- PA Secure presents an equally compelling track record, having co-generated ten funded projects between 2021 and 2026 including CREWS and ClimaResponse under Interreg BSR and several others through the Swedish Institute and Erasmus+ with a combined budget of approximately 8 million EUR, and a further four to five applications pending.
- PA Hazard channelled project generation through the BSR PHARMA Platform, producing around ten tangible project ideas that were submitted as applications, alongside eight topics identified for future development. Idea generation was not confined to dedicated settings. Workshops at the EUSBSR Annual Forum 2024, including the "Let's talk about PFAS" session and a workshop on "A Sustainable Rebuild of Ukraine," directly contributed to new partnerships, ultimately leading to the formation of the HAZGONE project platform.
- PAC Ship and PA Safe illustrate a country-by-country approach to idea generation, organising workshops in each Baltic Sea Member State together with local maritime clusters. This model produced a pipeline of projects including BS eNav, MaDaMe, OpenRisk II and applications related to windfarm and maritime safety, with BS eNav already securing a follow-up project through ÖKS funding and WINMOS IV obtaining CEF funding through active facilitation in Brussels. PAC Ship additionally supported the generation of 16 ship-related project ideas between 2023 and 2025.
- With additional funding the Bioeconomy PAC initiates new projects that identify and link the macro-regional issues such as energy and food security, economic development, climate change, and environmental sustainability with the objectives of PA Bioeconomy. The activity

involves Identifying organisations and facilitating dialogue meetings to explore the topic of bioeconomy. As a result of these activities there are 14 ISBR projects contributing to the policy area.

- PA Energy explicitly applies for and implements additional funding to support generation of new projects. Dedicated activities focus on identifying gaps, learning from existing energy efficiency and renewable energy projects and translating these insights into new project ideas. Support includes stakeholder roundtables, webinars, networking events and structured discussions with Steering Group members and project implementers. Platforms such as the Baltic Sea Partnership on Energy Efficiency[52] and CAMS[53] are used to amplify project experience and identify missing links. The outcome is an overview of project ideas and organisations involved, supporting consortium building and preparation of new applications aligned with PA Energy priorities.
- In PA Transport a concrete example is the stakeholder group from Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Germany seeking to create North-South-Poland eCorridor. According to the application form it is very much active, has meetings once a week, has developed Memorandum of Understanding and now seeks to present proposals to the ministers of the BSR countries. Beyond the e-Corridor initiative, PA Transport has contributed to approximately 14 project proposals across the 2021–2027 programming period, several of which have received funding. Notable examples include the Green Shipping Corridors seed project, which arose directly from PA Transport meetings identifying the need for broader stakeholder involvement in maritime transport; ADMIRAL, addressing AI-based logistics solutions to reduce emissions and improve transport efficiency; and the FT4U series of projects enabling digital data exchange and paperless transport processes across multiple countries. These examples illustrate how sustained PAC engagement in stakeholder meetings translates into a tangible pipeline of funded projects.
- In PA Innovation the PACs supported 26 ongoing projects with a total volume of approximately EUR 55 million, involving around 350 innovation stakeholders. Active implementation support included bilateral meetings with project leaders, participation as speakers in project events, and support for dissemination and visibility. The project also promotes cross-macro-regional project generation through cooperation with other macro-regional strategies and policy areas. Over the project duration, a minimum number of concrete project ideas are to be developed and documented, including information on partners, financing plans and policy relevance.



The survey to beneficiaries asked how beneficiaries felt supported during project generation and development. The perception regarding the connection to EUSBSR has already been presented in Chapter 6 (see also Figure 6.3). Survey results show that Lead Partners have been in contact with EUSBSR PACs at different stages of their project. 60% of lead partner responses (n=68) indicated that they have been in contact with one or various PACs before or during their application phase.

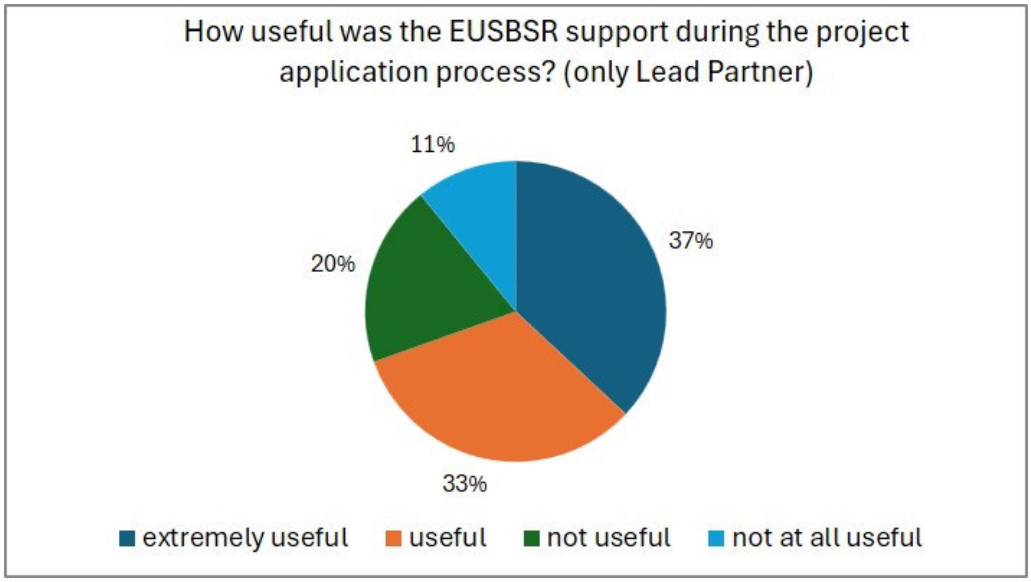
[52] https://si.se/en/projects-granted-funding/bsponee-baltic-sea-partnership-on-energy-efficiency/
[53] https://www.bef.lv/news-en/

While not all lead partners can say something about the usefulness of the PAC support during application, most of them who respond to the question find the support from PACs highly useful (see Figure 12-2 below). Overall, about 70% (n=46) found the support useful to extremely useful, with about 37% of which finding it extremely useful. 11% found the support not useful at all.

As can be derived from the open responses to the survey, a significant share of project representatives received meaningful PAC support during the application and development phases through online meetings, email consultations, thematic alignment guidance, partnership introductions, and direct involvement as project or associate partners. Several describe PAC engagement as genuinely formative: aligning project goals with the EUSBSR Action Plan, cross-checking relevance, improving the scope and structure of applications, and in some cases co-developing the project concept from the outset.

Taking a closer look to the beneficiaries who had some interaction with EUSBSR PACs during their application phase, they described a range of support. The generally positive feedback needs to be highlighted. From 73 open responses from beneficiaries, 64 are positive about the support and contact with PACs.

Figure 12-2 Usefulness of EUSBSR PAC support during application (only LP)



Source: own elaboration based on beneficiaries survey, n=46

Beneficiaries who received support from EUSBSR PACs during application described it in terms of meetings, written feedback on project ideas or application forms, advice on work plans, project outline, governance and networks, potential partners, operational issues, past projects.

Beyond direct communication, PACs contributed through networking and brokerage helping applicants identify suitable partners, spreading awareness of project plans through their platforms, and in some instances providing formal support letters. A smaller number of respondents mention more hands-on contributions, such as sharing thematic expertise, providing substantive content input, or even supplying physical materials relevant to the project's research scope.

The forms of support most frequently mentioned were informal meetings and exchanges, or emails, as well as feedback on project ideas and thematic alignment with the Strategy. In some cases, PACs or other EUSBSR stakeholders were directly involved in the project as partners or associated partners, while other received support in networking and dissemination. The responses indicate that PAC support in the application phase adds value and increased operational and strategic quality to the project applications, helps to find partners and ensures links with the EUSBSR and the PA Work plans.

- *"We organised several online meetings with the relevant PACs and consulted our proposal with them."*
- *"The project idea was discussed with few PACs in online meetings."*
- *"PAC Hazards have been actively involved in the platform application development with content and context support."*
- *"Online participation of PAC during project development calls with project partners. PACs cross-checked relevance of the topics, fitting to EUSBSR aims, and advised in case of need."*
- *"We got tips about the good partners and guidance on what kind of ideas would be needed."*
- *"We have received information as well as encouragement of PAC of PA safe which has facilitated the formulation of the project."*
- *"Getting help with network and platforms where to present results, getting a governance view of where to focus."*
- *"PAC Education and PAC Innovation - online or live meetings (at events) streamlining project concept and alignment with current needs."*
- *"Application design. Comments, feedback, adjustments."*

A recurring theme is that the open responses indicate that the PAC involvement has added strategic value. Respondents highlight PACs sharing lessons from previous funding calls and flagging what had gone wrong with earlier projects in their Policy Area, using that knowledge to help applicants sharpen proposals. In several cases PACs joined consortia as associated or full partners, enabling sustained input throughout development. Others describe PACs facilitating connections to relevant networks, validating the thematic relevance of project ideas, and encouraging projects. Respondents note, for example, that:

- *"PAC were presenting at project events, helping to disseminate information and invitations from projects, provided support and confirmation of the project messages for policy-makers."*
- *"After the initial exchange of e-mails, PACs highlighted key actions that could be supported. PACs also joined the project consortium since they saw significant added value for their work."*
- *"With the support from PAC we get the scope, scale and structure right in our project."*
- *"PACs were experienced especially what went wrong with projects in their Policy Area in previous call. They gave good advice to improve the application but without knowing about the details of the application."*
- *"We informed them about the project and had online meetings with PA Inno and PA Tourism, both very useful and supportive PACs."*

Across all these examples, a common thread is that the most productive PACs combine structured stakeholder engagement with active brokering across funding streams well beyond Interreg BSR alone.

EUSBSR support to IBSR project implementation and transfer of results



Desk research shows that there is EUSBSR support to project implementation and transfer of results which is visible through two main channels. One is the EUSBSR Annual Forum where numerous IBSR projects and project platforms participate with stands for relevant EUSBSR Policy Areas or with workshops or interactive sessions. The second is the support from EUSBSR PACs to project implementation, even if the intensity and scope of support vary from PAC to PAC.



In the survey and interviews to EUSBSR PACs, they perceive that the PAC-project relationship is mutually reinforcing: projects deliver the concrete activities and results that give the EUSBSR operational substance, while PACs provide the strategic orientation, networks and policy context that make project outputs relevant beyond their immediate scope. As one respondent puts it, without PAC involvement, projects would have little connection to the EUSBSR and vice versa.

Several PACs describe the relationship as a continuous feedback loop between policy and practice. Projects provide policy input, test solutions and generate ideas for new activities, while PACs steer them towards EUSBSR objectives and embed their results in broader policy dialogues. PA Secure offers a compelling illustration of this dynamic: their working model of identifying pressing issues, engaging champions and channelling resources through projects led to the establishment of the Baltic Sea Region Network of Volunteer Organisations and Authorities (BSR-NOVA). The IBSR project CREWS is now contributing to PA Secure and actively using BSR-NOVA as a setting for developing its authority-civil society cooperation model. PA Tourism describes a similar logic, noting that project results systematically feed into policy discussions, priority updates and new strategic initiatives, creating an evidence base that keeps the EUSBSR relevant and responsive. Overall, the responses reflect a PAC community that sees its engagement with projects not as a peripheral task but as a central mechanism through which the EUSBSR is implemented.

During the capitalisation phase, PACs most frequently communicate project results to external stakeholders, a well-established practice for the majority. Supporting knowledge transfer and solution testing is common but selective, with engagement varying by project. While some PACs avoid taking on formal leadership roles preferring to act as strong supporters rather than full project partners, they occasionally do so when a project holds particular strategic importance, such as when a coordinating body is directly involved. PACs also facilitate the integration of successful projects into transnational collaborative platforms or IBSR project platforms. Taking a leadership role in projects or platforms remains the least consistent activity, indicating it is not a core expectation but rather an exception driven by a project's strategic importance to PA.

Several PACs also highlight the role of PAC support in strengthening policy relevance and sustainability of outputs ensuring that project results are not only disseminated but embedded in ongoing policy processes at regional, national and EU levels, for example in the field of spatial planning, tourism, bioeconomy, maritime safety security and emergency response. Connections to national ministries, regional authorities, EU policymakers and European networks have, in several cases, directly

strengthened the uptake of project results. Several PACs also mention project platforms as important vehicles for organising larger BSR events and raising the profile of important messages and policy recommendations. The overall sentiment is that being part of the EUSBSR framework, with active PAC involvement, adds a strategic dimension to projects that meaningfully increases both their visibility and their long-term impact.

EUSBSR survey data reveals how EUSBSR PACs disseminate information about the IBSR Programme. Outreach is primarily directed toward institutional and Programme-embedded actors, reflecting the strategic and transnational character of the Programme. The most widely reached stakeholders are Baltic Sea international organisations and funding bodies, other PACs, and universities, each cited by 14 of 15 respondents. Baltic Sea Strategy Point (13) and national ministries (12) follow closely. A second tier of frequently reached stakeholders includes interest groups, associations and NGOs, regional public authorities, and international governmental organisations, each mentioned by 10 respondents. Research organisations, sectoral agencies, and EUSBSR National Coordinators form a further tier (7–8 mentions), reflecting the Programme's thematic and policy-oriented focus. Local public authorities and education/training centres are less regularly engaged (6–7 mentions), pointing to efforts to connect Programme results with local implementation. Private sector actors appear less frequently.

These patterns are brought to life by concrete examples shared by respondents.

- One response illustrates how EUSBSR communicators actively mobilise their networks rather than simply share information. A PAC of Spatial Planning personally invited stakeholders to the 5th Baltic Maritime Spatial Planning Forum, held in Riga in November 2025 using this established regional event as a practical vehicle for both dissemination and policy dialogue.
- Another example points to outreach beyond the Baltic Sea region itself. One respondent cited direct engagement with DG REGIO and DG EAC, the EC directorates responsible for regional policy and education respectively. This reflects an awareness that Programme communication benefits from reaching EU-level actors who influence the broader policy and funding context.
- A third example captures the multi-level nature of outreach in practice. One respondent described engaging HELCOM, the Union of the Baltic Cities, multiple cities and municipalities, regional authorities, ministries from several countries, and NGOs including WWF. All of this has been a part of regular stakeholder communication by respective PACs. This range, spanning intergovernmental bodies, local governments, and civil society, reflects the layered outreach that the Programme's transnational scope encourages.

When asked about **effective mechanisms** for communicating and disseminating information about the Programme, PAC respondents mention the following:

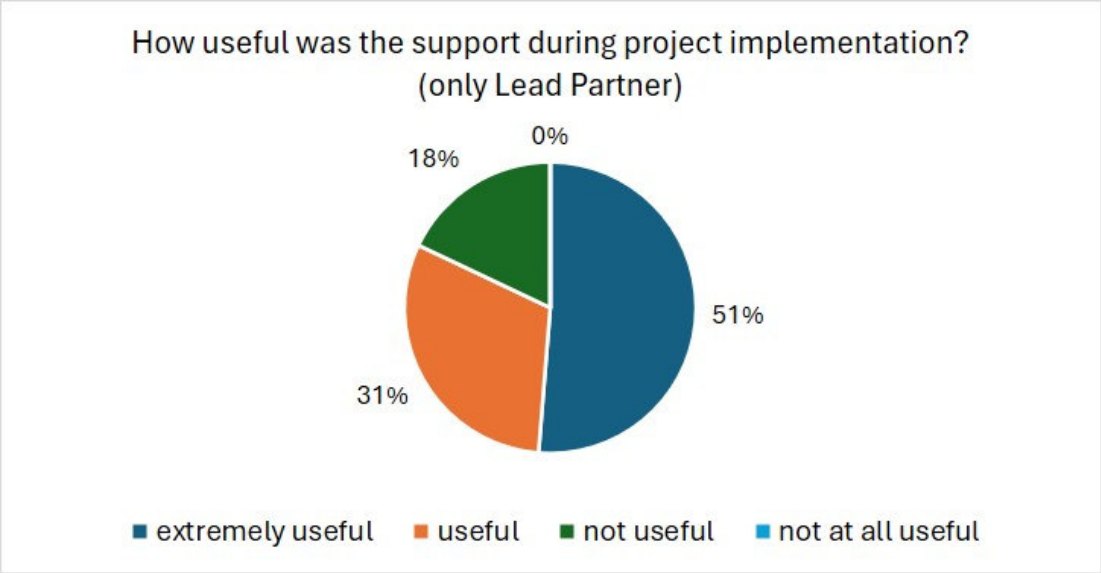
- Inviting projects to speak or present at PA events and at the EUSBSR Annual Forum.
- Referring stakeholders to the IBSR Programme website as well as specific project websites, sharing links to project documents and outputs, inviting stakeholders to project events, connecting stakeholders and projects virtually.
- Embedding project knowledge into policy work, e.g. directly feeding into VASAB or HELCOM recommendations or strategies.

- Organising project presentations at PA SG meetings placing projects in front of decision-relevant audiences in a structured setting.

These patterns are well illustrated by concrete examples from respondents. Several PAs have developed recurring formats that bring stakeholders and projects together regularly. For example, PA Ship organises a twice-yearly Operational Group meeting for all PA projects and invited speakers. The format has directly inspired new project ideas and action on green shipping corridors. The Baltic Sea PFAS Network[54] takes this further, convening stakeholders virtually every month thus generating a continuous flow of new connections and ideas among project representatives, national authorities, and universities.

The survey to beneficiaries asked how lead partners feel supported during project implementation. About 51% of lead partner organisations (n=68) responses indicated that they are in regular contact with one or various PACs during project implementation.

Figure 12-3 Usefulness of EUSBSR PAC support during project implementation (only LP)



Source: own elaboration based on beneficiaries survey, n=39

Overall about 82% of those lead partners who responded (n=39) find the support useful to extremely useful, with about 51% reporting is as extremely useful, as shown in the figure below. On the contrary, 18% find the support not useful, while no one finds the support not useful at all.

Looking on the responses on support from the EUSBSR PACs while implementing the project, beneficiaries described their support mainly in terms of dissemination, networking and facilitation, through the promotion of the project through EUSBSR events and stakeholders. Some beneficiaries also reported the support through knowledge exchange and feedback in the project outputs.

[54] https://www.ivl.se/english/ivl/project/baltic-sea-pfas-network.html connected to PA HAzards and the project platform HAZGONE.

Taking a closer look to the beneficiaries who had some interaction with EUSBSR PACs during the project implementation phase, they described a range of support. The generally positive feedback needs to be highlighted. From 71 open responses from beneficiaries, 60 are positive about the support and contact with PACs.

Concrete examples of this support include especially the dissemination of project results, the joint organisation of workshops, an increased visibility and communication of project results, but also the contribution to the quality of the results, e.g. feedback on policy briefs or inputs to recommendations, knowledge exchange and joint participation in events, such as the EUSBSR Annual Forums.

The responses point to a range of tangible outcomes arising from cooperation with PACs, with dissemination and visibility emerging as the most consistently cited benefits. Projects describe gaining access to high-level events and forums including the EUSBSR Annual Forum, the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum, the European Health Forum 2025 and Maritime Days where they could present results to audiences and decision-makers they would not otherwise have reached. Joint sessions, co-organised workshops and panel discussions are mentioned as concrete formats through which PAC cooperation translated into broader outreach, with one respondent noting that PAC channels helped their policy recommendations reach high-level policymakers beyond the direct project partnership.

- *”Cooperation with PAC Innovation facilitates the replication of our circular food delivery solutions (like the Venloop system) by connecting us with interested municipalities across the Baltic Sea Region during EUSBSR events and forums.”*
- *“The PA has recommended events and policymaker organisations / networks to reach out to. They have provided consultation and promised to promote our workshop which we are preparing for EUSBSR. They will attempt to include us in the project village during BSSS Cities and Region day. And they also provided consultation with regards to the RegioAwards.”*
- *“They helped us promote the project results and reach out to some stakeholders, we met at the Forum too.”*
- *“Connecting with other related projects, contributions to events and platform newsletters, invitation to EUSBSR events with active contribution.”*
- *“Through a critical assessment of what is feasible and what is not in terms of implementation, and by providing real samples for analysis.”*
- *“We took part in different relevant events to tell about our project and this was initiated by PAC.”*
- *“Dialogue and input into our manuals as well as a lot of help with dissemination of results.”*
- *“Participating in the Annual conference gave me some important food for thought.”*
- *“Advertisement of project activities, participation in some of the local project activities, exchange on additional cooperation opportunities.”*

In a few cases, mentioned by approx. 10% of the open responses, the support goes clearly beyond dissemination and visibility, into supporting the pilot phase of projects and the transfer of results to target groups. Here are a few examples of beneficiary responses:

- *"PACs are particularly helpful for establishing contact with interest groups. They support dissemination activities but support also with contacts to organisation which would benefit from the pilots."*
- *"NDPHS was involved as a partner throughout the entire project and focused specifically on how the project results could be transferred to the ministerial level in the participating countries. In addition, NDPHS played a key role in communicating and disseminating the project outcomes to relevant stakeholders, and in supporting regional knowledge transfer through the established channels of NDPHS/PA Health."*
- *"Support involves disseminating our project results via EUSBSR networks (PA Innovation), inviting the consortium to relevant policy dialogues, and supporting the transfer of our circular solutions to other Baltic Sea Region municipalities."*

Beyond dissemination, several respondents point to outcomes with longer-term strategic significance. These include contributions to policy processes such as the revision of VASAB Recommendations for Spatial Planning of the Coastal Zone in the Baltic Sea Region and land-use data harmonisation in the Region as well as the strengthening of multi-level governance and cross-border cooperation. PACs facilitated connections to new partners and stakeholder networks, in one case directly enabling a project to replace a partner that had dropped out. Cooperation also supported the development of platform projects and contributed to Action Plan updates, with one respondent describing the relationship as genuinely reciprocal – their platform serving as an operational tool for the PAC, while the PAC provided strategic direction in return. Across the responses, the prevailing sentiment is that PAC cooperation amplifies project impact, helping results travel further and embed more durably in regional policy and practice.

- *"PA Bioeconomy, during the project we had meetings with PA Bioeconomy coordinator related to policy brief on sustainable utilisation of forestry side streams."*
- *"We've been invited to PA meetings to introduce our project. We've been encouraged to give regular updates on the progress of our project. We've been invited to become part of the Steering Committee of one PA."*
- *"Knowledge sharing during the development of project results. Joint discussions on project (intermediate) results and how to better disseminate them. Support in organising events on European level. Sometimes joint applications to increase chances and gain slots on European events. Speaker roles during own organised project events. Link to EU policy makers, support in drawing meaningful recommendations."*

Finally, PACs also maintain and communicate updated information on (new and additional) funding opportunities, timelines and suitable Programmes. In some cases, support may extend to assisting with application drafting and the application process itself.

Efficiency and effectiveness of the IBSR support to EUSBSR

Assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of the project types for the EUSBSR support (PACs assistance, support to Strategy Point, organisation of the Strategy Forums) is methodologically difficult. First, the notions of efficiency and effectiveness of the EUSBSR are not clearly defined, leading to different definitions and forms of understanding, depending on the perspective. Second, there are different action areas and frameworks for evaluation. While EUSBSR PAC, Annual Forum and BSP have clear objectives and roles within the EUSBSR governance, it is not the task of this evaluation to evaluate them in their EUSBSR governance framework, but rather the dedicated IBSR support to them. So the guiding evaluation framework is rather the "return on investment" that the IBSR receives from its support to EUSBSR than the absolute achievements of the EUSBSR stakeholder work. Third, decisions about the IBSR support to the EUSBSR are not driven only by rational cost-benefit criteria but are first and foremost political decisions, sometimes recognising that this support is not optimal but still a valid way to support the EUSBSR, given the lack of larger national contributions to the EUSBSR governance.

Given that these methodological limitations make an assessment in the context of this evaluation challenging, the notions of effectiveness and efficiency are defined as follows:

- **Efficiency of the IBSR support to EUSBSR:** Are the resources dedicated to the EUBSSR spent efficiently, i.e. with an adequate and reasonable relationship between results/impacts and resources? What are disadvantages/inefficiencies of each type of support?
- **Effectiveness of the IBSR support to EUSBSR**: In how far have the expected results established in the Programme Document for PO 4.2 been achieved, namely, organisations have the capacity to coordinate and communicate the EUSBSR's progress and achievements, they engage different stakeholders in the region, they work on common priorities of the EU and non-EU countries, they strengthen the governance structures in the EUSBSR, they stimulate policy discussions in the Baltic Sea region, they build up networks, and they engage and motivate different stakeholders to plan actions and secure further funding for the implementation of the EUSBSR Action Plan.

With regard to **efficiency**, the analysis has examined the information regarding funding of the projects under 4.2, the activities and expected results presented in the 4.2 projects, the perception of MC members, beneficiaries and EUSBSR regarding the work and results of the supported projects. Most of the relevant information has been presented in the previous sections. Information on the role of EUSBSR on facilitating long-term effects of IBSR project results (presented in Chapter 8) has also been taken into account.

EUSBSR stakeholders generally perceive the current financial support mechanisms primarily through IBSR's PAC support as effective, flexible, and efficient, expressing satisfaction and seeing little need for fundamental change. The project-based approach is valued for its ability to cover basic routine activities, though some suggest that longer-term funding cycles (e.g. seven-year projects) would be also appreciated.

The perception of MC members is generally positive about the IBSR support as such.



The interviewed MC members broadly acknowledge that the EUSBSR and the Programme are closely linked and have mutual benefits. PAC performance is acknowledged as uneven, with some PACs delivering clear added value while others remain less visible or focused primarily on projects in which they are directly involved. Former mechanisms of interaction such as flagship labelling and explicit Strategy alignment criteria in project assessment are cited as having provided stronger and more visible linkages, and their absence is noted.

Approx. half of the MC members would like to see a clearer systematic uptake of project results into PA of the EUSBSR and more proactive idea generation work from all PACs. Two thirds of the MC delegations raise concerns about the general balance and depth of the IBSR support to the EUSBSR, however, not questioning the efficiency or effectiveness of the IBSR support as such. The most consistent observation is that the relationship is financially one-sided: the Programme currently serves as the primary and in many respects the only financial backbone of the Strategy, funding the annual forum, PAC structures and thematic projects. Respondents argue this is unsustainable and that responsibility for financing the Strategy should shift more firmly to Member States and mainstream Programmes, rather than resting disproportionately on the transnational Programme. A second concern is the blurring of identities between IBSR and EUSBSR. Respondents note that even at ministerial level, the Strategy and the Programme are frequently conflated - a confusion that weakens strategic ownership and makes it harder to build broad political commitment to the EUSBSR beyond the Interreg community. Ownership of the Strategy is seen as too narrowly concentrated among IBSR actors, while mainstream Programmes remain insufficiently engaged in its implementation.

On the question of improvement, though, most responses see a need for action rather at the EUSBSR and national level rather than for the IBSR Programme, wishing for more national support and commitment to the EUSBSR, a greater clarity and accessibility of EUSBSR structures and a stronger uptake of IBSR project results into regional and national policy-making.

With regard to **effectiveness**, positive outcomes of supported EUSBSR instruments and tools are benchmarked against the expected results of the IBSR support to EUSBSR governance tools under PO 4.2 (as defined in the IBSR 2021-2027 Cooperation Programme Document). The table on the next page shows the concrete expected results of the IBSR support to macro-regional governance.

Given the available data on concrete results of IBSR support to the EUSBSR, the contribution to the individual result categories cannot be quantified or assessed in detail. With the available information and stakeholder feedback it seems reasonable to assume that in general organisations benefit from the IBSR support in all categories. Thus, effectiveness of the IBSR support is only assessed at a general level.

Table 12-2 Achievements vs. expected results of the support to EUSBSR

Expected Result	Support to PAC	Support to BSP	Support to Strategy Forum
Organisations have the capacity to coordinate and communicate the EUSBSR's progress and achievements	✓	✓	✓
Organisations engage different stakeholders in the region	✓	✓	✓
Organisations work on common priorities of the EU and non-EU countries	✓	✓	✓
Organisations strengthen the governance structures in the EUSBSR	✓	✓	✓
Organisations stimulate policy discussions in the Baltic Sea region	✓	✓	✓
Organisations build up networks	✓	✓	✓
Organisations engage and motivate different stakeholders to plan actions and secure further funding for the implementation of the EUSBSR Action Plan.	✓	✓	✓

Source: expert assessment

Within a general qualitative range, the overall conclusion is that all supported tools contribute to the expected results, fulfilling the expectations. While the support to PAC and Strategy Forum are more direct, the support to the BSP has a more indirect effect on the expected results. But still it is deemed effective.



Some national stakeholders adopted in interviews a critical view on the IBSR support to the EUSBSR (demanding other sources of funding to the EUSBSR). However, the positive synergy effects of EUSBSR for the IBSR, namely the project platforms, project results and impacts, the spill-over effects to other Baltic organisations and networks, the continuity of networks and the easy access to other funding Programmes using the EUSBSR PACs as gatekeeper and signposting mechanism seem to be underestimated and not sufficiently identified. Here, a benchmarking with other Interreg Programmes can be interesting to show more explicitly the benefits of the support to EUSBSR for the IBSR.

12.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the evaluation questions:

EQ 3.4 How did the EUSBSR (mostly PACs) provide support to the implementation of Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects and transfer of project results to target groups? What did this support lead to?

The analysis of PO 4.2 projects and activities shows that there is clear EUSBSR support to IBSR project implementation and transfer of results which is visible through two main channels. One is the EUSBSR Annual Forum where numerous IBSR projects and project platforms participate with stands for relevant EUSBSR Policy Areas or with workshops or interactive sessions. The second is the support from EUSBSR PACs to project implementation, even if the intensity and scope of support vary from PAC to PAC and from project to project, depending on several factors.

The Monitoring Committee members interviewed generally agree that the EUSBSR and the Programme are closely linked and mutually beneficial. PAC performance is acknowledged as valuable but uneven. Approximately half of the MC members would like to see a clearer, more systematic uptake of project results in the PA of the EUSBSR, as well as more proactive idea generation from all PACs.

A majority of beneficiaries has close contact with EUSBSR PACs. About 51% of lead partner responses in the beneficiary survey (n=68) indicated that they are in regular contact with one or various PACs during project implementation. 82% of those lead partners who responded (n=39) found the support useful, with 51% thinking it was extremely useful. Beneficiary responses point to a range of tangible outcomes arising from cooperation with PACs, with dissemination and visibility emerging as the most consistently cited benefits. Projects describe gaining access to high-level events and forums, such as the EUSBSR Annual Forum, the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum, the European Health Forum Gastein or Maritime Days. There they can present results to audiences and decision-makers that they would not otherwise reach. Joint sessions, co-organised workshops and panel discussions are mentioned as concrete formats through which PAC cooperation has translated into broader outreach.

Beyond dissemination, several respondents point to outcomes with longer-term strategic significance. These include contributions to policy processes such as the revision of coastal spatial planning recommendations and land-use data harmonisation in the Baltic Sea Region as well as the strengthening of multi-level governance in relevant thematic areas. PACs facilitated connections to new partners and stakeholder networks. Cooperation also supported the development of platform projects and contributed to Action Plan updates, with one respondent describing the relationship as genuinely reciprocal – their platform serving as an operational tool for the PAC, while the PAC provided strategic direction in return.

There is evidence that PAC support sometimes goes clearly beyond dissemination and visibility, into supporting the pilot phase of projects and the transfer of results to target groups. During the capitalisation phase, most PACs frequently communicate project results to external stakeholders. Supporting knowledge transfer and solution testing is common but selective, with engagement varying by project. Several PAs have developed recurring formats that bring stakeholders and projects together regularly. For example, PA Ship organises a twice-yearly Operational Group meeting for all PA projects and invited speakers. The format has directly inspired new project ideas and action on green shipping corridors. The Baltic Sea PFAS Network (PA Hazards and part of the HAZGONE project platform) takes

this further, convening stakeholders virtually every month thus generating a continuous flow of new connections and ideas among project representatives, national authorities, and universities.

All stakeholders confirm that IBSR projects and PACs benefit from a win-win relationship. While IBSR projects provide policy input, test solutions and generate ideas for new activities, PACs steer them towards EUSBSR objectives and embed their results in broader policy dialogues. Examples from several PAs (e.g. PA Secure and PA Tourism) describe how project results systematically feed into policy discussions, priority updates and new strategic initiatives, creating an evidence base that keeps the EUSBSR relevant and responsive.

The general conclusion is that there is valuable support to the implementation of IBSR projects and to the transfer of project results. Through EUSBSR PAC networks, results reach policymakers and stakeholders beyond project partnerships, increasing visibility and practical application. Projects gain access to high-level forums, contribute to policy processes, and strengthen multi-level governance with PACs sometimes even securing consortium continuity. PAC cooperation amplifies project impact, helping results travel further and embed more durably in regional policy and practice.

EQ 4.2 How did PACs support project idea generation? What is the effectiveness of the additional support to PACs for project idea generation and development?

The analysis of PO 4.2 projects and activities, the interviews to PACs and the analysis of responses to the beneficiary survey show that support to project idea generation within IBSR is one of the core activities of PACs. All PACs revise project ideas and sometimes get in touch with applicants.

Responses in the beneficiary survey indicate that 60% of lead partner organisations were in contact with one or various PACs before or during their application phase. About 70% (n=46) found the support useful, with 37% thinking it was extremely useful.

Beneficiaries who received support from EUSBSR PACs during the application process described this support in terms of meetings, written feedback on project ideas or application forms, and advice on work plans, project outlines, governance and networks, potential partners, operational issues and past projects. A smaller number of respondents mentioned more hands-on contributions, such as sharing thematic expertise, providing substantive content input or even supplying physical materials relevant to the project's scope of research. Respondents highlighted that PACs shared lessons from previous funding calls and flagged issues with earlier projects in their Policy Area, using this knowledge to help applicants refine their proposals. Others described how PACs facilitated connections to relevant networks, validated the thematic relevance of project ideas and encouraged projects. In several cases, PACs joined consortia as associated or full partners, enabling sustained input throughout the project's development.

According to PACs, they receive a high number of project ideas and do not have time and resources to cooperate in-depth with all project ideas promotors and applicants. When PACs have time and identify relevant projects for their PA, they offer ad-hoc meetings, written support or other support via brainstorming sessions, application-writing workshops and shared online workspaces. For strategic projects from the perspective of the different Policy Areas, there is more thorough guidance during project idea generation and development.

The revision of PAC project generation activity and the generally positive feedback of beneficiaries lead to the conclusion that project idea support is highly effective and adds value to applications. The analysis shows that the intensity and number of applications supported by PACs differ, usually due to time constraints and limited resources. Even though the effectiveness of the PAC support to IBSR project idea generation is already high, it could be even more effective if PACs reached out and supported more applicants and organisations.

EQ 4.1 What is the efficiency and effectiveness of the project types for the EUSBSR support (PACs assistance, support to Strategy Point, organisation of the Strategy Forums)?

In the context of this evaluation, the efficiency of IBSR support for the EUSBSR is assessed in terms of whether the resources dedicated to the EUSBSR are spent efficiently, i.e. whether there is an adequate and reasonable relationship between results and resources. The effectiveness of IBSR support for the EUSBSR is assessed by determining the extent to which the expected results set out in the Programme Document for PO 4.2 have been achieved and if a general benefit is observed.

Support to PACs: This is the most important support in terms of resources. Work between PACs and IBSR is deemed as efficient and effective. The support creates value for money with a wide range of visible and tangible effects and benefits over many different thematic areas, covering all POs, over a long time period to IBSR projects, project idea generation and the overall IBSR Programme. The support allows to ensure in-depth preparation of and assistance to projects, personalised support to the dissemination and transfer of results, continued stakeholder engagement, communication to institutions and decision-makers in the Baltic Sea Region.

Support to the Baltic Strategy Point (BSP): The Strategy Point in itself is an important support to the EUSBSR governance, in particular to PACs and the National Coordinators, but also ensuring continuity and effectiveness of the EUSBSR governance. The work of BSP and its support is deemed useful to maintain the overall governance capacity and quality for the EUSBSR.

Support to the Strategy Forum: The IBSR support is rather small in terms of funding with less than 5% of projects under PO 4.2. It can be concluded that the Annual Forum is a very useful and relevant event that brings together IBSR projects, EUSBSR PA stakeholders and policymakers. Considering the analysis, the IBSR support is considered as effective and efficient.

A need to reflect on the general balance and depth of the IBSR support to the EUSBSR has been identified, considering the feedback of two-thirds of the MC delegations on the perceived need to shift responsibility for financing EUSBSR more firmly to Member States and mainstream programmes.

Despite the overall positive assessment, there are some challenges, such as uneven PAC performance across PACs, low visibility of PAC work within IBSR, lack of follow-up on general EUSBSR contributions to IBSR projects and project platforms, including long-term effects. The challenges might be difficult to tackle by the IBSR Programme but rather seen as a suggestion to reflect on them together with the EUSBSR governance.

Overall, it can be concluded that the current support model enables substantial positive synergy effects between the EUSBSR and the IBSR, the spill-over effects to other Baltic organisations and networks, the continuity of networks and the easy access to other funding Programmes. These positive effects add to the overall long-term effect and sustainability of project results (see also Chapter 8).

13 The Programme implementation procedures and tools

The Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme implements its projects through structured implementation procedures. One key tool in programme implementation is the online system BAMOS+.

This section refers to the following evaluation questions:

EQ 5.1 Which main changes, made in the period 2021-2027 (compared to the 2014-2020) to application procedures as well as to content and financial reporting procedures, were the most significant for reducing the administrative burden for applicants and projects?
EQ 5.2 How did these adjustments lead to more efficient processes also for the MA/JS? What could still be improved to make the processes even lighter?
EQ 5.3 What are applicants' and projects' experiences in using BAMOS+ (e.g. for newcomers to the Programme, as well as for Lead Partners who already worked with BAMOS in the period 2014-2020)? What are the BAMOS+ features (during application and during reporting) that applicants and projects find most useful and user-friendly?

The analysis covers a qualitative documentary review of administrative procedures and changes from 2014-2020 to 2021-2027, a service blueprint analysis, the analysis of interviews to Programme Bodies, as well as the examination of beneficiary responses to different surveys. It has to be noted that several changes identified below as relevant for reducing administrative burden are more thoroughly analysed in other chapters of this report, e.g. the use of SCOs (Chapter 11), the small projects (Chapter 9), the focus on pilots and solutions (Chapter 10), and are here only described as drivers for change.

13.1 Context

The Programme is based on a supporting Programme architecture and implemented through common rules and agreements, a distribution of tasks between Programme bodies, a structured framework of processes, internal procedures, a website, the BAMOS+ system and a set of integrated tools. Over the years, the Programme has developed efficient processes which are regularly evaluated and also internally revised. The main processes in contact with applicants and beneficiaries are the application process and the reporting/monitoring process during project implementation.

The application process is structured as depicted below.

Figure 13-1 IBSR 2021-2027 Application Process (example of the Project Platform Call)



Source: https://interreg-baltic.eu/gateway/

The support tools for applicants and beneficiaries are available on the IBSR website, for example, through the 'gateway for applicants', an online interface platform where applicants can search for calls for applications, check the requirements for submitting a project proposal, watch the tutorials or go through several aupport materials in the form of factsheets or specific guidance notes, e.g. on indicators selection, as well as a matchmaking portal to identify possible partners (interreg-baltic.eu/gateway/). Information for applicants and beneficiaries is also available in the Programme Manual and different complementary documents. Guidance on BAMOS+ through manuals, the BAMOSwiki and the BAMOS Helpdesk facilitate the work with the online system for applicants and especially for beneficiaries during project implementation and reporting.

The Programme Website is relevant for the communication and dissemination of project results, as well as showcasing project impact stories and long-term effects, aggregating information on certain themes and topics and on project platforms, presenting information on the support to the EUSBSR and indicating links and contributions of IBSR projects to the EUSBSR.

The BAMOS system was already used in the 2014-2020 programming period and was further developed into BAMOS+ for the 2021-2027 programming period. It is a system for the electronic data exchange, ensuring the exchange of documents, information and data between the project partners and the Programme. This includes the application for funding, the contracting of the projects, the reporting and monitoring of the project implementation, the certification costs and the payment of the Programme reimbursement, the changes in the project set-up, if any, and the communication between the projects and the MA/JS. BAMOS+ introduced a number of changes that comply with the Programme implementation logic and its overall changes. Two main changes were introduced. The first one regards the complete modularisation of application forms and the second the embedding partner reporting.

In 2021-2027, the Programme prepared a matchmaking platform for partners to help organisations identifying partners for their projects, which is also relevant for and linked to the communication activities of the Programme. Beyond these, the interactive support offer for projects during implementation is extensive, including also a pilot check-up that allows the direct engagement with beneficiaries as they prepare their piloting activities.

A number of changes in the Programme design and implementation took place in 2021-2027, falling under the overall shift towards more simplification, results-oriented approaches and digitalisation. The Programme document itself highlights this shift towards simplification, in particular through the use of SCOs. Furthermore, the introduction of small projects simplified the application process, gave the opportunity to Programme newcomers to apply for the Programme funding and exclusively use SCOs, which simplifies their reporting process.

The Programme also introduced a streamlined intervention logic for core projects with a focus on achievements including a pre-defined structure for the work packages, namely 'preparation-piloting-transferring' for when designing a project, highlighting this shift towards stronger result-orientation. Last but not least, some minor changes took place, such as the improved structured and targeted support to applicants and beneficiaries, through webinars, Q&A consultations etc. These changes add to the digitalisation efforts through the adjustment of the pre-existing BAMOS system into BAMOS+.

With regard to the state aid statements, changes were integrated in form of an ex ante risk classification per type of organisations before assessing the application of Article 20 of the General Block Exemption Regulation (GBER). So, instead of assessing the activities of all applicants/partners, the MA/JS in its assessment of state aid focuses on the types of organisations who are more likely to fall under state aid rules and on those who have requested a plausibility check. This reduced the administrative burden for many applicants, and also for the MA/JS.

13.2 Analysis

To show the evidence and findings that help to answer the different evaluation questions, the analysis is structured into different sub-chapters. First, the analysis of changes in procedures and processes in IBSR 2021-2027 is introduced. After that, a service blueprint analysis of the internal processes is presented, gaining knowledge on the efficiency of processes. This is followed by the examination of the interviews to Programme Bodies of the responses of beneficiaries and applicants to different surveys.

Changes in procedures and processes introduced in 2021-2027



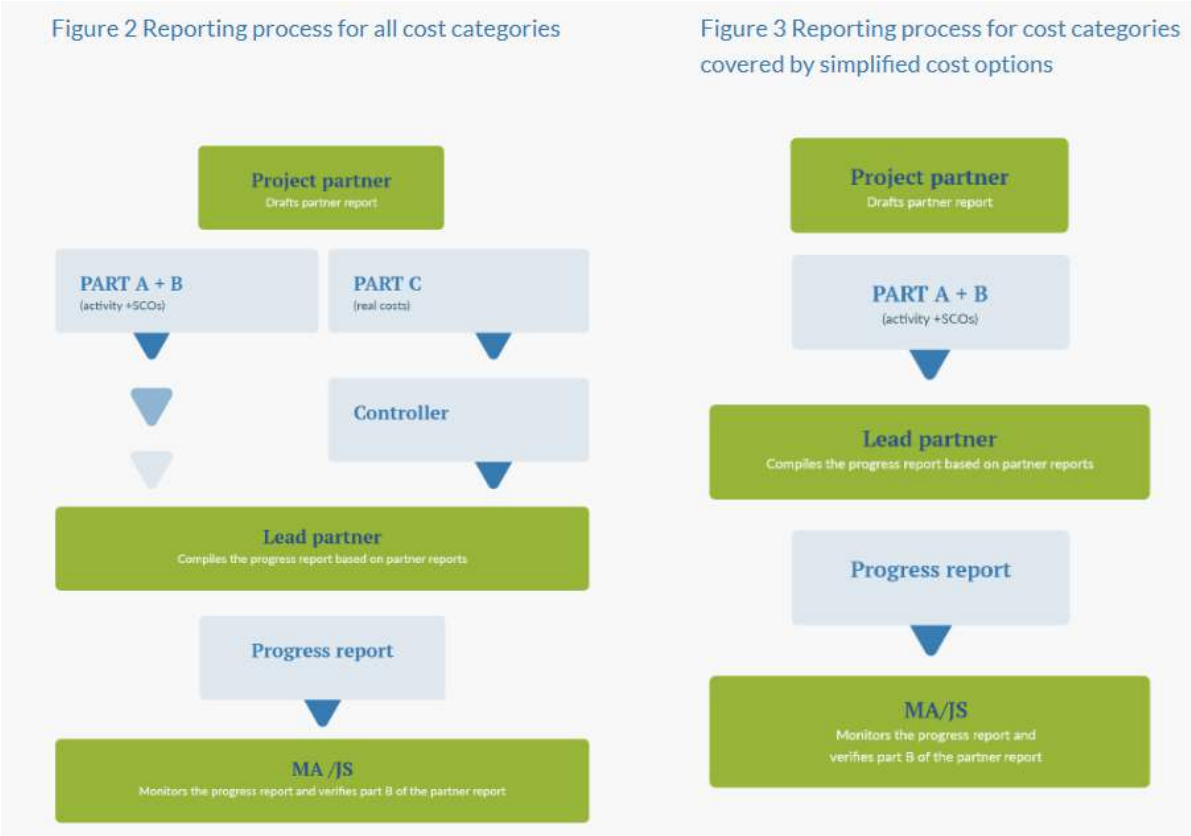
According to the MA/JS, the introduction of SCOs has been the most relevant change introduced in the 2021-2027 period, speeding up internal processes for the MA/JS and reducing administrative burden. The use of SCOs has significantly streamlined the administrative lifecycle for projects. By moving away from traditional real-cost reporting, the Programme has unlocked structural efficiencies across application, reporting, and auditing workflows. The use of SCOs (see also Chapter 11) simplified the financial reporting procedure and reduced the number of errors. When using SCOs, project partners spend significantly less time compiling, translating, and filing individual invoices, receipts, travel slips, and bank statements. Partner expenditures entirely covered by SCOs are not subject to traditional verification by national controllers. The Managing Authority/Joint Secretariat (MA/JS) verifies these costs directly during the progress report monitoring phase based on predefined rules. This has vastly shortened the time needed to compile partner reports. It has also shortened the time needed for verification of costs.

Historically, staff costs were the most complex and error-prone area of Interreg controls and audits. To address this issue, the IBSR Programme introduced standardised, country-specific hourly rates. These rates are calculated using a verifiable method. Project partners simply multiply the documented hours by their country's set rate, thereby eliminating the risk of mathematical errors or differing national eligibility interpretations.

As SCOs eliminate the need for manual receipt-by-receipt checking, less verification work is needed, so the amount of work has decreased significantly. Overall, this streamlined validation process enables the Programme to process reimbursements faster than during the 2014–2020 period, when payment validation could take months.

The financial reporting process for cost categories covered by SCOs is more efficient and straightforward (as can be observed in the figure below), leading to a streamlining of the overall reporting procedure.

Figure 13-2 Simplified reporting process when using SCOs



Source: https://interreg-baltic.eu/toolkit/online-Programme-manual/d-core-projects/d-4reporting/

In addition, other relevant changes in 2021-2027 helped simplifying processes and making them more efficient.

The introduction of small projects (analysed in chapter 9) simplified the application process for applicants and gave them the opportunity to apply for the Programme funding, exclusively using SCOs, which simplifies their reporting process, reducing the administrative burden.

Furthermore, the change in the intervention logic and the focus on concrete achievements of projects, such as pilots and solutions, led to a streamlined work package structure and changes on the content-related side of processes. This regards a more focused and a more action-oriented Programme logic. The projects are expected to result in practical solutions and results that address clearly defined target groups. This intervention logic reflects also the indicator system proposed by the European Commission for the 2021-2027 Interreg Programmes. All core projects had to follow three pre-defined core stages in their application: preparation, testing and transfer of solutions. Preparation regards project partners and their target groups jointly working to preparing and designing the solution proposed in their project. Testing regards putting this into practice to see how the solution works. Lastly, transfer regards going beyond the project environment and looking at the outreach that is not only targeted to the partners and those actively involved in the project, but demonstrate the good results of the project to the wider audience and encourage others to use their results.

The pre-defined work package structure for the core projects demonstrates a focused process that helps applicants to develop their project ideas. While this is not being perceived as directly reducing the administrative burden for beneficiaries or applicants, evidence suggests that project results and solutions from 2021-2027 projects are more tangible and usable than in 2014-2020 because they are explicitly structured to be tested and refined in real-world conditions.

These major changes, SCOs, small projects, and the focus on pilots and solutions are interconnected and reflected in the BAMOS+ system. The development of BAMOS+ supports the management of applications, projects and the overall Programme. As in previous programming periods, the BAMOS+ system ensures that there is an integrated system for electronic data exchange that covers application, reporting and communication. BAMOS+ introduced a number of technical improvements, compared to BAMOS (2014-2020). Content-related changes are linked to the streamlined Programme focus on solutions and pilots, as well as to adjustments in the application form. Two main changes were introduced. The first one regards the complete modularisation of application forms and the second the embedding partner reporting. The changes and their positive effects are widely appreciated and perceived positively by Programme bodies.

The Programme, in line with these changes, prepared adjusted guidelines and support tools, available on the website and reflected also in the BAMOS+ system. Further to that also the progress reporting mirrored these changes allowing the Programme to monitor the achievements and the challenges in a coherent way throughout the lifecycle of the project.

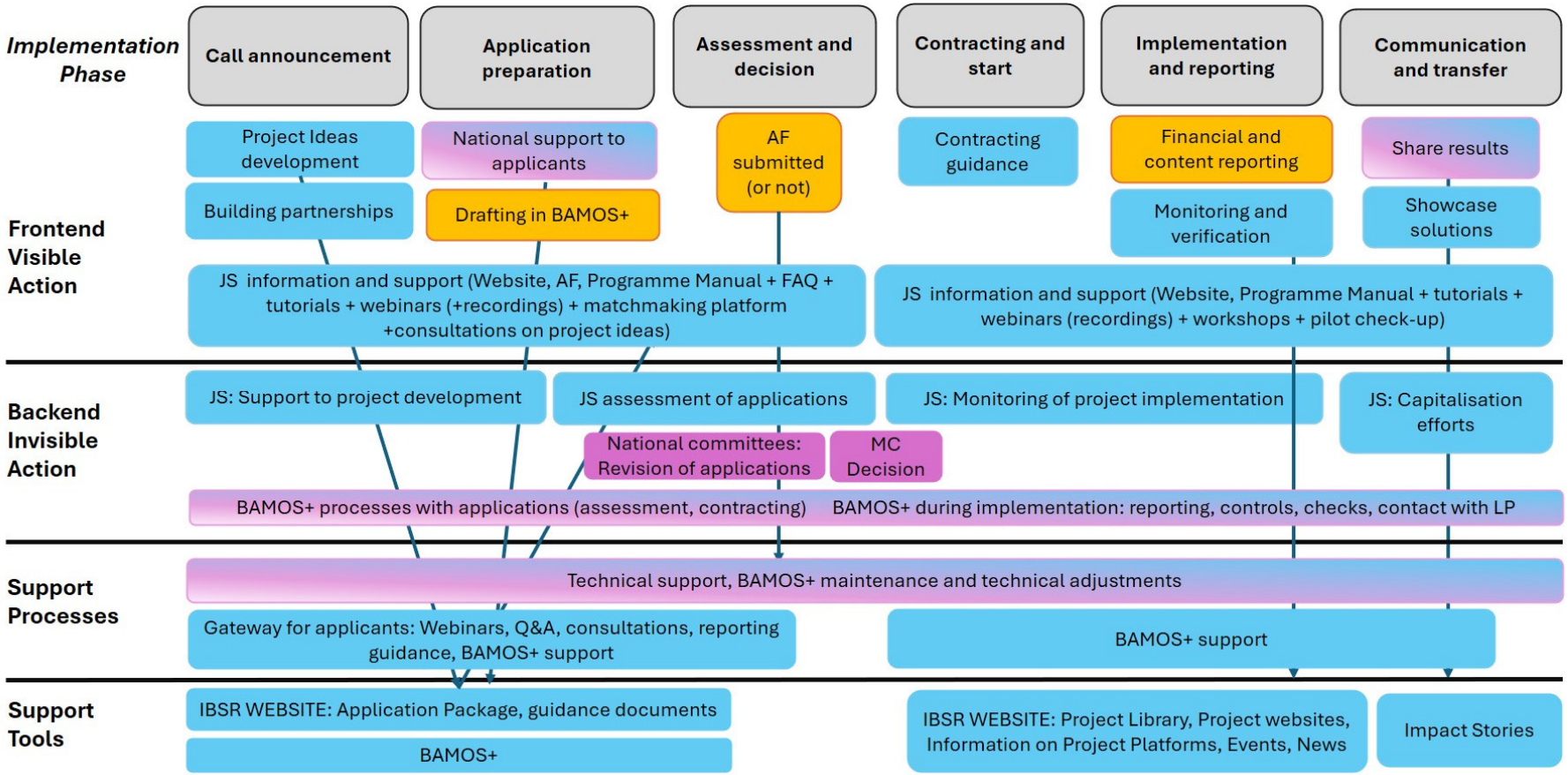
Service blueprint analysis of internal processes



The work with applicants and beneficiaries of the Programme can be understood as delivery of a customer service. The analysis of service delivery from the customer perspective adds, therefore, important insights to the usual evaluation of efficiency of Programme-internal processes. ***Service blueprints*** are process optimisation tools to analyse service processes, from the customer perspective.

The visualisation below sketches the different procedures and integrating front and backend actions with support tools and processes to show if and where the flow and service delivery are not optimal according to the documents, interviews and survey results. The figure shows the interactions of the applicants with the Programme and how these are supported at different stages. The

Figure 13-3 Service blueprint of the internal processes



Source: Own elaboration. (Blue steps are developed mostly by the MA/JS, Pink steps are developed by or in cooperation with national delegations and the MC, orange steps are developed by the applicants/beneficiaries. This is a simplified process description to visualise internal processes.

The service blueprint analysis suggests an effective and efficient service delivery of the Programme in the 2021-2027 programming period. The processes are coherent and well aligned to each other. Frontend action is supported by backend support, supportive guidance and documents as well as by the BAMOS+ system. The analysed processes are generally very efficient, the interaction between the Programme bodies is clear and useful.

As presented in Chapter 11, the use of SCOs in 2021–2027 has generated significant efficiency gains and contributed substantially to administrative simplification. According to analysis carried out by the MA/JS in March 2026, the average time required for partners to submit progress reports decreased by around 66%, from 114 days in 2014–2020 to 38 days in the current period. This improvement is linked to the wider use of SCOs, reduced documentation requirements, and the centralisation of SCO verification at MA/JS level, with national controllers focusing only on real costs. At the same time, payment timelines also improved significantly, decreasing by around 44%, from 195 to 111 days between the end of the reporting period and reimbursement.

With regard to internal learning and improvement of processes, the MA/JS uses different tools to constantly improve administrative processes during Programme implementation. Tools such as feedback surveys after each Call, satisfaction evaluations after each event, internal process reviews and internal reflection activities lead to the early detection of inefficiencies and issues within the internal processes.

There is a considerable share of repetitive and documentation-intensive tasks such as screening applications, checking eligibility and state aid requirements, reviewing reports, and identifying potential issues during project implementation. In light of recent technological advancements, the utilisation of AI tools might have the potential to streamline administrative processes and enhance the efficiency of programme management in future programming periods.

Monitoring Committee members' perception



The interviews with MC members and national delegations confirmed that the application process in 2021-2027 is perceived as smooth and straightforward with no or only very few complaints by applicants. The support to applicants provided through the website of the Programme and more specifically a dedicated section on '**gateway for applicants'** with all important information for the application procedure, the forms, the deadline and instructions on how to prepare the application is well received by applicants. The use of a project idea form as a first step is highly welcomed by all MC members. This system is noted for increasing predictability for applicants and improving proposal quality through MA/JS guidance.

The MC members generally view the administrative processes as pragmatic and functional. The impact of new tools and procedural changes is largely seen as positive, particularly in reducing administrative burdens, despite some technical teething issues. For two MC members, an on-going efficiency concern is the relatively long duration from project idea to project start, which depends also on the applicants' internal processes and of course on external factors such as the number of applications in a Call. One MC member would like to have more time for strategic steering or political reflection during meetings and selection of projects.

The overall processes are well established. The introduction of SCOs in 2021-2027 is widely credited with improving reporting procedures and making verification and controls by MA/JS much more efficient, compared to previous programming periods. The introduction of SCOs has also been credited with reducing the administrative burden for project partners.

The MC members report on generally positive feedback on BAMOS+, only one MC member finds it partially not intuitive and sometimes technically unstable. Other MC members and the MA/JS did not see any issues with stability of BAMOS+, on the contrary being rather satisfied with the stability of the system and the high data security, proofed in external tests. Individual MC members indicated potential for minor improvements in the BAMOS+ system, such as lacking features like PDF exports or the State aid checkbox design.

Beneficiaries' view on administrative burden and BAMOS+

Evidence from the beneficiary survey indicates that SCOs simplified budget planning, financial reporting and compliance with Programme rules and reduced the administrative burden for project partners throughout the project cycle



As already analysed in Chapter 11, the use of SCOs also has significantly accelerated both verification and payment processes compared to the previous programming period and traditional real-cost reimbursement methods. 81% of beneficiaries in the survey agreed that SCOs reduced the administrative burden during the application phase, notably through reduced documentation requirements, simpler budgeting and fewer detailed calculations. In addition, 76% reported this allowed an increased focus on project content and results, while 75% considered that SCOs improved the clarity and predictability of eligibility rules.

The results of survey and interviews show that the use of SCOs helped in four different ways:

- SCOs significantly reduce administrative burden by eliminating the need to verify and justify individual expenditure items (in particular, for flat rates, to a lesser extent for staff costs). Although the CPR made SCOs mandatory only for operations below EUR 200,000, the Programme decided to apply SCOs also to the full budget of small projects (approximately EUR 500,000).
- SCOs allow administrative and financial resources to be redirected towards project implementation and the achievement of results, rather than financial verification.
- Simplified procedures reduce the requirements for administrative knowledge and capacity, facilitating access for small organisations, such as SMEs and NGOs, for which administrative requirements can represent a barrier to participation.
- SCOs contribute to a substantial reduction in error rates. Under traditional cost-based systems, relying on invoices and complex calculations, errors and irregularities were relatively frequent. By contrast, the incidence of such errors under SCOs is reported to be close to zero.

The Programme carried out different surveys to applicants and beneficiaries of core and small projects which included also the assessment of the BAMOS+ tool and the overall support applicants receive from the MA/JS. The beneficiary survey conducted for this evaluation did not ask specifically about BAMOS+.



The Programme survey to Call 2 beneficiaries has been analysed[55]. When it comes to BAMOS+, the vast majority of core project beneficiaries (79%, n=86) strongly agreed or agreed that the tool is valuable, with an even higher value for small project beneficiaries (95%, n=19). In general, the survey respondents evaluated BAMOS+ as a useful and intuitive tool. The detailed evaluation was as follows:

Table 13-1 Beneficiary evaluation of BAMOS+

Statement	Core Project Beneficiaries			Small Project Beneficiaries		
	Agree*	Disagree	Neutral	Agree*	Disagree	Neutral
I consider BAMOS+ a valuable tool for data exchange with the MA/JS.	79%	3%	17%	95%	0%	5%
BAMOS+ has a high availability, i.e. can be accessed whenever it is needed.	88%	2%	9%	89%	5%	5%
BAMOS+ is stable and reliable, i.e. there are no data losses etc.	83%	1%	16%	84%	5%	11%
The navigation between the sections is intuitive.	52%	25%	23%	53%	16%	32%
The dashboard supports me in my work.	58%	8%	34%	58%	0%	42%
Messaging Centre is easy and convenient to use.	51%	6%	43%	42%	5%	53%

* -Agree covers the responses 'Strongly Agree' and 'Agree', while Disagree here covers 'Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree'.
Source: Own elaboration based on Programme surveys to beneficiaries of core (n=86) and small projects (n=19) conducted in August-September 2024.

The table shows that the availability and reliability of BAMOS+ are highly appreciated by the beneficiaries of both core and small projects, whereas when it comes to the navigation and intuitiveness the satisfaction is slightly lower, with 52% of core project beneficiaries and 58% of small project beneficiaries agreeing that the navigation between the sections is intuitive. Furthermore, 75% of core project beneficiaries (58% for small project beneficiaries) found the BAMOSwiki helpful. While only 27% of core project beneficiaries (37% of small project beneficiaries) had been in contact with the BAMOS Helpdesk, all of them (100% in both surveys) found the answer timely and useful.

Also, the evaluation of specific features and functionalities within BAMOS+ was generally very positive, as can be observed in the table below. A number of elements were appreciated, such as the centralised application system, the structured data entry and the integration with other support tools. At the same

[55] These surveys provide the most recent opinion of beneficiaries on BAMOS+. The survey to core project beneficiaries was conducted during August and September 2024, receiving a number of 86 valid responses. The survey to small project beneficiaries was conducted during August and September 2024, receiving a number of 19 valid responses.

time, few applicants reported that the system has some minor usability challenges and that the structure of the tool is not always intuitive, particularly for newcomers.

Early Call 1 applicant survey responses reported that clearer guidance on financial and reporting aspects would reduce the administrative burden, with respondents asking for 'more practical examples how to report standard costs', 'step-by-step instructions for filling the application or compiling the budget'. As an answer to these concerns, technical changes were already introduced in BAMOS+ as well as new guidance provided to applicants of the following calls.

Table 13-2 Beneficiary evaluation of specific features or functionalities of BAMOS+

Statement	Core Project Beneficiaries (n=18-65)			Small Project Beneficiaries (n=3-16)		
	Good*	Acceptable	Poor	Good*	Acceptable	Poor
Overall structure of progress report	78%	17%	6%	100%	0%	0%
Partner report management	72%	22%	6%	67%	0%	33%
Project user's management	72%	22%	6%	67%	0%	33%
Progress report: finance reporting	78%	22%	0%	100%	0%	0%
Partner report	78%	21%	1%	94%	0%	6%
Report of Hours and Employment	72%	25%	3%	88%	6%	6%
User management	68%	29%	3%	75%	19%	6%

* 'Good' covers the responses 'Very good and 'Good'.
Source: Own elaboration based on Programme surveys to beneficiaries of core and small projects conducted in August-September 2024.

13.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the evaluation questions:

EQ 5.1 Which main changes, made in the period 2021-2027 (compared to the 2014-2020) to application procedures as well as to content and financial reporting procedures, were the most significant for reducing the administrative burden for applicants and projects?

The introduction of SCOs has been the most significant change in the 2021–2027 period. It has sped up internal processes for the MA/JS and reduced administrative burden. Using SCOs has significantly streamlined the administrative lifecycle for projects. As thoroughly analysed in Chapter 11, the use of SCOs has substantially reduced the administrative burden for project partners throughout the project cycle. Evidence from interviews, Programme data and beneficiary surveys consistently indicates that SCOs simplified budget planning, financial reporting and compliance with Programme rules.

The introduction of small projects (analysed in chapter 9) simplified the application process for applicants and gave them the opportunity to apply for the Programme funding, exclusively using SCOs, which simplifies their reporting process, reducing the administrative burden.

Another major change was the adjustment of the intervention logic and the focus on pilots and solutions leading to a streamlined work package structure and changes on the content-related side of processes.

While this is not being perceived as directly reducing the administrative burden for beneficiaries or applicants, evidence suggests that project results and solutions from 2021-2027 projects are more tangible and usable than in 2014-2020 because they are explicitly structured to be tested and refined in real-world conditions. This has an indirect effect on the perception of more valuable project results in relationship to the work and time dedicated to application and project implementation.

BAMOS+ ensures that there is an integrated system for electronic data exchange that covers application, reporting and communication in the 2021-2027 period. BAMOS+ introduced a number of improvements, compared to BAMOS (2014-2020) The changes and their positive effects are widely appreciated and perceived positively by Programme bodies and beneficiaries.

EQ 5.2 How did these adjustments lead to more efficient processes also for the MA/JS? What could still be improved to make the processes even lighter?

The service blueprint analysis indicates that the Programme has established a coherent service delivery model in which digital tools, guidance and internal coordination are well interlinked and contribute to a smooth progress starting with the application towards implementation and reporting.

The use of SCOs in 2021-2027 has generated significant efficiency gains and contributed substantially to administrative simplification. As mentioned already in Chapter 11, the average time required for partners to submit progress reports decreased by around 66%, from 114 days in 2014-2020 to 38 days in the current period. Payment timelines also improved significantly, decreasing by around 44%, from 195 to 111 days between the end of the reporting period and reimbursement.

The MA/JS uses different tools to constantly improve administrative processes during Programme implementation. This leads to the early detection of inefficiencies and issues within the internal processes.

Potential for improvement has been detected with regard to BAMOS+. Slight improvements would further increase efficiency of processes within the MA/JS, for example by embedding the project idea form and its submissions into the BAMOS+ system, by using an automatic schedule for the consultations to reduce the time needed to plan them, and some technical changes related to the pdf forms in BAMOS+.

SCOs do not cover all cost categories of core projects, so it might be reflected on if and how the use of SCOs would be possible for other cost categories. However, it has to be noted that future processes depend on the 2028-2034 Interreg Regulations and how the use of SCOs and the performance-based approach will impact the internal operations.

In light of recent technological advancements, the utilisation of AI tools has the potential to enhance the efficiency of administrative processes. AI could support repetitive and documentation-intensive tasks such as screening applications, checking eligibility and State aid requirements, reviewing reports, and identifying potential issues during project implementation. AI support in this context is meant as technical support for the MA/JS in compliance with European laws and regulations, not excluding human judgement and responsibility. This could free up programme staff to focus on tasks requiring human judgement, such as assessing project quality, advising beneficiaries, and supporting effective implementation. It is suggested to explore the use of AI-based tools to automate routine screening and reporting tasks, while allowing programme staff to focus on qualitative tasks requiring expert judgement.

EQ 5.3 What are applicants' and projects' experiences in using BAMOS+ (e.g. for newcomers to the Programme, as well as for Lead Partners who already worked with BAMOS in the period 2014-2020)? What are the BAMOS+ features (during application and during reporting) that applicants and projects find most useful and user-friendly?

Programme survey evidence shows that BAMOS+ is perceived by the vast majority of beneficiaries as a valuable tool, with applicants finding the tool very helpful, intuitive, of high availability, stable, reliable and supportive. 79% of core project beneficiaries find it a valuable tool, 88% think that is has a high availability, 83% find it stable and reliable. The figures are even higher for small project beneficiaries (95%, 89% and 84%).

In terms of user experience, applicants and in particular newcomers to the Programme needed some time to familiarise with the structures. Lead partners already familiar with BAMOS (2014-2020) benefitted from the enhanced functionality. Once familiar, most applicants of both core and small projects received the tool well. The evaluation of specific features and functionalities within BAMOS+ is generally very positive. Support tools like the BAMOSwiki and the BAMOS Helpdesk are perceived as very useful.

Most beneficiaries are satisfied with the possibilities of BAMOS+. Specific requests from a minor share of beneficiaries refer to smaller technical improvements, e.g. the possibility of printing/exporting reports in PDF or budget overviews in MS Excel, or to improve the Report of Hours and Employment Confirmation sheets with an automatic functionality of highlighting weekend days. Another aspect to improve would be the state aid checkbox design.

14 The 2021-2027 Programme communication strategy and its implementation

This Chapter covers the diverse evaluation questions related to the Programme's communication strategy and its implementation:

EQ 6.1 What is the influence of hosting project pages on the Programme portal on communicating the projects efficiently (in comparison to solutions from the previous Programme)?
EQ 6.2 Do the beneficiaries feel part of "Interreg family"? If yes, how does it show?
EQ 6.3 Are there lessons learned from projects' and Programme communication or needs for immediate improvements to address new/arising expectations from applicants and project partners? How did the projects cope with the mandatory visibility requirements? How did the support that the Programme provides to projects concerning the visibility requirements work for them?
EQ 6.4 Is the Programme communication effective in raising the awareness of decision-makers (national and/or EU levels) about the Programme (e.g. via project examples from the region)? For what do the decision-makers consider the Programme most useful?
EQ 6.5 How did PACs act as Programme multipliers, supporting the Programme and projects' communication? Which stakeholders did PAC's' activities as multipliers mainly reach out to? What were the most effective mechanisms that PACs used in communicating the Programme to its stakeholders?
EQ 6.6 How did national contact points contribute to the Programme communication in the countries where these existed?

The analysis used a mixed-methods approach, combining different qualitative and quantitative methods, covering various aspects of the communication process, as well as the Programme's activities and tools. A wide array of analytical methods was used for this purpose, including beneficiary perception analysis, interviews with MA/JS, MC members and EUSBSR PACs, analysis of written documents, website analytics and information about the communication activities of EUSBSR PACs and national-level structures.

14.1 Context

Communication in the Interreg Baltic Sea Region 2021–2027 is organised as a shared, multi-level system, linking Programme-level communication with communication by individual funded projects. The MA/JS coordinates and implements Programme communication. Its Programme Unit includes dedicated communication staff responsible for the communication strategy, Programme website and social media, content production, and communication support to projects. The Monitoring Committee oversees Programme communication alongside overall Programme implementation and evaluation. National structures also help disseminate Programme information within participating countries.

At project level, every lead partner must appoint a communication manager, who coordinates communication across the partnership, engages target groups, ensures visibility requirements are followed, manages the project's Programme webpage/social media where applicable, and coordinates communication among partners. Communication is deliberately interconnected. The MA/JS provides projects with guidance, training, templates and technical tools, while projects provide stories,

summaries, images, quotes and other content that the Programme can amplify through its own channels. The Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027 Programme Manual and Communication & Visibility Guidelines set out the rules and practical requirements for implementing funded projects, including how partners must communicate project activities, acknowledge EU/Interreg funding, and comply with branding and visibility obligations.

The Programme website constitutes the central hub of communication for the Programme, integrating multiple communication functions, targeting different audience groups, including applicants, beneficiaries, decision-makers and the wider public. Within this framework, the hosting of project webpages on the Programme portal represents one of the most significant changes introduced under the 2021-2027 Programme compared to the previous programming period.

14.2 Analysis

The approaches used to answer the different evaluation questions differ significantly. At the same time, the evaluation questions require very different types of reflection. Consequently, the analysis below is presented according to the various aspects analysed, rather than by method.

14.2.1 Effectiveness of the Programme portal and its project pages

Under the previous programming period, projects developed and maintained independent websites, which remain accessible through the Programme project library. Project information and results were presented through multiple communication environments, making it more challenging to ensure a coherent overview of Programme achievements and consistent long-term accessibility of project information after project closure. The influence of this approach on project communication can be assessed by comparing the current centralised model with the decentralised website structure used under the 2014–2020 Programme and by examining evidence from website analytics, surveys and interviews.

Under the 2021–2027 Programme, project communication is organised through webpages hosted directly on the Programme portal. This approach ensures consistency with Programme branding and standardises the structure and minimum content available for each project. All projects are provided with the same technical tools and communication modules, helping to ensure a consistent application of communication and visibility requirements across the Programme portfolio. This model creates a coherent presentation of projects and results while facilitating access to information for users navigating across multiple projects.

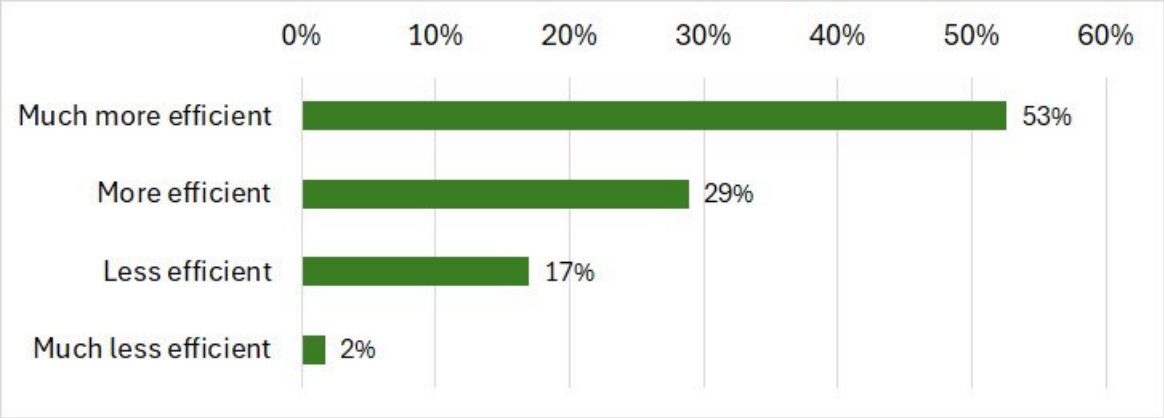
From an efficiency perspective, the centralised hosting model reduces duplication of effort and simplifies communication tasks for beneficiaries. Rather than developing and maintaining independent websites, projects can rely on predefined structures and technical solutions provided by the Programme. The system therefore reduces the need for project-specific web development while simultaneously supporting compliance with communication and visibility requirements.



Evidence from the beneficiary survey confirms the usefulness of this approach. 82% of the beneficiaries who responded to this question (n=118) think it is more or even much more

efficient to host all project pages on the Programme portal. Only 17% have the perception that it is less efficient.

Figure 14-1 Perception of beneficiaries on hosting all project pages on the Programme portal



Source: own elaboration based on the survey to beneficiaries (n=118)

Overall, respondents viewed hosting project pages on the Programme portal very positively. They appreciated having all projects and their results in one place, making information easier to find, improving visibility of both individual projects and the Programme, and ensuring long-term access to project outputs beyond the project lifetime. Many also highlighted the savings in time and budget, the reduced administrative burden, and the value of a consistent visual identity and communication standard across all projects. However, about one third of the beneficiaries who responded to this question in the open comments felt that the standardised approach comes with trade-offs. Although the standard template is considered efficient and user-friendly, some beneficiaries perceive limitations in terms of flexibility in website design, content structure and technical functionality. This makes it more difficult for projects to showcase their unique features or present specialised outputs.

Also previous surveys to beneficiaries, carried out by the Programme confirm the general positive opinion. They show high levels of satisfaction with the project webpages themselves. Among respondents from core projects, 84% indicated that project pages meet all or most of their communication needs, while only a limited share reported unmet needs or limited use of the pages. Similar patterns are observed among small projects.

Interview findings reinforce this assessment. Programme officers and MC members consistently describe the centralised hosting of project webpages as a major improvement compared to the previous programming period. Interviewees emphasise that Programme-hosted webpages have reduced the workload associated with maintaining communication tools and complying with mandatory visibility requirements. The responsibility for maintaining the technical infrastructure now lies with the Programme rather than individual projects, allowing project partners to focus more on implementation activities and communication content rather than website management. In this sense, the current approach not only improves consistency but also increases efficiency by reducing the administrative burden placed on beneficiaries.

Beyond stakeholder perceptions, website analytics provide further evidence of the performance of the centralised approach. Website analytics demonstrate that project pages represent a major driver of user engagement and constitute one of the most frequently accessed elements of the Programme website.

Table 14-1 Project library engagement rate and session duration (2024–2025)

Year	Avg. monthly website users	Avg. monthly project page users	% of website users visiting project pages	Avg. session duration in project pages
2024	5,525	3,757	68%	00:02:14
2025	6,147	4,479	73%	00:01:30

Source: own elaboration based on website analytics

Analysis of website traffic during 2024 and 2025 shows that project-related content attracts a substantial proportion of all website users. In 2024, the website recorded an average of 5,525 monthly users, of whom 3,757 users, corresponding to 68%, visited project pages. In 2025, average monthly website traffic increased to 6,147 users, while the number of project page users increased as well to 4,479, representing 73% of total website users. This finding suggests a high level of interest in project-related content highlighting the importance of project pages within the overall Programme website.

The growing share of website users accessing project pages may also indicate increasingly targeted and task-oriented use of the website, with users locating relevant information more efficiently. The centralisation of project communication therefore appears to enhance the visibility and discoverability of project outputs and activities by integrating into a single communication environment where users can easily navigate between projects, Programme information and thematic content. Additional insights can be drawn from the monthly distribution of website traffic presented in Figure 14-2.

Figure 14-2 Monthly website users in relation to the Programme Calls (2024-2025)



Source: own elaboration based on website analytics

Website traffic generally increases during periods when calls for proposals are open, indicating that Programme-level communication activities attract substantial numbers of users to the portal. As project information is hosted within the same communication environment, these visits may also contribute to greater exposure of project-related content. Compared with the previous programming period, when projects relied on separate websites, the centralised structure creates opportunities for project pages to benefit from Programme-generated traffic and enhances the overall accessibility of project information.

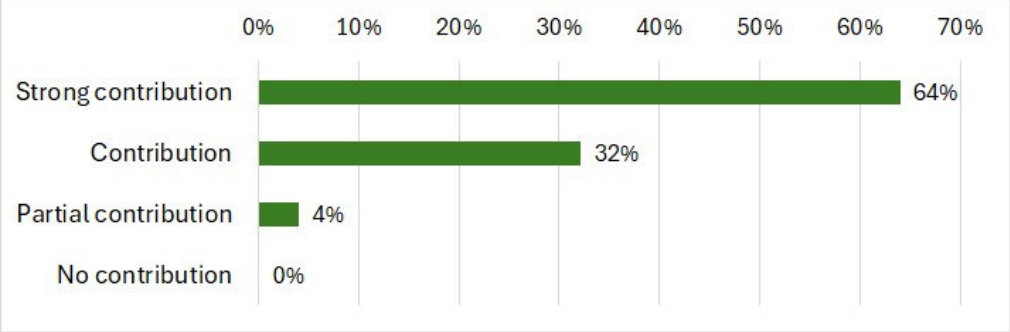
The benefits of centralised hosting extend beyond immediate communication efficiency. Dedicated sections on the Programme website present outputs, pilots and joint solutions, helping to connect individual project-level results with broader Programme achievements. By bringing this information together within a single communication environment, the portal facilitates capitalisation and makes outputs easier to identify, access and compare across thematic areas. In contrast to the previous programming period, when project information was distributed across separate websites, the Programme portal provides a stable, Programme-maintained repository of results. Interviews suggest that this is particularly valuable for policy-makers and other stakeholders seeking access to project outputs beyond the implementation period.

14.2.2 Fostering a sense of belonging to the "Interreg family"

The notion of an "Interreg family" is reflected less in a formal sense of membership than in the perceived ownership, the perceived value of Interreg participation and the existence of recurring interactions, shared working practices and long-term cooperation relationships among beneficiaries. In this context, the Programme contributes to creating specific and unique conditions that facilitate exchange, mutual learning and repeated cooperation across projects and calls.

To find out about the specific "value" that see beneficiaries in participating in Interreg projects, they were asked in the beneficiary survey conducted for this evaluation about the effects on their participation regarding a) transnational networking and cooperation and b) new or enhanced opportunities for exchange within their Member State at national, regional or local level. In addition they were asked if they see a specific added value of Interreg compared to other funding Programmes.

Figure 14-3 Interreg participation contributes to transnational networking and cooperation

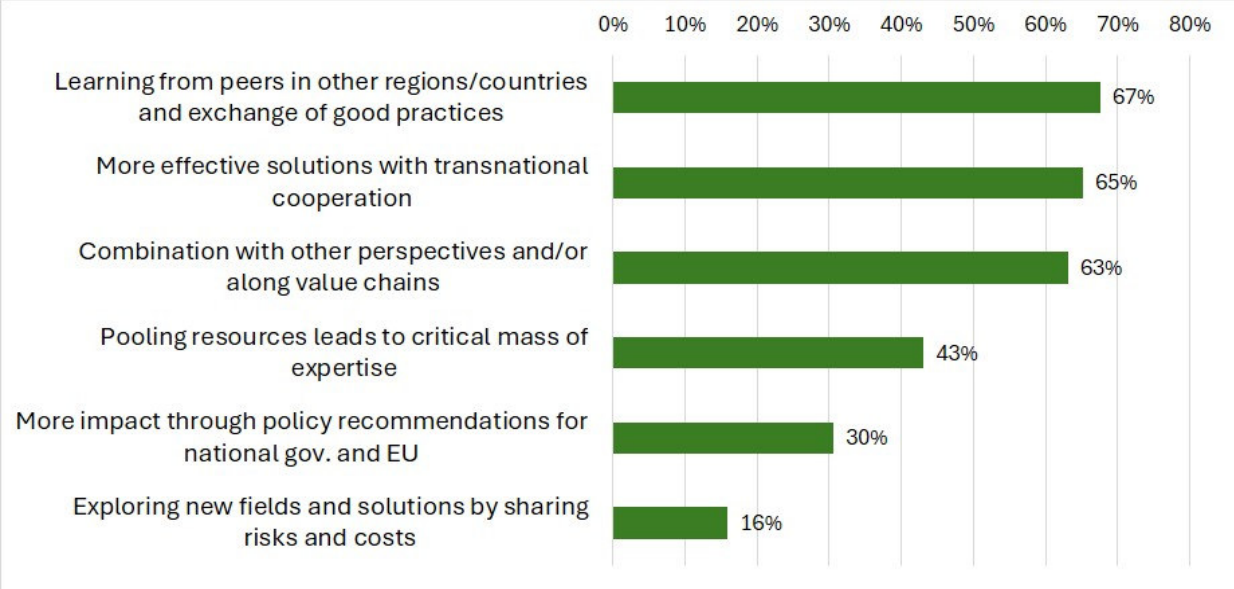


Source: own elaboration based on the beneficiary survey (n=327)

The results confirm a specific and unique value of Interreg projects for beneficiaries. It is not surprising that the Interreg participation contributes for 96% of the beneficiaries to transnational networking and cooperation.

The beneficiaries were also asked if and where they see a **specific added value of Interreg** compared to other funding Programmes. Only 2.4% did not see any added value of Interreg, while the majority confirmed at least one specific benefit for them, as shown in Figure 14-4.

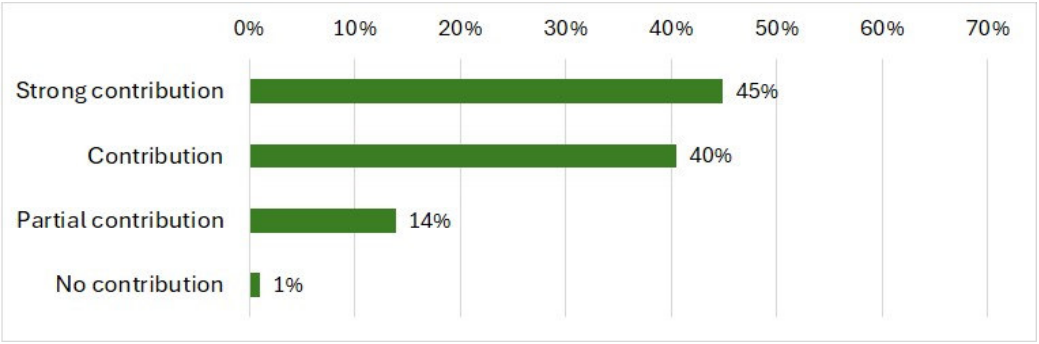
Figure 14-4 Added value of Interreg compared to other funding Programmes



Source: own elaboration based on the beneficiary survey (n=335), multiple answers were possible.

The learning effect, the exchange with peers and the combination with other perspectives and along value chains or development paths for more effective solutions are among the highest ranked benefits of the cooperation. In addition, 85% of the beneficiaries in the survey (n=319) also feel a strong positive effect on their day-to-day work in the own organisation and country.

Figure 14-5 Interreg participation contributes to opportunities for exchange at national regional or local level



Source: own elaboration based on the beneficiary survey (n=319)

This becomes particularly evident, analysing the numerous open responses to this survey question. Of the 118 open responses received to this question, 105 (89%) reflect a positive sentiment and describe benefits of the Interreg participation for the organisation at Member State level.

The perceived benefit covers different positive effects. In this sense, the responses from beneficiaries indicate that the IBSR Programme serves as a catalyst for multi-level cooperation and knowledge transfer within countries. Organisations act as innovation hubs, successfully bridging the gap between transnational expertise and local needs by sharing evidence-based tools with municipalities, regional agencies, and national ministries. These collaborations strengthen local capacity and elevate regional issues to the national policy agenda, fostering dialogue on critical topics like the circular economy and sustainable development. Furthermore, Interreg functions as a badge of quality, expanding professional networks and building strategic partnerships between science, industry, and government. Ultimately, the framework provides the necessary resources and visibility to implement complex solutions that would otherwise be unattainable at a purely local level.

Examples of the responses from the beneficiary survey indicate the specific value of Interreg:

- *"Participation in the Programme has significantly expanded our University's reach within the national and regional landscape. By acting as a knowledge hub, we have successfully transferred innovative Baltic protection solutions from the transnational level to local and regional stakeholders in our Member State."*
- *"EU projects are always a good starting point for a conversation and possible cooperation, almost like a badge of quality."*
- *"Participation in the project has significantly accelerated our engagement with national stakeholders. The transnational validation of our "Venloop" solution allows us to effectively approach new Polish municipalities (e.g., Dębno, Warsaw) for replication activities (WP3). Furthermore, we have strengthened cooperation with existing Polish project partners within Cluster III (POMINNO, Buy Responsibly Foundation) and successfully built a local ecosystem of sub-contractors (logistics, technology, food production) to support the circular economy pilots."*
- *"You become more visible in the national context and enjoy better exchange in all contexts with our country."*
- *"Our projects are supported by German Environment Agency - even them becoming PP. We are invited to present them at national events. Also in Northern Germany, Hamburg and Schleswig Holstein the projects got attention and public authorities and stakeholders get more and more engaged. We got invited to train Hamburg procurement staff on Chemicals, and even the Federal German Agency for Seashipment and Hydrology invites for cooperation."*
- *"We would not find so many connections and networking opportunities also within country if there was no EU Interreg projects."*
- *"Technology innovation between science and industry together with practical field work for testing and data collection would not be possible or much less likely without Interreg participation. The same is true for product development, product testing and development of comparative studies based on project data and results."*

- *"We became the member of the Interreg consultative committee as the NGO representative in our country due to our experience in Interreg BSR projects."*
- *"Through our participation, we have met many new peers and experts, which increased our awareness and practical understanding of sustainable and regenerative tourism. This has directly influenced our strategic development, including becoming one of the first regional tourism organisations in Poland to join the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)."*
- *"We had the opportunity to set up a new cooperation with our region authorities for the first time."*
- *"Project funding enables meaningful collaboration also for the local ecosystem."*
- *"In Finland the project has successfully established strategic and technical cooperation between partners that represent National public agencies, research institutions and enterprises. Most likely the cooperation continues after the project."*
- *"Thanks to the new skills acquired during the project, both at the implementation and management levels, as well as through promoting and informing about our participation in the project, we are becoming more recognizable and competitive, which makes it easier for us to establish cooperation at various levels."*
- *"As part of our BSR project, we have had very many interactions (workshops, events, 1-on-1 meetings) with people from local, regional and national authorities, which we would not have been able to have without this project. The BSR project provided purpose, direction and staff time to really find the relevant stakeholders and put effort in engaging them in the most useful way."*
- *"Thanks to our diverse partnerships, we have the opportunity to meet practitioners, national and EU-level decision-makers, international organisations working on a given topic, NGOs and experts. Without Interreg, we would probably never have had the chance to meet such a wide range of people and institutions. We are also frequently approached by individuals and organisations outside the Baltic Sea Region, which demonstrates that some solutions can be transferred to other parts of Europe."*
- *"Without this Programme we would rather act at a more local level, but due to this Programme we are reaching out far beyond our borders and get in touch with other organisations, culture and people."*
- *"Our voice on hazardous substances from city perspective which we express in several projects (6 meanwhile) building one on the other finally is very loud - because we are MANY partners and get MORE and MORE. The echo is going from municipalities & BSR to national level and even EU meanwhile. It makes them listen to municipalities finally. We can say that after 10 years of these projects we are "on the agenda".*
- *"As an association we were grateful to have the insights of the ministry and our exchange between business organisations and the government was extremely fruitful."*

Feeling these benefits, adds to the specific sense of belonging to the "Interreg family". The analysis shows that several features of Interreg and the Programme support this process of creating a specific sense of belonging to the "Interreg family". The following mechanisms have been identified.

A first factor contributing to the sense of belonging to the wider Interreg cooperation network is the existence of a common operational and communication framework. Programme-hosted project pages, common visibility tools and shared communication guidelines provide projects with a shared communication environment and a joint Programme identity. By using the same branding tools, beneficiaries engage with the Programme through a common framework that reinforces their connection to a wider cooperation community, creating consistency across projects while reinforcing the perception that projects are part of a broader cooperation community rather than isolated initiatives. Survey evidence confirms that beneficiaries perceive the visibility package and communication support positively, indicating broad acceptance of the common communication framework established by the Programme. For core projects under Call C-2, 91% of beneficiaries assessed the visibility package as useful or very useful, while for small projects all respondents considered the visibility package to be useful or very useful.

A second mechanism is the creation of dedicated spaces that facilitate interaction and cooperation among beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries. The Matchmaking Platform plays an important role in this respect. In 2025, the platform registered 2,045 organisations across Programme participating countries and contributed to the creation of 312 project ideas. Beyond its technical function in partner search, the platform provides a shared space for stakeholder interaction and engagement within the Programme. In this sense, it contributes not only to project generation but also to the gradual reinforcement of a Programme-level community. Survey findings indicate that applicants who use the platform assess it positively, particularly for partner search. The platform is primarily intended for applicants lacking existing networks, such as newcomers. Its use was reported by 26% of Core Project applicants and 29% of Small Project applicants. The evidence suggests that the platform supports the development of new cooperation links and facilitates entry into the Programme community.

The Programme also promotes regular interaction through communication-focused networks and informal exchange formats. A dedicated Facebook forum for communication managers where projects share good practices, information about events and notable monthly “Comms Coffee” meetings, provide opportunities for peer exchange, mutual learning and community-building. These formats create opportunities for regular exchange among communication managers from different projects and help maintain connections between beneficiaries and the Programme. In addition, Interviewees consistently describe their value for strengthening cooperation among projects, facilitating peer learning and improving the Programme’s approachability. Their importance lies not only in the exchange of communication knowledge but also in maintaining continuity of interaction beyond individual projects.

Events constitute another important mechanism supporting the development of the Interreg community. The Programme organises both online and in-person events, maintaining different formats to reach diverse audiences. Interviews highlight the effectiveness of webinars and digital events in lowering entry barriers for newcomers and enabling broad participation. At the same time, interviewees consistently emphasise the importance of face-to-face interaction for building trust, establishing durable partnerships and reinforcing cooperation among Programme stakeholders. The evolution of the event portfolio reflects this understanding. While the total number of events decreased after the start of the programming period, the number of in-person events increased substantially in 2025, suggesting a strategic emphasis on formats that facilitate direct interaction, knowledge exchange and networking among Programme stakeholders.

Large Programme events also contribute to strengthening relationships among beneficiaries and stakeholders, reinforcing a sense of belonging to the Interreg community. The Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme Conference is the Programme's main flagship event. It attracted approximately 300 participants in both 2022 and 2025, suggesting the presence of a relatively stable community of beneficiaries and Programme stakeholders. In addition, the Programme makes use of the EUSBSR Annual Forum - an event organised by the EUSBSR stakeholders and co-financed by the Programme - as a complementary opportunity to engage with its community, notably through Programme-organised sessions and a dedicated stand during the Forum. At the Forum, Programme stakeholders also meet stakeholders from other Interreg programmes active in the Baltic Sea Region, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging to the wider Interreg family. Participation in the EUSBSR Annual Forum overall increased from approximately 400 participants in 2022 to around 700 in 2025. While these events serve broader communication and policy objectives, they also maintain opportunities for professional connections across the Programme community by bringing together beneficiaries, applicants, policy actors and other stakeholders of the Baltic Sea Region cooperation area.



Interview evidence highlights the particular role of small projects in fostering a sense of belonging to the Interreg community. Small projects are repeatedly identified as important entry points for newcomers, particularly municipalities, smaller public authorities and NGOs. By lowering barriers to participation, they allow organisations with limited previous Interreg experience to become involved in transnational cooperation and gradually familiarise themselves with Programme procedures and cooperation practices. As a result, small projects help broaden participation while contributing to the renewal and expansion of the Programme community.

Continuity within the Interreg community is further supported by the ongoing involvement of experienced beneficiaries, which helps maintain cooperation networks and institutional knowledge across successive calls and programming periods. At the same time, survey and interview evidence indicates that small projects facilitate networking, trust-building and the development of future cooperation initiatives. Together, these mechanisms help sustain the Interreg community over time by combining the continuity provided by experienced actors with the integration of newcomers.

14.2.3 Communication requirements visibility measures and lessons learned



The in-depth communication analysis examined the use and performance of the Programme's central website and online tools, such as matchmaking platform and newsletter, of the IBSR social media channels and of events in supporting communication aims, stakeholder engagement, and project visibility[56].

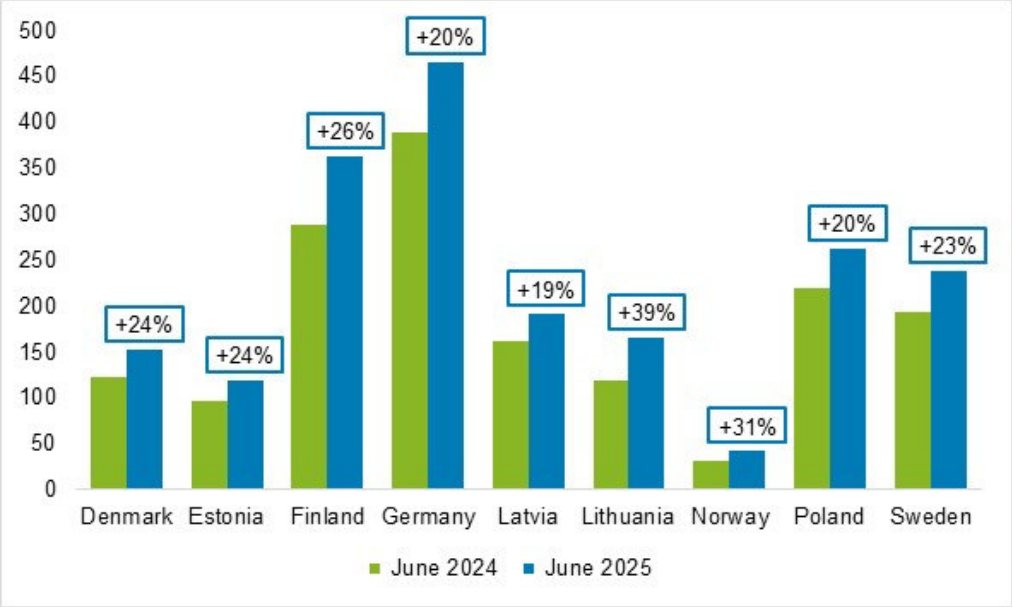
Beyond analysing the Programme portal and hosted project pages, the evaluation identifies lessons related to the use of communication channels and audience differentiation that affect the Programme outreach.

[56] Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021–2027, Programme Manual and Communication & Visibility Guidelines.

Online tools

The **newsletter** is aimed at disseminating information on calls, projects, solutions, and Programme developments to a broad and geographically diverse audience.

Figure 14-6 Newsletter subscribers by country (June 2024–June 2025)



Source: own elaboration based on Newsletter analytics

The number of newsletter subscribers increased from 1 620 in June 2024 to 1 998 in June 2025, corresponding to a growth of approximately 23%. Subscriber growth is observed across all Programme countries, indicating a broad-based growth of the mailing list. The strongest relative growth is observed in Lithuania (+39%), Norway (+31%) and Finland (+26%), while Germany, Poland and Sweden also record notable increases of around 20% or more.

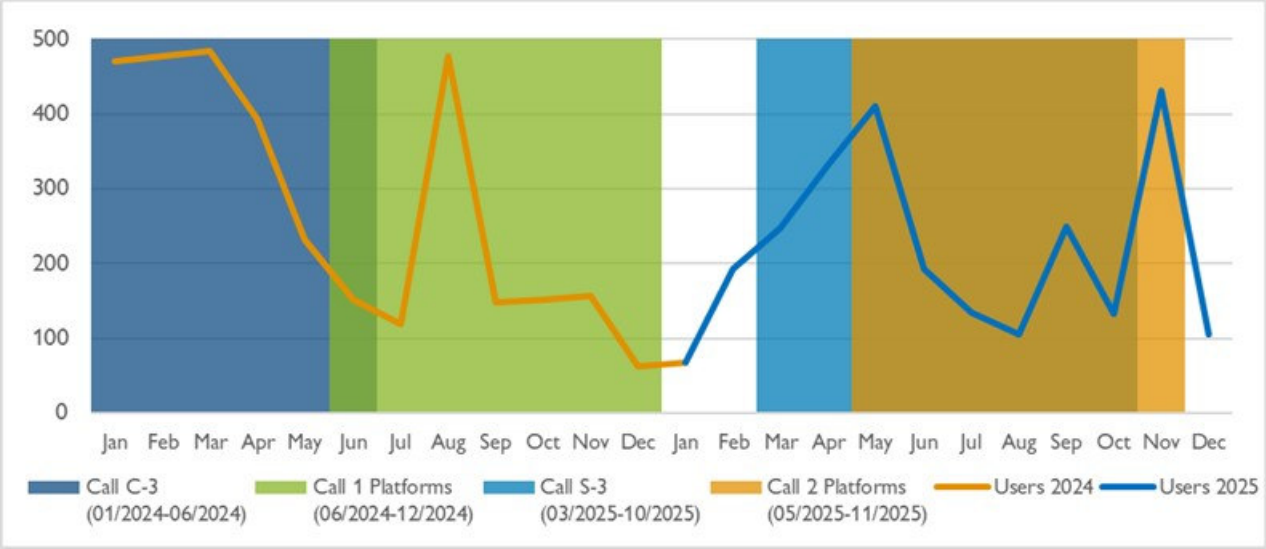
In absolute terms, larger Programme countries such as Germany, Finland, Poland and Sweden continue to account for higher subscriber numbers; however, growth patterns are not limited to these countries. Smaller Programme countries also display consistent increases, suggesting that expansion of the newsletter audience has been geographically balanced rather than concentrated in a limited number of countries. Overall, the data points to steady and sustained growth of the newsletter as a communication channel across the Programme area.

In 2025, the **Matchmaking Platform**, registered 2,045 organisations on across the Programme participating countries, contributing to the creation of 312 project ideas. Beyond its technical function in partner search, the platform provides a shared space for stakeholder's interaction, supporting engagement within the Programme. In this sense, **this platform contributes not only to project generation but also to the gradual reinforcement of a Programme-level community**.

Usage data indicates also a clear seasonal pattern aligned with Calls. In both 2024 and 2025, peaks in platform usage correspond closely to the opening and active phases of calls, including Call C-3,

the first and second calls for project platforms, and Call S-3. Compared to the general website traffic, the Matchmaking Platform exhibits more pronounced fluctuations, indicating that it is primarily activated during partnership building and project development phases rather than used continuously throughout the year.

Figure 14-7 Matchmaking platform seasonality usage 2024-2025



Source: own elaboration based on Matchmaking Platform analytics

Additionally, analysis on newsletter subscriptions and the Matchmaking Platform users by organisation type shows a high degree of consistency between these communication channels. In both channels, higher education and research institutions, public authorities and non-governmental organisations constitute the core audience, accounting for the majority of subscribers and users in December 2024 and December 2025.

Higher education and research institutions represent approximately one quarter of registered organisations on the Matchmaking Platform (24.4%) and around one third of newsletter subscribers (31%). Public authorities collectively (local, regional and national levels) also represent a substantial share, accounting for approximately one quarter of registered Matchmaking Platform users and close to one third of newsletter subscribers.

Non-governmental and international organisations form a stable and significant audience segment across both channels, representing approximately 15–16% of users in December 2025. Enterprises, including SMEs and large enterprises, account for around 16% of registered Matchmaking Platform organisations and around 11–14% of newsletter subscribers, indicating moderate engagement of business-oriented actors, primarily through the partnership-oriented platform.

National-level public authorities represent comparatively a smaller share in both channels, accounting for around 2% in both 2024 and 2025. By comparison, the regional public authorities are more strongly represented, with a stable share of approximately 9-10%, while local public authorities account for around 12% across both newsletter and the Matchmaking Platform. This distribution and the relatively low participation of national level actors may indicate a preference for engaging with the Programme

through alternative channels, such as targeted events or specific networking platforms with more policy-oriented messages. This is consistent with the profile of national public authorities, which in principle do not need a matchmaking platform to network nor a newsletter to receive information on the Interreg Programme.

Events



Events constitute an important component of the Programme's communication and visibility activities, complementing other communication tools. Events provide opportunities for direct interaction, knowledge exchange and networking among beneficiaries, stakeholders and decision-makers. Events are also used as a channel to showcase project results. The Programme organises multiple online webinars and in-person events, maintaining different formats to reach diverse audiences. Findings are based on Programme documentation and available participation data on the Programme website.

The Programme events over the 2022–2025 period show a clear **evolution in the approach to events**. In 2022, the Programme organised or participated in a comparatively high number of events (37 in total), reflecting a high level of activity at the start of the programming period. However, from 2023 onwards, the total number of events decreased to around 21–23 per year. This trend indicates a strategic shift towards a more selective and targeted event portfolio, prioritising formats with higher added value. At the same time, the balance between virtual and in-person events evolved. While virtual events continued to play an important role, particularly for outreach and lower entry barriers, their number declined significantly in 2025 (11). However, the number of in-person events increased substantially in the same year, reaching 10 events, the highest level across the analysed period. This shift suggests a strategic emphasis on face-to-face interaction, in line with the Programme's recognition of the importance of in-person meetings for building trust, fostering durable partnerships and reinforcing community-building.

The consistent attendance numbers at the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme Conference flagship events (both editions, 2022 and 2025) may suggest the presence of a relatively stable core audience, likely composed of potential applicants, beneficiaries, and Programme stakeholders with an ongoing interest in the Programme's activities and outputs.

MA/JS support to project communication

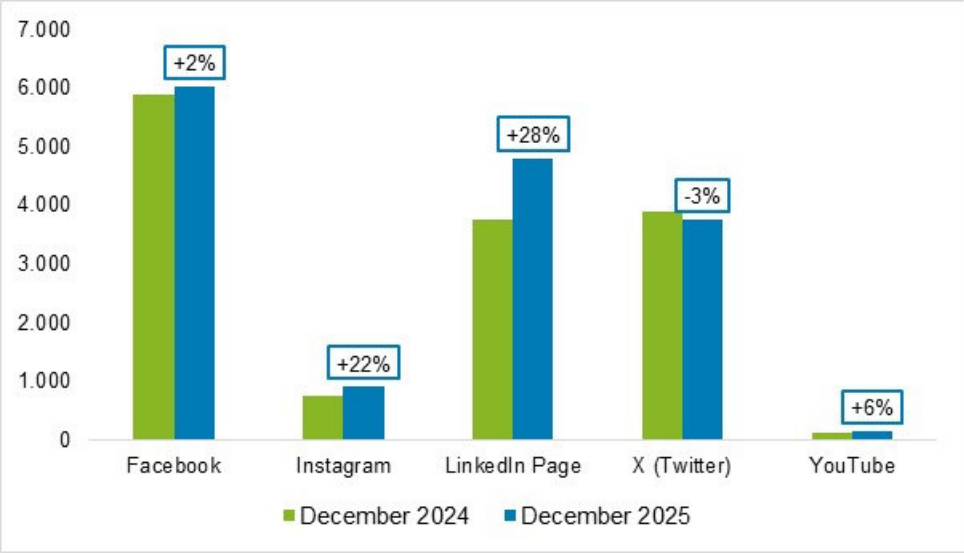
Each project is required to appoint a dedicated communication manager. Projects are also advised to generate communication outputs, including summaries, storytelling elements, quotes and multimedia material for social platforms. This results in a **continuous flow of project-based contents** that feed Programme social media channels through reposting and amplification, thereby increasing the visibility of both individual projects and the Programme as a whole. This is further reinforced by support from the MA/JS, for example, via a dedicated Facebook forum for project communication managers and informal monthly "Comms Coffee" meetings provide spaces for peer exchange, sharing of best practices and mutual learning on communication tasks. This initiative complements formal communication channels and contributes significantly to continuity of interaction among beneficiaries beyond individual projects, supporting community-building among beneficiaries.

Social media

While the Programme maintains a presence across several **social media platforms**, evidence suggests that communication content is frequently disseminated in similarly across channels, despite differences in audience profiles and platform trends. According to the Programme 21-27 Communication Strategy, LinkedIn and X are primarily intended to reach applicants, project partners, multipliers and decision-makers, while Facebook and Instagram are positioned as channels for more visual and storytelling-oriented communication. YouTube serves as a transversal platform supporting all audience groups through audiovisual content.

Evidence from social media analytics further suggests that communication channels evolve differently over time. Between 2024 and 2025, LinkedIn recorded the strongest growth among the Programme's social media channels (+28%), while Facebook remained relatively stable (+2%) and X experienced a slight decline (-3%). This pattern suggests that audiences increasingly engage through different platforms and that communication strategies may benefit from adapting content and outreach approaches to platform-specific audience profiles.

Figure 14-8 Evolution of social media followers by platform 2024–2025



Source: own elaboration based on social media analytics

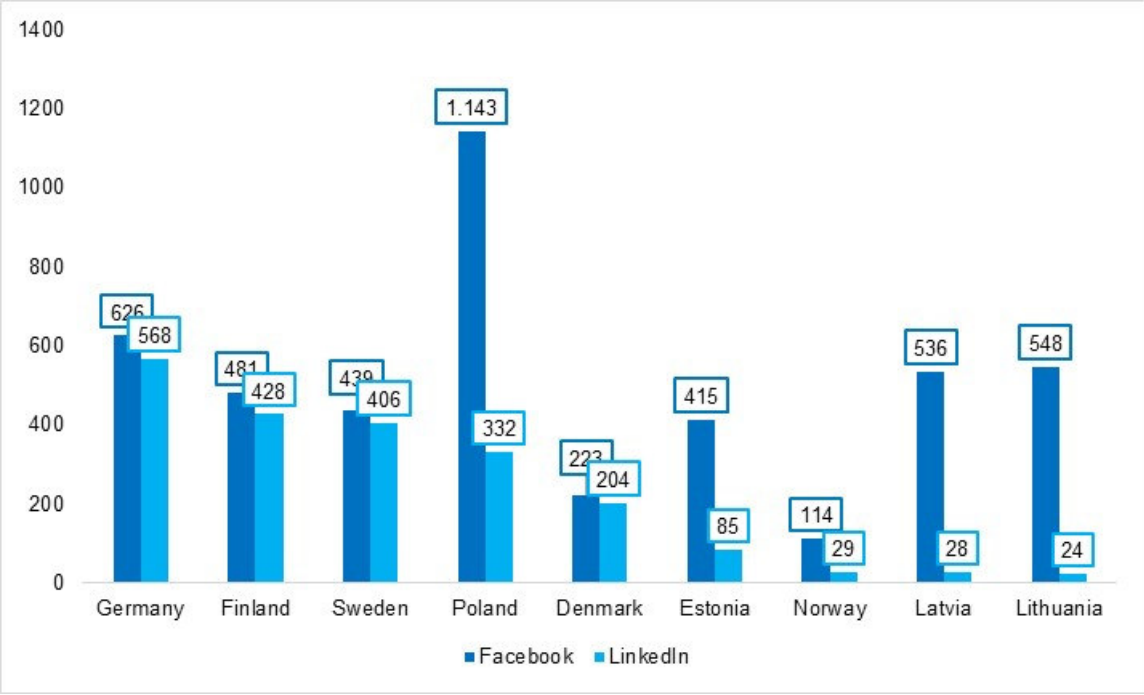
While audience segmentation is clearly defined across social platforms, this may imply a need for differentiated content strategies rather than relying primarily on cross-posting. Facebook and Instagram appear less relevant for reaching decision-makers, whereas the Programme's communication strategy identifies X (formerly Twitter) as a relevant channel for reaching decision-makers, among other audiences such as potential applicants, project partners and multipliers. This relevance dates back to the previous programming period, when Twitter was, alongside Facebook, one of the Programme's main social media platforms. Since then, engagement on X has declined, consistent with the platform's reduced overall relevance following its transition from Twitter; a shift that affected user numbers and strategic positioning globally, including within the Programme's own communication approach.

In this context, LinkedIn emerges as the Programme's most strategically important social media channel. It represents the main platform through which beneficiaries and other relevant stakeholders interact, while also serving as a key source of information for newcomers to stay updated about the Programme. At the same time, LinkedIn offers the strongest potential for reaching professional audiences. Currently, LinkedIn is the only platform channelling extra content. This approach could be strengthened and extended to the other platforms, taking into account their specific features and audiences.

The trends illustrated in the beginning of this section suggest differing stages of growth and maturity across platforms. For instances, Facebook appears function as a mature network with limited growth (2% increase within two years) but stable audience indicating sustained relevance among established Programme stakeholders across the Baltic Sea Region. In this context, limited growth is not necessarily a signal of declining importance but rather reflects a wider concentration of users as it is also the social platform with the highest number of followers/subscribers (6,018 followers in 2025).

By comparison, the strong growth observed on LinkedIn points its increasing strategic importance. The increase of LinkedIn followers suggests a gradual shift in how target audiences engage with the Programme. Similarly, Instagram's growth despite a smaller share and being the newest Programme platform, indicates its role in engaging audiences beyond the Programme's traditional communication channels.

Figure 14-9 Comparison of Facebook and LinkedIn Usage by Country (2025)



Source: own elaboration based on social media analytics

Geographic data for Facebook and LinkedIn indicates that social media audiences are distributed across all Programme countries, with a largely stable country composition over time. While higher absolute follower numbers are observed in larger Programme countries such as Germany, Finland, Sweden and

Poland, all participating countries are represented on both platforms. This suggests that social media outreach is geographically balanced and not concentrated in a limited number of countries.

The **relative importance** of platforms **differs** significantly **by country**. In several countries including Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, Facebook shows a markedly stronger presence than LinkedIn, whereas in countries such as Germany, Finland and Sweden the two platforms display more comparable follower levels. These data evidence that **Facebook continues to play a particularly important role in reaching specific-country stakeholders**. In this context, **the continued use of Facebook reflects a context-aware and results-oriented communication approach**, rather than following general social media trends, ensuring that core audiences are reached through the most relevant channels across the Programme countries.

These findings suggest that a uniform approach based primarily on cross-posting identical content across platforms may limit communication effectiveness. Different platforms attract different audiences across different countries and fulfil different communication functions. The analysis therefore points towards the potential benefits of more differentiated, platform-specific communication strategies. Tailoring content formats, messages and narratives to the characteristics of individual platforms could strengthen engagement and visibility while improving communication performance across audience groups.

Visibility requirements and support



Survey findings indicate that projects generally cope well with the mandatory visibility requirements and the support provided by the Programme facilitates compliance while reducing the communication burden for beneficiaries. Between 91% (core projects) and 100% (small projects) of beneficiaries considered the visibility package useful or very useful in an early Programme survey[57]. This suggests that rather than perceiving visibility requirements as an administrative burden, beneficiaries generally regard the communication tools provided by the Programme as practical instruments that facilitate compliance and increase the visibility of project results. A key lesson emerging from the analysis concerns the effectiveness of the Programme's centralised communication support. The Programme-hosted project pages represent one of the most valued communication tools and visibility measures, as already illustrated. Survey findings further indicate that the central Programme portal is widely regarded as a reliable source of information. Applicants and beneficiaries generally assess the quality and completeness of information positively and report that relevant information is relatively easy to find.

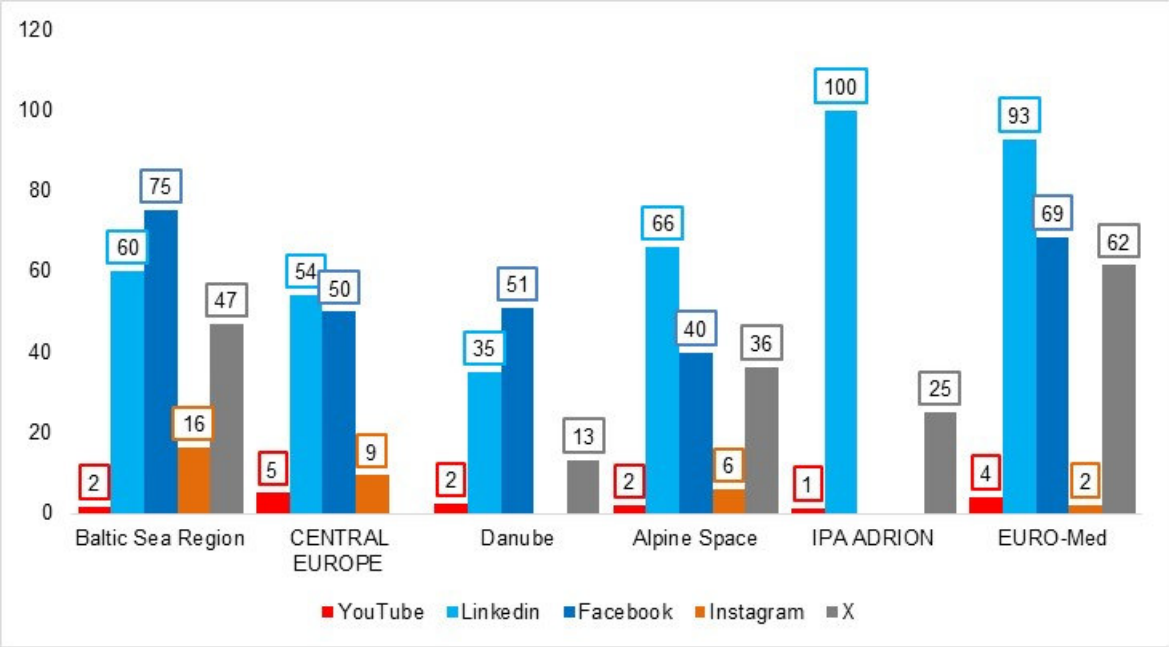
14.2.4 Effectiveness of communication in reaching and engaging decision-makers

Programme communication appears effective in reaching decision-makers, particularly through targeted events, direct interactions and policy-oriented formats. At the same time, the evidence suggests that this effectiveness is less consistent when it comes to ensuring sustained political visibility and systematic uptake of project results. Communication tools create access points to decision-makers and policy

[57] Programme survey to beneficiaries (project partners) of core and small projects (2024).

stakeholders, but awareness of the Programme and of concrete project examples remain uneven across countries and governance levels.

Figure 14-10 Comparative social media audiences across Interreg Programmes (2026)



Source: Programmes' social media pages/channels/profiles in No. of followers/subscribers per million inhabitants (April 2026)

Social media benchmarking suggests that the Programme has established a comparatively strong digital presence across several communication channels when compared with other Interreg Programmes and macro-regional frameworks. In particular, the Programme demonstrates relatively high follower numbers on LinkedIn and Facebook, indicating substantial visibility among professional and general stakeholder audiences.

However, effective engagement with decision-makers appears to be reached more effectively through targeted communication and stakeholder engagement mechanisms. Evidence from the analysis of the general Programme communication channels indicates that higher-level policy actors are not consistently reached through the Programme's broader communication tools. This suggests that national-level policy actors are less likely to engage through general digital communication channels and more through targeted events, specific networking platforms and policy-oriented communication activities.

Survey and interview findings confirm that events and direct exchanges are the most effective mechanisms for engaging decision-makers. EUSBSR governance stakeholders identify participation in and organisation of events, notably EUSBSR Annual Forums and thematic workshops, direct exchanges within Policy Area Steering Groups, invitations for projects to present results in policy fora, and the use of Programme and project websites as reference tools as the most effective communication mechanisms. These formats allow project results to be presented in settings where they can be linked

to policy priorities and discussed with actors who are directly involved in macro-regional governance, national ministries, regional authorities, sectoral agencies and European-level institutions.

Events therefore emerge not only as dissemination channels but also as spaces where policy dialogue and stakeholder interaction can take place. The Programme organises both online and in-person events and participates in major external events to showcase project results and promote Baltic Sea Region cooperation. The EUSBSR Annual Forum is especially relevant in this regard. The Programme has organised sessions as part of the event or own events back-to-back. Participation in the Annual Forum increased from approximately 400 participants in 2022 to around 700 in 2025. This growth indicates increasing recognition of the Forum as a key platform for discussing Baltic Sea Region cooperation and policy priorities. Similarly, in 2025 the Programme organised an Interreg Baltic Sea Region workshop, led by the team from the MA/JS team, as part of the Baltic Sea States Subregional Co-operation (BSSSC) event. The Programme's participation in events like this demonstrates a growing emphasis on policy-relevant communication and stakeholder engagement. fostering collaboration across borders and reimagining the future of regional cooperation.

Beyond Programme-organised events and sessions in other events, project participation, project participation in external events is also an integral part of the communication approach. Projects are required to participate in major EU-level events or campaigns during their implementation period, depending on project type. This requirement aims to increase the visibility of Programme-funded activities and to support dissemination of project outputs and solutions beyond the immediate Programme community. Participation in EU-level events provides projects with opportunities to present their results to wider audiences to engage with stakeholders from other Programmes and policy contexts, contributing to the awareness of the Programme's contribution to broader EU-level objectives.

At the same time, interviews indicate that communication is more effective in reaching implementation-level stakeholders than in ensuring visibility at political level. MC members across countries note that transnational Interreg is less visible at political level than cross-border or regional and national Programmes. They also highlight that project results are not always translated into policy-relevant narratives. As a result, decision-makers do not always become aware of concrete project examples or fully understand how Programme results can contribute to ongoing policy discussions. The issue is not primarily the quality of Programme communication tools in this matter, which are consistently described as clear and comprehensive. Rather, the challenge lies in adapting messages to political audiences and translating technically complex project results into concise and policy-relevant narratives that resonate with national policy priorities and ongoing policy debates.

Social media evidence also points to the need for differentiated communication towards decision-makers. LinkedIn is consistently perceived as the Programme's strongest platform for professional and institutional audiences and, during interviews described as the most effective social media channel for reaching beneficiaries, multipliers and policy-oriented stakeholders. At the same time, Facebook and X retain relevance in specific countries and for certain national, regional and local authority audiences. These findings reinforce the importance of tailoring communication channels and messages to the characteristics of different policy audiences.

Both interviews and survey findings further point to growing expectations regarding storytelling and result-oriented communication. Stakeholders increasingly expect project achievements and impacts to be communicated through accessible narratives, practical examples and solution-oriented messages. This appears particularly relevant for projects addressing complex technical topics, where effective communication depends not only on the availability of information but also on its accessibility and relevance for policy audiences. Strengthening storytelling and result-oriented communication therefore represents an important opportunity for improving the visibility and uptake of project results among decision-makers.

Finally, interviews suggest that the Programme is viewed not only as a funding instrument but also as a platform for policy dialogue, knowledge exchange and the testing of innovative approaches that can inform policy development and implementation. Stakeholders also value the Programme's contribution to the implementation of EUSBSR priorities by translating macro-regional objectives into concrete cooperation activities, pilot actions and policy-relevant solutions. Furthermore, the Programme is regarded as an important platform for connecting actors across governance levels and sectors, enabling decision-makers to learn from experiences developed elsewhere in the region and to identify transferable practices for addressing common challenges.

14.2.5 The role of EUSBSR PACs in Programme communication

As shown in Chapter 12, EUSBSR PACs play a strong role within the Programme communication system. The intensity and effect of this role varies between PACs, depending on institutional differences and the number and content of IBSR projects they are involved in. The evidence from surveys, interviews and the analysis of EUSBSR governance structures indicates that PACs contribute to Programme communication not simply by disseminating information, but by actively connecting projects with relevant stakeholder communities, embedding project results into policy discussions and providing structured platforms for visibility and exchange. In this way, PACs extend the reach of Programme communication beyond individual projects and contribute to linking project achievements with wider macro-regional governance processes and policy priorities.

The role of PACs as multipliers is rooted in their position within the EUSBSR governance framework. Through their thematic responsibilities and extensive stakeholder networks, PACs are able to connect Programme-funded projects with actors operating at different governance levels and across different sectors. Evidence from the survey addressed to EUSBSR governance stakeholders indicates that stakeholder outreach conducted by PACs is broad and multi-level. It covers national ministries, regional and local authorities, international organisations, sectoral agencies, research and higher education institutions, NGOs and enterprises. Through these networks, PACs contribute to increasing awareness of Programme activities, facilitating access to project results and promoting opportunities for involvement in cooperation initiatives.

The role of PACs extends beyond communication in a narrow sense. PACs operate as an interface between projects, governance structures and policy processes. Through steering groups, thematic networks, policy dialogues and project development activities, PACs help ensure that project outputs reach audiences well beyond individual project partnerships and contribute to broader macro-regional governance and policy discussions. PACs therefore create feedback loops between projects and policy

actors, allowing project results to inform Action Plan implementation and revisions while ensuring that policy priorities are reflected in project activities. Interviews with Programme bodies show a positive perception of an important role of PACs as multipliers for Programme communication. In the view of MA/JS and MC members, PACs actively share information about the Programme, particularly disseminating information on calls, supporting applicants and promoting results through their policy networks.



Findings based on an EUSBSR survey to PACs provides further detail regarding the stakeholders most frequently reached through PAC communication activities. Other PACs (100%), Baltic Sea international organisations and funding bodies (93%), and higher education institutes and universities (87%) are among the most frequently targeted groups. These are followed by national ministries (80%), interest groups, associations and NGOs (73%), international governmental organisations (73%) and regional authorities and sectoral agencies (66%). Research organisations and technology centres (60%), local public authorities (53%) and EUSBSR National Coordinators (46.7%) also represent important audiences. This distribution reflects the strategic and transnational character of PAC communication activities, which are primarily directed towards actors capable of facilitating policy learning, cooperation and the transfer of project results beyond individual partnerships.

The survey conducted among PACs confirms the active use of Programme communication channels and materials in their outreach activities. Responses from 13 PACs covering ten Policy Areas indicate that most PACs use information from Programme communication channels to inform networks of potential project developers and policy area steering groups. Approximately 62% (8 respondents out of 13 - from the following Policy Areas: Bioeconomy, Education, Secure, Ship, Spatial planning, Tourism and Transport) of PACs report using Programme information to inform potential project developers, while 54% (7 respondents out of 13 - from the following Policy Areas: Culture, Energy, Safe, Secure, Spatial Planning) use Programme information to inform policy area steering groups. Some respondents indicated both forms of activity. These findings confirm that PACs function as trusted intermediaries within the Programme communication system. Rather than acting as passive transmitters of information, they actively adapt and relay Programme information to audiences that are relevant within their thematic and policy domains.



Beneficiary survey findings provide additional evidence of the relevance of PAC support. Approximately 51% of lead partners among respondents (n=68) indicated that they are in regular contact with PACs during project implementation and dissemination of results. 82% of those lead partners who responded (n=39) find the support useful or even extremely useful. These findings suggest that PAC support is valued by beneficiaries and that communication activities undertaken by PACs are perceived as contributing positively to project implementation and dissemination efforts. During implementation, PACs maintain regular communication with projects and support networking and knowledge exchange activities. Evidence from interviews indicates that PACs consistently help projects build connections with relevant stakeholders and policy communities. Participation in Programme events remains one of the principal channels through which this interaction takes place. PACs also facilitate information flows between projects, steering groups and policy networks, ensuring that project activities and emerging results are visible within relevant governance structures. Several respondents describe the relationship between projects and PACs as mutually

reinforcing: projects provide practical solutions, experiences and evidence, while PACs provide access to policy networks, strategic orientation and wider stakeholder communities.

The evidence suggests that the most effective communication mechanisms employed by PACs are based on direct interaction and active stakeholder engagement rather than passive information dissemination. Survey responses and interviews consistently identify participation in and organisation of events as the most effective communication mechanism. In particular, EUSBSR Annual Forums, thematic workshops, steering group meetings and stakeholder events are considered highly effective platforms for communicating Programme achievements and project results. Several examples presented in Chapter 12 further illustrate this role. PACs refer to workshops organised under the EUSBSR Annual Forum, Operational Advisory Board meetings, Baltic Sea Tourism Forum activities and thematic stakeholder events as mechanisms through which projects can communicate their results to wider audiences. Examples describe PACs supporting dissemination through policy dialogues, facilitating contacts with policymaker organisations and networks, organising joint webinars and events, and helping projects communicate their outputs to ministries, regional authorities and European-level stakeholders.

According to beneficiaries, PACs also play a role in the capitalisation and transfer of project results. Their established networks enable project results to reach ministries, international organisations, research institutions, NGOs, local authorities and EU-level stakeholders. Evidence suggests that invitations to present at PAC events and the EUSBSR Annual Forum are among the most effective mechanisms for ensuring wider visibility and uptake of project results.

Beyond dissemination activities, PACs also contribute to embedding project results into policy processes. Survey responses and interviews indicate that project results are regularly presented in steering group meetings, discussed in policy fora and integrated into Policy Area activities and strategic documents. PACs therefore contribute not only to increasing visibility but also to strengthening the policy relevance of project outputs. In several cases, project findings provide input for revisions of EUSBSR actions, thematic priorities and policy discussions. This moves communication beyond information sharing and creates opportunities for projects to influence broader macro-regional policy narratives.

These findings are consistent with the evidence presented in Chapter 12, which shows that PACs create feedback loops between projects and the EUSBSR governance system.

14.2.6 National-level contributions and Programme communication

National-level actors contribute to Programme communication in different ways across the Programme area[58]. National-level communication is organised through different institutional arrangements, including formal NCP structures in some countries and other national coordination channels in others. The evidence therefore points to differentiated national arrangements rather than a uniform communication model across all participating countries.

[58] Data on the contact points and national support structures is provided on the Programme web portal: https://interreg-baltic.eu/national-information.

Across the Programme area, national-level actors function as intermediaries between the Programme and national stakeholders. Their communication role extends beyond the promotion of calls for proposals and includes outreach to applicants and beneficiaries, dissemination of project results, support to partner search and networking activities, and the translation of Programme priorities into national and regional contexts. Through these activities, national-level actors contribute to ensuring that Programme opportunities, achievements and results reach public authorities, practitioners, thematic organisations and policy-makers.

In countries with dedicated NCP structures and communication staff, national-level communication activities are particularly visible. Information available through the Programme's "National Information" section in the Programme portal and interview evidence indicate that countries such as Finland, Germany, Latvia, Norway, Poland and Sweden have formal contact points, typically hosted by ministries, Managing Authorities or Interreg-related institutions. In these contexts, communication activities include national information days, webinars, tailored information sessions, partner search support, dissemination through newsletters and social media channels, and direct guidance to applicants and beneficiaries. Materials are often provided in both national languages and English, facilitating wider accessibility and helping to connect Programme-level communication with domestic audiences.

The evidence suggests that structured national communication arrangements can strengthen the link between Programme-level communication and national stakeholders. National contact structures contribute to contextualising Programme information, adapting messages to national circumstances and promoting Programme opportunities through established national and regional networks. The evidence suggests that communication linking Programme opportunities and results to domestic policy priorities and administrative realities is generally more effective than generic Programme-level messaging. In this sense, national-level actors help make Programme communication more accessible and relevant to different stakeholder groups.

At the same time, communication functions are organised differently across countries. In some countries, such as Lithuania, Estonia and Denmark, national contact functions are less formalised, and communication responsibilities are embedded within existing institutional arrangements or handled by smaller teams. Interviews indicate that dissemination may rely more heavily on personal networks, MC members, Programme-level communication tools or existing cooperation structures. In several countries, MC members contribute actively to dissemination and stakeholder engagement and effectively perform functions similar to those carried out by dedicated contact points elsewhere. This confirms that national-level communication is not dependent exclusively on formal NCP structures but can also be delivered through broader institutional networks and country-specific arrangements.



Interview evidence also highlights the role of regional and thematic structures in national communication systems. Depending on the country, communication may be organised centrally or involve regional actors at different territorial levels. Regional development agencies, regional councils, municipal associations and thematic networks often play an important role in disseminating information and connecting Programme opportunities with potential beneficiaries. Several countries also use national committees or sub-committees that bring together representatives from central and regional levels to discuss Programme implementation, review applications and develop

common national positions. These mechanisms contribute to information exchange and help connect Programme communication with regional development priorities.

National-level communication is also supported by a range of complementary mechanisms designed to facilitate Programme participation. Several participating countries have established support schemes for proposal development, application preparation or national co-financing. While these instruments primarily support participation rather than communication, they also increase the visibility of the Programme and strengthen engagement with potential beneficiaries. Germany provides one of the most developed examples through the federal INTERREG support framework managed by the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR), which supports application preparation, national co-financing and strategic activities linked to Interreg participation. Finland operates a national co-financing system administered through the Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Council, while Norway provides national funding to support participation in Interreg Programmes. Other countries rely more strongly on regional development agencies, ministry support or existing cooperation networks.

Several examples illustrate how national-level communication supports the dissemination of Programme results. Latvia maintains a dedicated national Interreg portal that provides information on projects involving Latvian partners, project results, success stories, calls for proposals and implementation guidance. The portal was established to communicate achieved results in the national language, promote cooperation and partnership culture and support Latvian beneficiaries. Similarly, the German BBSR maintains a dedicated Interreg B online portal and a database of transnational Interreg projects involving German partners, allowing users to search projects by topic, Programme, location and participating organisations. These examples demonstrate how national-level communication structures can complement Programme-wide communication by increasing the visibility of project results among domestic audiences and policy-makers.

The interviews also indicate that the intensity, scope and continuity of national-level communication vary across the Programme area. Countries with dedicated communication staff and established structures tend to conduct more systematic outreach activities and maintain continuous engagement with stakeholders. According to interviews, the Polish NCP, based in the Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, exemplifies this approach. It combines the translation of Programme documents, national information seminars organised around each call, and cooperation with Joint Secretariat staff. In addition, it provides practical guidance during project preparation, clarifies assessment expectations for applicants, is actively involved in capitalisation activities, and is positively perceived by the regions.

By contrast, where formal structures are less developed, communication is often integrated into broader institutional responsibilities and relies more heavily on personal networks, MC members and existing institutional arrangements. Interviews also underline the **importance of adapting Programme communication to national contexts**. While Programme-level communication tools are consistently described as clear and professional, MC members and national representatives stress that effective outreach often requires translation, contextual framing and the use of national languages. In particular, communication that links Programme results to domestic policy debates and administrative realities is considered more effective in engaging national authorities and decision-makers than generic Programme-level messaging.

14.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the evaluation questions:

EQ 6.1 What is the influence of hosting project pages on the Programme portal on communicating the projects efficiently (in comparison to solutions from the previous Programme)?

Hosting project pages centrally on the Programme portal has significantly improved the efficiency, coherence and sustainability of project communication compared to the decentralised website model used in the 2014-2020 programming period. Under the previous approach, individual project websites varied widely in structure, level of detail, and compliance with visibility requirements, leading to uneven quality, fragmented presentation of results, and limited long-term accessibility once projects ended.

Evidence from the beneficiary survey confirms the usefulness of the new approach. 82% of the beneficiaries who responded to this question (n=118) think it is more or even much more efficient to host all project pages on the Programme portal. Only 17% perceive it as less efficient. However, about one third of the beneficiaries who also provided an explanation felt that the standardised approach comes with trade-offs. Although the standard template is considered efficient and user-friendly, beneficiaries perceive limitations in terms of flexibility in website design, content structure and technical functionality. This makes it more difficult for projects to showcase their unique features or present specialised outputs.

The current model introduces a standardised framework for project communication, ensuring consistent branding, structure and minimum content across all projects. From an efficiency perspective, this reduces duplication of effort, as projects no longer need to develop and maintain independent websites and simplifies compliance with regulatory visibility requirements. Interviews confirm that this approach has led to savings in time and budget, reduced administrative burden, and to a consistent visual identity and communication standard across all projects.

In terms of effectiveness, centralised hosting has strengthened visibility, discoverability and long-term accessibility of results. Web analytics show that project pages are a major driver of overall website engagement, accounting for over two thirds of total users in both 2024 and 2025, with a growing share over time. This indicates that project-related content benefits from being embedded within the Programme's main communication environment and reaches audiences beyond individual project partnerships.

Compared to the previous Programme, the current system improves capitalisation potential, as policy-makers and stakeholders can consult project outputs after project closure through a stable Programme maintained platform. Project pages also benefit from Programme-generated traffic, increasing the exposure of project content. Unlike project-specific websites, the current model provides a stable Programme-maintained repository of results that remains accessible beyond project closure. Overall, the shift to Programme hosted project pages represents a clear improvement in both efficiency and communication impact, addressing many of the structural weaknesses observed in the previous period.

EQ 6.2 Do the beneficiaries feel part of "Interreg family"? If yes, how does it show?

The notion of an 'Interreg family' becomes evident in the sense of ownership and value placed on Interreg participation, as well as in the recurring interactions, shared working practices and long-term

cooperative relationships among beneficiaries. In this context, the Programme creates specific and unique conditions that facilitate exchange, mutual learning and repeated cooperation across projects and calls.

Evidence from interviews, surveys and observed participation patterns in events indicates that beneficiaries perceive a sense of belonging to Interreg, particularly at the implementation level. This sense of belonging appears to stem from a functional network based on trust, repeated cooperation and accumulated experience. Beneficiaries see that Interreg has a unique value in contributing to transnational networking and cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. However, 85% of the beneficiaries also feel a strong positive effect of Interreg on their day-to-day work in the own organisation and country. For them, based on their open responses, the IBSR Programme serves as a catalyst for multi-level cooperation and knowledge transfer within countries. Organisations act as innovation hubs, successfully bridging the gap between transnational expertise and local needs by sharing evidence-based tools with municipalities, regional agencies, and national ministries. These collaborations strengthen local capacity and elevate regional issues to the national policy agenda, fostering dialogue on critical topics like the circular economy and sustainable development.

Several mechanisms contribute to this perception. First, centralised communication structures – such as Programme hosted project pages, common visibility tools and shared communication guidelines - create a common operational framework, reinforcing a sense of collective identity. Second, community building instruments such as the matchmaking platform, thematic webinars and informal formats (notably the Forum for Communication Managers on Facebook) provide regular opportunities for project developers to connect with one another. Through these formats, participants exchange good practices, share information about events, and promote mutual learning, fostering continuity of interaction beyond individual projects. In addition, Programme events and external events such as the EUSBSR Annual Forum provide important opportunities for networking, trust-building and the development of long-term cooperation relationships across the Baltic Sea Region.

Interviews consistently highlight the particular role of small projects in fostering a sense of belonging to the Interreg community. They serve as entry points for newcomers, especially for municipalities, smaller public authorities and NGOs, lowering barriers to participation and gradually integrating new actors into more complex forms of cooperation. At the same time, experienced beneficiaries contribute stability and informal mentoring, reinforcing community continuity across calls and project generations. This combination of experienced and new participants helps sustain cooperation networks and institutional knowledge over time while continuously expanding the Programme community.

EQ 6.3 Are there lessons learned from projects' and Programme communication or needs for immediate improvements to address new/arising expectations from applicants and project partners? How did the projects cope with the mandatory visibility requirements? How did the support that the Programme provides to projects concerning the visibility requirements work for them?

The analysis highlights several clear lessons learned from Programme and project communication, alongside identified areas for incremental improvement rather than structural correction. A key lesson is the high effectiveness of centralised, standardised communication support. Survey results show very high satisfaction with visibility packages and hosted project pages, with over 90% of beneficiaries considering the provided tools useful or very useful. Programme-hosted project pages emerge as one of the most valued communication and visibility measures, illustrating the effectiveness of the

Programme's centralised communication support. This confirms that the Programme's approach effectively supports compliance while significantly reducing the communication burden for projects. The evidence indicates that beneficiaries cope well with the mandatory visibility requirements and generally perceive the support provided by the Programme as facilitating rather than complicating compliance.

Importantly, the analysis also highlights a lesson related to social media communication and target-group segmentation. Evidence from surveys, analytics and interviews indicates that different social media platforms reach distinct audiences, with LinkedIn particularly effective for beneficiaries and decision-makers, while Facebook and X retain relevance for territorially embedded and national and regional level actors. This may imply a need for differentiated content strategies rather than relying primarily on cross posting. A more differentiated, platform-specific messaging approach would allow the Programme to better tailor content formats and narratives to the expectations of each target group. Of course, it has to be considered that this would probably require more resources.

Finally, both interviews and surveys point to rising expectations regarding storytelling and result-oriented communication. The Programme's increasing emphasis on storytelling approaches in project pages and social media reflects an appropriate response to the challenge of communicating technically complex projects to broader audiences.

EQ 6.4 Is the Programme communication effective in raising the awareness of decision-makers (national and/or EU levels) about the Programme (e.g. via project examples from the region)? For what do the decision-makers consider the Programme most useful?

Programme communication is effective in reaching decision-makers, particularly through events and targeted interactions, but less effective in ensuring sustained political visibility and systematic uptake of project results. The evidence suggests that communication is most effective when project results are presented through policy-oriented events, direct exchanges and concrete examples that can be linked to ongoing policy priorities and discussions.

Data from website analytics and surveys shows that higher level policy actors are underrepresented in general communication channels such as newsletters. In contrast, interviews and survey responses consistently identify events – especially EUSBSR related forums, thematic workshops and policy-oriented meetings – as the most effective channels for engaging policy-makers. These formats provide direct interaction, context specific dialogue and opportunities for projects to present results in policy relevant settings. The EUSBSR Annual Forum has become a particularly important platform in this regard, bringing together policy-makers, Programme stakeholders and project representatives around shared regional challenges and priorities.

MC members across countries note that transnational Interreg cooperation is less visible at political level than cross-border or regional/national Programmes, and that project results are not always translated into policy-relevant narratives. The challenge does not primarily relate to the quality of Programme communication tools, which are consistently described as clear, professional and comprehensive, but rather to communicating project achievements in concise, policy-relevant and decision-maker-oriented formats. Greater use of concrete project examples, storytelling and result-oriented communication could therefore help strengthen political visibility and the uptake of Programme achievements. Building more on the synergies with EUSBSR governance and networks would also contribute to higher visibility among decision-makers.

The evidence suggests that awareness of Programme achievements remains stronger among implementation-level stakeholders than among higher-level political actors. While communication successfully creates access points for decision-makers, it does not always translate into sustained political recognition of Programme achievements and results.

In this context, decision-makers primarily value the Programme for its contribution to the development of practical and transferable solutions, for supporting transnational cooperation aligned with EUSBSR priorities, and providing platforms for dialogue and exchange across governance levels. The Programme is also valued as a mechanism for knowledge exchange and policy learning, enabling decision-makers to identify, test and transfer solutions developed elsewhere in the Baltic Sea Region. Furthermore, stakeholders appreciate the Programme's contribution to the implementation of EUSBSR priorities through concrete cooperation activities, pilot actions and policy-relevant solutions.

EQ 6.5 How did PACs act as Programme multipliers, supporting the Programme and projects' communication? Which stakeholders did PAC's' activities as multipliers mainly reach out to? What were the most effective mechanisms that PACs used in communicating the Programme to its stakeholders?

PACs play a multiplier role within the Programme communication system through their contribution to the Programme communication by connecting projects with relevant stakeholders across governance levels, embedding project results into policy processes, and providing structured platforms for visibility and exchange. Most PACs use Programme communication material to inform potential project developers and Policy Area steering groups, confirming their role as trusted intermediaries rather than passive information transmitters of information.

PACs also contribute to the transfer and capitalisation of project results by using their networks and governance structures to increase the visibility, relevance and uptake of project outputs among strategic stakeholders. In performing this role, PACs primarily reach national, regional and local public authorities, sectoral agencies, thematic networks and steering groups, as well as research organisations and international actors linked to EUSBSR priorities.

The most effective communication mechanisms identified include participation in strategic events (notably EUSBSR Annual Forums), organisation of thematic workshops, direct exchanges within steering groups, and inviting projects to present results in policy fora. Interview evidence suggests that direct interaction through workshops, forums and stakeholder meetings is considered more effective for sustained policy engagement than communication channels based primarily on information dissemination.

EQ 6.6 How did national contact points contribute to the Programme communication in the countries where these existed?

NCPs and others national contact structures contribute substantially to Programme communication at national level by providing outreach, information, networking opportunities and support to applicants and beneficiaries. National-level actors play a significant role in extending the reach of Programme communication, adapting Programme messages to national and regional contexts, and supporting applicant and beneficiary engagement.

Where dedicated NCP structures exist, communication activities typically include national information events, webinars, tailored information sessions, dissemination through national networks and direct guidance to stakeholders. In these contexts, NCPs act as intermediaries between national stakeholders and the Programme, helping to increase the visibility and accessibility of Programme information. In other countries, NCP functions are less structured or embedded within existing institutional arrangements, in some cases with limited additional resources. In such cases, communication activities tend to be more ad-hoc, and MC members frequently assume NCP like roles.

Depending on the country, communication is organised centrally or involves regional actors at different territorial levels. Regional development agencies, regional councils, municipal associations and thematic networks often play an important role in disseminating information and connecting Programme opportunities with potential beneficiaries. Several countries also use national committees or sub-committees that bring together representatives from central and regional levels to discuss Programme implementation, review applications and develop common national positions. These mechanisms contribute to information exchange and help connect Programme communication with regional development priorities.

Examples illustrate how national-level communication supports the dissemination of Programme results. Latvia maintains a dedicated national Interreg portal in Latvian language that provides information on projects involving Latvian partners, project results, success stories, calls for proposals and implementation guidance. Similarly, the German BBSR maintains a dedicated Interreg B online portal and a database of transnational Interreg projects. MC members and national representatives stress that effective outreach often requires translation, contextual framing and the use of national languages. In particular, targeted communication that links Programme results to domestic policy debates and administrative realities is considered effective in engaging national authorities and decision-makers.

National-level communication can be further strengthened by Programme activities, for example, by facilitating exchange among national delegations about good practices in national-level communication.

15 Conclusions and recommendations

The Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027 remains highly relevant and well aligned with the evolving needs of the Baltic Sea Region, despite significant geopolitical changes since 2022. The Programme has successfully adjusted via its projects to strengthen resilience, energy security, crisis preparedness and regional self-reliance while maintaining its strategic objectives.

Compared to the 2014-2020 period, the Programme demonstrates an evolution from knowledge generation and conceptual cooperation towards more operational implementation, testing and transfer of practical, scalable solutions. Projects increasingly deliver mature, user-oriented solutions supported by advanced digital technologies, stronger stakeholder engagement and real-life piloting, resulting in potential for long-term uptake and policy impact.

The Programme has successfully introduced new thematic priorities, such as resilient economies and communities, responsive public services and circular economy, which address important regional challenges and offer possibilities for complementary EU and national funding by combining transnational cooperation, innovation and systemic policy development. These priorities complement rather than duplicate mainstream ERDF and ESF interventions.

Interreg continues to occupy a distinctive niche by addressing transnational challenges that cannot be solved through national programmes alone. Its distinctive feature is the use of large, transnational partnerships involving triple- or quadruple helix stakeholders. Its added value lies in combining multi-level governance, policy learning, cross-sectoral cooperation and practical testing of innovative solutions, while connecting local implementation with macro-regional policy development.

The analysis provides strong evidence that the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme successfully delivers on its value statement. Across the portfolio, the Programme supports the transition towards greener, more resilient societies by enabling partners to develop and implement innovative, transnational solutions to shared regional challenges. The evidence also demonstrates a strong beneficiary orientation, with projects responding to the concrete needs of public authorities and other stakeholders while producing practical outputs that can be applied in policy and practice. Finally, the Programme consistently promotes knowledge transfer and capacity building by facilitating learning across borders, strengthening institutional capacities, and enabling the uptake and transfer of successful approaches across the Baltic Sea region. Together, these findings confirm that the Programme not only reflects its stated values in its design but also translates them into tangible results through its implementation.

The evaluation confirms the strong durability of Programme results. Previous projects have generated lasting impacts through institutional embedding, follow-up projects, policy integration and gradual scaling of successful solutions. The current Programme effectively builds upon these achievements, demonstrating a cumulative learning process across programming periods.

The Programme has also broadened participation by attracting substantial numbers of newcomers, particularly public authorities and SMEs, while maintaining strong engagement of research

organisations. Small projects have lowered entry barriers and supported experimentation, although they have not yet fully unlocked participation from smaller civil society organisations and less experienced applicants. These groups still face challenges due to their limited capacity.

Administrative simplification has been effectively implemented in the Programme procedures and tools. The extensive use of SCOs has significantly reduced administrative burden, shortened reporting and payment times, and allowed beneficiaries to focus more strongly on project implementation and results.

The close relationship between the Programme and the EUSBSR represents a major strength. The interaction between projects, PACs, project platforms and governance structures substantially enhances policy uptake, dissemination and long-term sustainability of project results.

Overall, the Programme demonstrates high effectiveness, strong stakeholder satisfaction and clear European added value, while providing an increasingly mature model for delivering transnational cooperation.

Only minor recommendations can be made to improve the performance of the IBSR programme further:

- Small projects provide a more accessible entry point for organisations that are new to the Programme. The analysis showed that there was a strong interest from usually smaller organisations, such as NGOs and local public authorities in small projects. However, as can be seen by the high rate of failed applications, in particular smaller organisations face challenges presenting successful applications. Even if the challenges lie also within these organisations (e.g. lower technical capacity, fewer staff), providing them with even more targeted support, if the future Programme resources allow for it, might help them to strengthen the quality of their submissions and improve their chances of success.

- SCOs are well functioning, but some minor challenges merit attention. Standard hourly rates remain broadly aligned with actual costs, but inflation and changing labour costs may erode this alignment over time. Concerns also relate to travel flat rates and reporting requirements, particularly the 15% travel and accommodation flat rate, which is appreciated for its simplicity but may create inequalities when linked to staff costs. Reflection might be needed to see how these challenges can be addressed in the future. Further practical simplification could be achieved by reducing the level of detail required in timesheets and providing clearer guidance on calculating and reporting annual working hours.

- Minor potential for improvement has been detected with regard to BAMOS+. Slight improvements would further increase efficiency of processes within the MA/JS, for example by embedding the project idea form and its submissions into the BAMOS+ system, by using an automatic schedule for the consultations to reduce the time needed to plan them. From the beneficiary/applicant perspective, smaller technical improvements might further improve the usability of the tool (e.g. the possibility of printing/exporting reports in PDF or budget overviews in MS Excel, or to improve the Report of Hours and Employment Confirmation sheets with an automatic functionality of highlighting weekend days, improving the State aid checkbox design).

- In light of recent technological advancements, the utilisation of AI tools has the potential to enhance the efficiency of administrative processes. It is suggested to explore the use of AI-based tools to automate routine screening and reporting tasks, while allowing programme staff to focus on qualitative tasks requiring expert judgement.

- Within the context of mutual benefits between IBSR and EUSBSR, a need to reflect on the general balance and depth of the IBSR support to the EUSBSR has been identified, considering the feedback of two-thirds of the MC delegations on the perceived need to shift responsibility for financing EUSBSR more firmly to Member States and mainstream programmes.

- National Contact Points (NCPs) and other national contact structures contribute substantially to programme communication at a national level. In some countries, however, the NCP's role is less embedded within existing institutional arrangements and has limited additional resources. In such cases, communication activities tend to be more ad hoc. National-level communication could be further strengthened by supportive programme activities, such as facilitating exchange among national delegations about good practices in national-level communication.

16 Annex 1: Data collection activities

This annex presents the details of the data collection activities, involving IBSR 2021-2027 stakeholders, such as interviews and surveys.

16.1 Interviews

17 semi-structured interviews have been conducted, five of them with the MA/JS, nine with national delegations, as well as three with EUSBSR stakeholders.

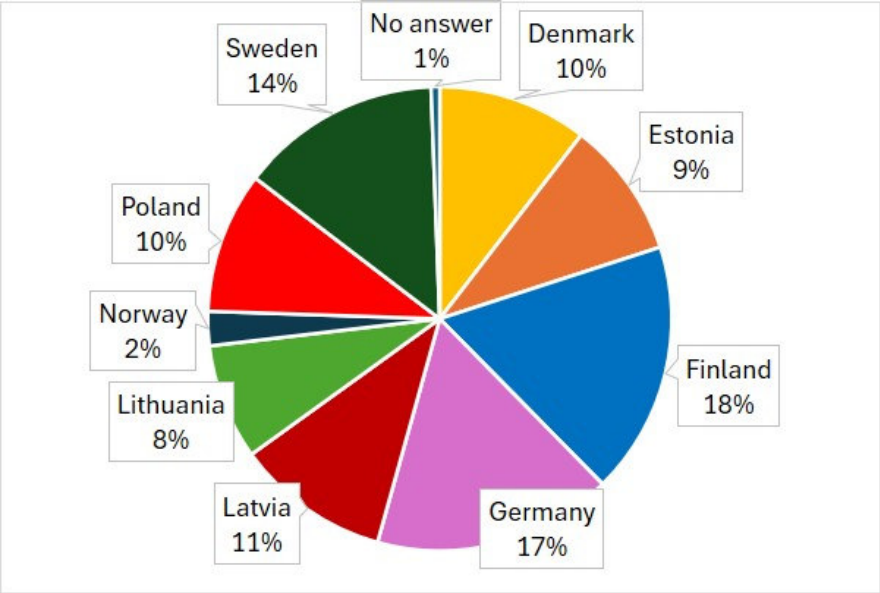
Interview with	Details	Date
MA/JS group interview (online)	General status of the programme, progress, focus on pilots and solutions	15 January 2026
MA/JS group interview (online)	Implementation procedures, processes	21 January 2026
MA/JS group interview (online)	Geopolitical changes and Support to EUSBSR/ connection to EUSBSR	20 January 2026
MA/JS group interview (online)	Simplified Cost Options	27 January 2026
MA/JS group interview (online)	Core projects and small projects	22 January 2026
MA/JS group interview (online)	Communication	02 February 2026
MC member/national delegation	Denmark	19 February 2026
MC member/national delegation	Estonia	03 March 2026
MC member/national delegation	Finland	25 February 2026
MC member/national delegation	Germany	24 February 2026
MC member/national delegation	Latvia	16 February 2026
MC member/national delegation	Lithuania	13 February 2026
MC member/national delegation	Norway	12 February 2026
MC member/national delegation	Poland	24 February 2026
MC member/national delegation	Sweden	17 February 2026
EUSBSR stakeholder	Baltic Sea Strategy Point (BSP)	21 April 2026
EUSBSR stakeholder	PACs Transport	21 April 2026
EUSBSR stakeholder	PAC Health	30 April 2026

16.2 Beneficiary Survey – respondent information

The web survey to beneficiaries was open to beneficiaries and project partners between 5 February and 09 March 2026. It generated 335 responses and delivered important insights for most evaluation questions.

The 335 responses cover all EU Member States and Norway, represented in the Programme.

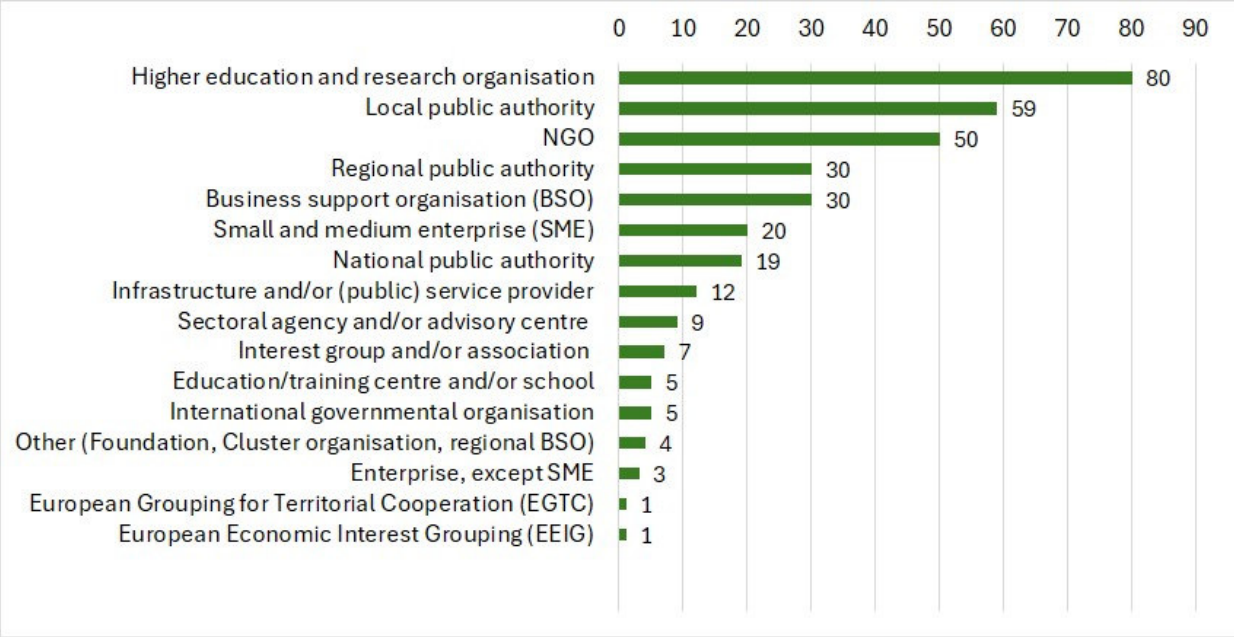
Figure 16-1 Share of respondents by country of origin (n=335)



Source: Respondent data from the survey to beneficiaries (March 2026)

With regard to the organisations that participated in the survey, the following structure can be observed.

Figure 16-2 No. of respondents by type of organisation (n=335)



Source: Respondent data from the survey to beneficiaries (March 2026)

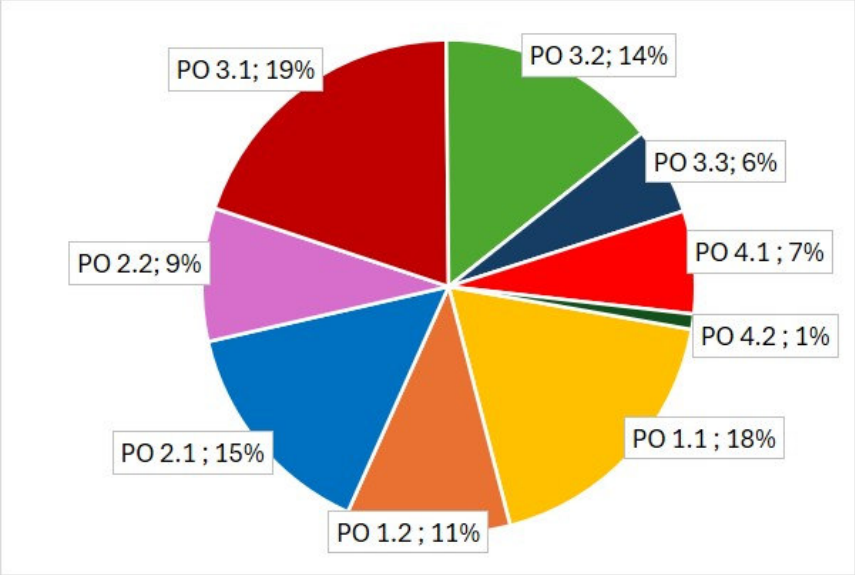
The responses came from respondents who identified either as lead partner (68; 20%), as Project Partner (263; 79%) or Associated Partner (3; 1%), with one “Don’t Know” response.

Respondents could indicate to which calls and types of projects they applied to. Reflecting reality, where one organisation can be involved in several projects/applications and even in different types of projects (core/small/platform), the respondents could answer with multiple responses. The results show that 259 respondents (77%) answered that they applied to a core project call, 66 applied to a small project call (20%), 56 applied to project platform calls and 35 to EUSBSR support calls. Many combinations of multiple answers were possible, but there were, for example, 32 respondents who only checked the “small project” box (10%), while 28 respondents only applied for the EUSBSR support (8%).

It has to be noted that there was an additional question asking about participation in a small project in 2021-2027 as a requirement to get further questions only dedicated to small project partners. This question was answered by 69 respondents (21% of all respondents). The incoherence between answers about small project participation (66 vs. 69) might be explained with some partners not exactly knowing to which call for application or type of project they applied.

The survey asked under which PO the respondents were participating. Again, multiple answers were possible, as respondents can be involved in more than one project. The following figure shows the distribution of answers per PO.

Figure 16-3 No. of respondents and share by PO (n=335)



Source: Respondent data from the survey to beneficiaries (March 2026)

16.3 EUSBSR Surveys – respondent information

Two smaller web surveys addressed EUSBSR stakeholder, namely EUSBSR PACs with 15 responses and the Baltic Sea Strategy Point with 2 responses. Both surveys focused only on the specific stakeholder groups, thus not expecting a high number of responses, but rather standardised written feedback on specific questions. Both surveys were launched on the 13 February 2026.

The responses from EUSBSR PACs correspond to 11 different Policy Areas:

- PA Spatial Planning (3 responses)
- PA Culture (2 responses)
- PA Safe (2 responses)
- PA Secure
- PA Innovation
- PA Nutri
- PA Energy
- PA Hazards
- PA Tourism
- PA Ship
- PA Education.