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Consultation of Stakeholders for Interreg post-2027 Interreg Baltic Sea Region

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Introduction

The European Commission invited all Interreg Programmes to run a consultation with their stakeholders and report back to the Commission by the end of 2024. These Harvesting reports, including a standard set of questions defined by the Commission, would form an important basis for the European Commission's proposal on transnational Interreg programmes for the post-2027 period.

This report summarises the consultation carried out by Interreg Baltic Sea Region, the inputs from the stakeholders to the key questions, and outlines the recommendations based on the consultation outcomes.

1 Consultation of stakeholders

1.1 Main stakeholders consulted

Approximately 300 representatives of different organisations took part in the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme (the Programme) stakeholder consultations. The biggest group of respondents was the policy area steering groups of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) (180 representatives). These include mainly representatives of national authorities and sectoral agencies.

Further respondents represented a wide range of organisational types. Larger groups of respondents included pan-Baltic youth organisations, local public authorities, regional public authorities, NGOs, and national public authorities. Additionally, smaller groups of respondents included higher education and research organisations, SMEs, sectoral agencies, large enterprises, infrastructure and public services providers, EEIGs and interest groups.

In addition, the validation workshop “Have your say on Interreg funding in the Baltic Sea Region after 2027” at the EUSBSR Annual Forum, which the Programme organised together with the Central Baltic Programme, gathered some 60 participants.

1.2 Methods of consultation

The MA/JS of the Programme ran an online survey that was open from February to May 2024. In addition, the MA/JS carried out 22 consultation interviews with EUSBSR policy area steering groups, Pan-Baltic organisations and their youth groups.

Together with the Central Baltic Programme, the MA/JS also organised a validation workshop, “Have your say on Interreg funding in the Baltic Sea Region after 2027”, at the EUSBSR Annual Forum in October 2024.

The conclusions of the consultations were discussed with the Monitoring Committee of the Programme on 14 November 2024.

1.3 Summary of the input on the key questions



1. In which topic do you see the biggest need and potential for transnational cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region?

The stakeholder consultations have revealed a strong need for transnational cooperation in the Baltic Sea region. The consultations highlighted the importance of a **cross-sectoral approach** in tackling the topics important for transnational cooperation. It appears that the multifaceted societal and environmental challenges in the region cannot be resolved through interventions by actors representing a single thematic field. Furthermore, **joint capacity building** was seen as vital for tackling future challenges in different fields. The main thematic blocks identified for intervention at the transnational level were **resilience and security** as well as **green and climate-neutral development**.

Resilience and security

Respondents emphasised several concerns regarding security and the need for building societal resilience: **climate change resilience, food security, energy security, health threats, inclusion of different groups of society, disinformation, maritime security and cybersecurity**. In addition, **military crises**, and their consequences, such as immigration and emerging challenges at the EU external borders with Russia and Belarus were highlighted. The depopulation of rural areas concerned many respondents as well. The answers from regional and local authorities reflected their ever-changing operational environment and the need for **foresight and preparedness skills**, including **digital skills**.

Regarding specific topics, collaboration for increasing **climate change resilience** was high on the respondent's agenda. The respondents saw that the focus should be on the ability of societies to address the consequences of climate change (adaptation), as well as reduce the underlying causes of climate change itself (mitigation). Respondents also emphasised that addressing climate change requires a comprehensive approach that integrates multiple issues. Tackling relevant areas together, rather than in isolation, is crucial for achieving sustainable and effective climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. Local authorities wanted to increase their capacity to implement better climate adaptation strategies. Joint efforts would improve efficiency and harmonise emergency response approaches e.g. on severe weather conditions resulting in floods and fires. The effects of climate change on different groups of people should be considered and the inhabitants would need to be involved in the development of adaptation measures.

Food and product safety and security in the Baltic Sea region were considered an essential topic for transnational cooperation as well. Further collaboration in **renewable energy projects**, related research, and infrastructure development would bolster energy security in the region. **Public health** was another pressing area for cooperation, with a focus on enhancing the resilience of healthcare systems to cope with threats. By sharing knowledge, increasing digitalisation, coordinating response mechanisms, and investing in capacity-building, countries could better prepare for and respond to health emergencies collectively. Mental health, particularly among youth, was also emphasised. **Better integration of different groups of**



society, particularly **youth**, would increase societal resilience and strengthen democracy. Cooperation for capacity building in the integration of **migrants** into the labour market was seen as important as well.

Furthermore, **maritime security** remains an important topic for cooperation in the Baltic Sea region. This includes reliable navigational conditions, accurate preparedness and response for maritime accidents and security issues, water protection, and careful planning of marine space. Digital maritime services are needed to improve navigation safety and pollution preparedness and response.

Digitalisation and related skills were also discussed in relation to **rural areas'** development chances. Digitalisation would, for example, help provide healthcare services in sparsely populated areas. Transnational cooperation should help create more equal digital opportunities across regions. Rural areas' inhabitants need to acquire digital competencies, stimulate entrepreneurship, and generate new and modern jobs.

Resilience towards **disinformation** emerged as an important topic as well. Overall, the general public should be better sensitized and educated about the advantages and dangers of digitalisation including artificial intelligence.

The respondents saw joint efforts among countries facing similar safety and security issues and expert collaboration across countries as important to improve efficiency and harmonise emergency response approaches. For instance, creating future scenarios for municipalities, cities, and regions in wider cooperation would increase the quality and durability of such scenarios. **A comprehensive security model** was discussed, extending beyond traditional military approaches to include human, economic, environmental, and individual security dimensions. Furthermore, “preparedness in planning” was mentioned. This would vary depending on needs including civil infrastructures, energy systems restoration, resilience against threats to communications and cyber structures and planning for rising sea levels (use of harbours, location of roads, protection of cities).

Green and climate-neutral development

Green transition, environmental sustainability, as well as climate change adaptation and mitigation were regularly highlighted in the consultations as interconnected fields in which transnational cooperation should continue in the region. Related topics included **transitioning to carbon-free societies** including renewable energy and green mobility, **circular economy**, **managing sea and water resources** but also the sustainability of other **natural resources**, **sustainable food systems**, and developing the **bioeconomy**, particularly agriculture, in line with **environmental and biodiversity concerns**. In addition, the **environmental state of the Baltic Sea** continued to be a shared concern.

The respondents saw the **energy transition** remaining critical, involving the shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, bioenergy, and hydrogen. **Green and energy-efficient mobility**, including **shipping**, was connected to the energy transition.

The circular cycle should furthermore be closed in various branches. The respondents also expressed a demand for the development of **carbon-neutral agriculture and food production**, as well as fostering



bioeconomy and a circular economy with renewable biomass-based resources. **Sustainable and efficient use of natural resources** from water and forests was stressed. Innovative ways to adjust human consumption were seen as a requirement to advance in these topics.

Many respondents emphasised that transnational cooperation was needed for **mainstreaming environmental protection and biodiversity**. New solutions in any field should take these into account. **The status of the Baltic Sea** and water protection, in general, remained as topics that need cooperation. New solutions still need to be tested for nutrient recycling from wastewater. The matter of hazardous substances in the waters needs to be tackled as a cross-cutting issue within policy makers, authorities and the public. Sustainable shipping continues to be a topic for transnational cooperation, reducing emissions to the water. Also, spatial planning across national boundaries was mentioned to highlight transnational environmental corridors that could help tackle climate and other environmental challenges related to biodiversity and maritime zones, forests and the protection of wildlife. The respondents recognised that the **effects of climate change** needed to be considered in all the efforts to save the ecological sustainability of the Baltic Sea and the biodiversity in the region. Local and regional authorities welcomed **joint learning** in achieving sustainability goals and becoming climate-neutral also in the view of decreasing budgets. Furthermore, **better-harmonised regulations and the way EU legislation is being implemented** across the countries were called for.

Green and climate-neutral development included the need for **skills development** in cities, regions, and SMEs. Many respondents connected green transition with **digital skills**, for instance working towards smart and sustainable cities or intelligent transport systems. A skilled workforce adept in digital tools and methodologies was needed in the region to drive innovation and sustainable practices across sectors.

2. What currently works well in transnational cooperation in the topics named above and should be either preserved or reinforced?

Many respondents praised the **existing engagement of people devoted to collaboration** across the topics. Experts and organisations work together and share expertise in **different networks**. **Piloting solutions and sharing experiences** across borders also work well in many topics. The most often highlighted topics with well-working transnational cooperation related to the Programme priority 1 on innovative societies. In these topics, respondents saw existing collaborative networks and frameworks facilitate successful knowledge exchange and partnership-building across borders. Joint policy development, strategies, and alignment of S3 ensure building on top of each other's strengths. Another strong field of cooperation identified is environment and sustainability. According to the respondents, there are highly skilled people and existing networks in this field that could help make the Baltic Sea region a pioneer region in the transition to more sustainability. Further good examples of working networks are planners' forums and the coordination of maritime spatial planning in the Baltic Sea region. Respondents also saw that the exchange of good practices in implementing the Water Framework Directive works well. Most of the respondents referred to the **well-working Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme**. The Programme covers **relevant topics** for the region, and the priorities allow cross-cutting approaches. In



particular, the wide range of topics included in the Programme's "innovative societies" priority, including resilience building, were appreciated. Respondents also appreciated the **capacity building** across borders with a **broad spectrum of partners from the public and private sectors**. The Programme was seen as an opportunity for municipalities to participate in changes and develop solutions without the need to change regional policies and, according to the 'go local' principle, learn from other regions' solutions. The Programme was also seen as a **strategic platform for cooperation**.

The competence and helpfulness of the **staff** and the **good communication tools** were often mentioned. The **matchmaking tool, simplified cost options, 80% co-financing, piloting focus and the two project types** (bigger core projects with piloting and smaller projects offering easier access to the Programme) were praised.

3. What currently does not work well in transnational cooperation in the topics named above and should be improved?

In many topics, respondents referred to the **missing communication among different authorities in the countries as well as among authorities across countries**. This resulted in a lack of cross-sectoral approaches, missing common standards and harmonisation of legislation and approaches as well as contradicting political incentives and support schemes. Topics that were mentioned were mobility and connectivity, risk preparedness, water management, hazardous substances, digitalisation, renewable energies, green procurement, and R&D. Missing sea basin approach and alignment among the countries was seen hampering maritime spatial planning as well. Lack of time, skills, and resources were mentioned as reasons for missing transnational and cross-sectoral cooperation among authorities.

Of the cooperation topics the one most mentioned regarding the need to improve cooperation was **mobility and connectivity**. Respondents were missing e.g. funding for infrastructure investments to improve connections in the region and regulatory development for digitalised and automated mobility.

Fragmentation of transnational initiatives and organisations was also mentioned as a challenge in cooperation. Clearer goals, targets and the role of different bodies were called for. Some saw a more strategic role of Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme in this.

Sustaining the outcomes of transnational projects better, e.g. by anchoring them in the institutional memory of organisations, integrating them into national and regional systems or getting financing for innovative solutions to bring them to the market, remained a challenge across thematic topics.

The respondents raised the challenge of **involving public authorities and utility operators** in the cooperation. Lack of experience, time, and resources were mentioned as reasons. In addition, the fact that the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme supported soft activities rather than investments in infrastructure and business development was mentioned as a reason why transnational cooperation was not attractive for some organisations.

Respondents named **aspects of the Programme** that could be improved. These related to financial rules, challenges for new and small organisations, the small scope for investments, missing topics or the low co-



financing rate for Norwegian partners. However, none of the single points was brought up by many respondents.

4. What are the major obstacles for a good transnational cooperation in the Baltic Sea region? How could these be removed?

Language and cultural differences were often mentioned as obstacles to cooperation. The Baltic Sea region comprises countries with diverse cultural backgrounds. These differences can create challenges in communication, decision-making processes, and understanding of norms and expectations. The respondents saw that further opportunities for transnational exchange would reduce these barriers.

Legal frameworks and administrative structures differ as well. These lead to differences, for instance, in the **mandates of cities** to work on a certain matter. Sometimes, there is a lack of understanding of how a matter is dealt with in another country. Variations in **regulatory frameworks and standards**, such as environmental protection standards, were also mentioned as barriers to seamless cooperation. Further, **different levels of development**, already-made investments in solutions, and **different political priorities** across countries were seen as obstacles in many cooperation topics.

The fragmentation of entities active in transnational cooperation was also seen as an obstacle. Several respondents **lacked coordination and strategic complementarity** of transnational activities, which the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region does not sufficiently provide.

The respondents also saw **the lack of political support from regional and national levels** for transnational cooperation as an obstacle. Transnational cooperation is often seen as something “nice-to-have” rather than part of an investment policy. On a practical level, **the lack of resources** was mentioned as the major obstacle to participation in transnational cooperation activities. It concerns, in particular, smaller organisations like municipalities and NGOs, including youth organisations.

Furthermore, the difficulty **of finding the right partners for cooperation** was mentioned as an obstacle. The respondents wished for more opportunities for international exchange, networking and matchmaking.

The **administrative complexity of the Programme** was most often mentioned as an obstacle to participation in Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects, particularly for smaller and new organisations in the cooperation. Offering simpler participation forms, particularly for youth organisations, was seen as a solution. For some, **the flat rates offered by the Programme** were seen as an obstacle as they have limitations in meeting all needs.

5. Are there things that you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? Why?

One of the most often mentioned wishes for activities under Interreg BSR that are currently not possible or are difficult **is cooperation with partners outside the Programme area**. In particular, engaging with **Ukraine** and learning from their experiences was seen as valuable, for instance, in civil protection. Sharing both successful and challenging experiences from Ukraine could help adjust legislation and practices for



enhanced societal security in the BSR. Also, cooperation in environmental matters with Ukraine was seen to benefit the Baltic Sea region. Expertise and critical partners were seen as needed also from other parts of the EU and even beyond (e.g. for the development of environmental solutions and establishing new markets).

Many respondents wished for Programme funding to also support **longer-term cooperation**, maintaining established networks, and continuing activities after a project. At the same time, **smaller, micro projects** were wished for. These projects should focus on knowledge exchange, study visits or project preparation.

A major group of respondents saw a need for a stronger focus on **research activities, innovation collaboration, and funding for technical solutions**. The reason for these statements can be found in the current period when the Programme has clearly limited its funding for pure research projects. The needs of public authorities, testing practical solutions, and the involvement of target groups have been in focus.

Infrastructure development, for instance, in the transport field or for environmental protection, was furthermore mentioned as an activity that several respondents wished to do within Interreg but could not.

6. What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Interreg?

The important novelties in Interreg that the respondents came up with correlate strongly with the responses to the questions above. Many of the points raised were less novelties but rather aspects of the Programme that could be improved or strengthened.

The respondents like to see **multi-sectoral projects** interlinking different fields and types of organisations. Some **new topics** should be integrated into the Programme, like resilience of external borders and artificial intelligence. **Cooperation across programme areas** should be made better possible as well.

A novelty often mentioned was **funding for soft activities like exchange visits and networking activities**. Furthermore, many respondents wanted to see **small cooperation grants**, e.g., for smaller entities and seed funding for project preparation. **Follow-up projects and activities** for successful projects were frequently mentioned as well. These include transfer activities e.g. to cities that did not take part in the main project. Furthermore, **co-creation with stakeholders** with funding for the implementation of created solutions

The **inclusion of youth** in the projects was a novelty often mentioned. Young people's potential in the projects was seen as experts contributing to a certain topic or as representatives of their community. It was even proposed to make the involvement of youth mandatory at some stage of project implementation.

Finally, a **reduced administrative complexity** was mentioned as a novelty to look for in future Interreg.

7. Is there a need for some infrastructure projects to be implemented in transnational cooperation?



Less than half of the respondents saw a need for infrastructure projects.

Local authorities often saw an infrastructure component as important in projects **for testing and piloting solutions** and as a practical ground for transnational cooperation. Investments would make the results of a cooperation project **better visible** to citizens and decision-makers, increasing the local level's interest in participation. The type of investments could be small environmental, renewable energy and greening projects.

Needs for **joint bigger infrastructure investments** were also expressed. Transport and mobility, including maritime transport, were the most often mentioned fields of investment. Renewable energy and digital infrastructure were also mentioned several times.

8. What could facilitate your work with your counterparts in another country?

One of the most often mentioned ways to facilitate work with counterparts was **to support establishing contacts** through matchmaking platforms and person-to-person matchmaking events with people sharing similar interests. Many respondents also saw **the support for maintaining knowledge hubs, platforms, and networks** as important to facilitate their work with counterparts, for instance, in environmental monitoring and crisis management.

Joint capacity building of authorities across countries on certain topics and learning how to learn from others was seen as a further way to facilitate cooperation. In addition, **support for developing joint strategies and harmonising standards** across countries would facilitate the work with counterparts.

Cooperation with and among youth across the countries would need specific support. **Dedicated resources** would be needed **for youth** organisations and persons to guide the youth in participation.

Some saw **seed money** for project preparation as a great help for working with counterparts. In general, **more resources and easier access to funding opportunities** were seen as facilitators of cooperation.

9. What would be the transnational cooperation project of your dreams in the Baltic Sea region?

The respondents presented a huge variety of topics for a dream transnational cooperation project covering all the topics for which the respondents saw a need for cooperation (see question 1). In general, the dream projects had often **a multi-disciplinary approach** and included **wide partnerships** from all levels and types of organisations (e.g. sustainable growth, crisis preparedness and resilience projects). Many respondents dreamed of projects that supported **local communities and small cities holistically** in their real needs and their development towards better sustainability and resilience. In particular rural regions were often mentioned in the dream projects.

Furthermore, dream projects included **small projects** for exchange of experience and site visits, **long-term projects** and projects including **youth**.



The specific topic that was more often mentioned than others was the cross-border **transport** of passengers and goods. The respondents dreamed of high-speed rail connections including tunnels for bridging waters as well as smart ticketing across country borders.

1.4 Quotes from the consultation

“Everchanging operational environment calls for new tools to enhance foresight skills and resilience. Creating future scenarios in wider cooperation would benefit the quality and durability of results.”
Regional public authority, Finland

“Resilience issues. The security situation in the region has been dramatically changed. All BSR countries are NATO members. We need to be better to work together in building resilience in the region. It's a broad definition and includes crisis preparedness work, supply security, food security etc.” *National public authority, Sweden*

“It is important to strengthen the aspect of social participation in projects, e.g. from youth, not only the exchange among experts. This would make it clearer why it is better to work together through projects and pass on European values and strengthening democracy.” *Local public authority, Germany*

“Environment and climate are the topics. We need to find new ways to work with lower budgets in municipalities. We need to know what has already been done in other cities.” *Local public authority, Sweden*

“The value for Møre and Romsdal by engaging in projects is to collaborate with regions that excel in certain areas. We can leverage their expertise, learn from their experiences, and adapt successful strategies to our local context. This approach not only accelerates progress but also fosters a culture of continuous improvement and innovation.” *Regional public authority, Norway*

“The Flat Rate system is great for many reasons. I would like to see this system spread to other funds in my own country and in EU. I admire the work of the team who has built this system and got it through. It simplifies reporting - and thereby, it saves costs and time. But it also gives a fair chance to NGO's.” *NGO, Sweden*

“Interreg funding stands as a flexible funding resource, with the use of simplified cost options notably enhancing its accessibility. By streamlining administrative processes, SCOs enable organisations to focus more on project implementation rather than bureaucratic tasks. This simplification has broadened the Programme's appeal, making it more accessible to a diverse range of organisations.” *EUSBSR Policy Area Steering Group*

“<What is working well is> the cooperation based on an Interreg BSR project ABC running 20 years after its completion without financing. It is cooperation among city planners coming together and jointly solving planning problems of a city.” *Local public authority, Sweden*

“Over the decades HELCOM has managed to agree and implement action plans with measures that reduce pressures on the Baltic Sea marine environment. Interreg BSR is important for HELCOM covering the



whole sea basin and catchment. Programme's thematic scope is well in line with HELCOM's needs and the approach to solutions fits well to HELCOM's way of working with management objectives of the action plans." *International organisation, EEIG*

"We would like to be able to implement the topics in question in the widest possible network of partners, so that the solutions developed by one consortium can be taken up by others and further implemented, improved or transferred to their region or local community. The vast majority of partners have similar problems, so it is important that existing solutions can also serve others." *Sectoral Agency, Poland*



2 Recommendations for post-2027

2.1 Transnational cooperation topics

The stakeholder consultation of Interreg Baltic Sea Region highlighted the critical need to sustain transnational cooperation in the Baltic Sea region. Further, it showed that the multifaceted societal and environmental challenges in the region cannot be resolved through interventions by actors representing a single thematic field. Therefore, the post-2027 interventions of the Programme should be structured as a **cross-sectoral approach** allowing **integrated place-based interventions**. Referring to the main thematic blocks identified for intervention at the transnational level, the future Interreg Baltic Sea region should be ahead of reforms and focus on **supporting the region's transition toward greater resilience and security as well as a greener and climate-neutral region**. **Joint capacity-building** should continue to be a cornerstone in future transnational activities to achieve this goal.

Resilience and security

Resilient economies and communities were a new topic for the Programme in 2021-2027. Building on the progress made during the 2021–2027 period, future efforts should adopt **more comprehensive and integrated approaches** to enhance resilience across the region. In addition, the new aspect of **security should** be connected to the interventions for greater resilience, reflecting the multiple types of risks that the people in the region are facing. A comprehensive view should be taken for a secure region and encompass human, economic, environmental, and individual security dimensions.

Climate change is a central concern for resilience and security. The focus in the Programme should be on societies' ability to address the consequences of climate change, including the risks posed by extreme weather phenomena. The effects of climate change on different groups of people should be considered and the inhabitants would need to be involved in developing effective adaptation measures. To enhance **societal resilience**, it is essential to focus on **inclusion and health**, also addressing the demographic challenges in the region. Better integration of different groups of society, particularly youth, would increase societal resilience and strengthen democracy. Due to the current geopolitical situation, the security and the economic resilience of the areas on the **external borders** of the region would need solutions deriving from transnational cooperation to accompany the support through other mechanisms. In addition, the aspect of **digital skills** should be considered when building the region's resilience and security. Among others, this would strengthen the resilience of rural areas to offer possibilities for people to stay as well as increase the resilience towards disinformation. Additionally, **maritime safety**, as a vital transnational concern, should continue to be in focus of the Programme.

A greener and climate-neutral region

The consultation showed that the Programme should continue supporting transnational cooperation for a greener and climate-neutral region. This includes long-standing cooperation for a better **environmental**



state of the Baltic Sea region's waters. The new Programme should build on the gained experience and expertise in water management, adapting them to climate change, and looking for new solutions to reduce nutrients and different hazardous substances in the waters.

Furthermore, the Programme should continue supporting the transition to **carbon-free societies**, finding **circular approaches** and **ways to use natural resources from land and water sustainably**. This includes developing a **bioeconomy** aligned with environmental and biodiversity concerns. A similar approach should also be taken for the **blue economy**, including sustainable shipping, within the new Programme.

In the future Programme, the steps towards a greener and climate-neutral region should be taken by **integrated cross-cutting approaches**. Green transition, environmental sustainability, and climate change adaptation and mitigation should be seen as interconnected fields. The topics need to be tackled together with policymakers, authorities and the public. **Skills development**, including digital skills, will be critical in these initiatives. **Climate change** effects should be factored into all future cooperation activities towards a greener and climate-neutral region. Furthermore, development activities in the region should be stronger aligned with **biodiversity** objectives.

Joint capacity building

Joint capacity building has been the core added value of the transnational Interreg cooperation projects in the region. Reinforced by the consultation outcomes, it should also be central in future transnational activities supported by the Programme. Joint capacity building of different experts across borders while developing **practical solutions** to joint challenges would be the way the Programme helps the region's transition also in the future. The future Programme should answer to the needs of local and regional authorities in capacity building for better foresight and preparedness skills to navigate in changing circumstances. The future projects should also continue supporting sharing experiences and joint learning to facilitate the implementation of EU legislation for greener and climate-neutral societies, particularly helping smaller municipalities cope with the task. Based on the experience from the previous projects and on the outcome of the consultation, the **piloting of solutions** should continue as a core activity in transnational cooperation projects. Also, in the future, a small infrastructure component could be possible in projects for testing and piloting solutions and making the results of transnational cooperation more visible on the ground.

2.2 Programme geography

The region around the Baltic Sea has proved to be a coherent region for transnational cooperation, sharing joint challenges and opportunities. A wide range of networks at national, regional, and local levels, as well as between business, the academic sector, and civil society, have long been established and contribute to the territorial development of the region.



Nevertheless, experience and **expertise from outside the Baltic Sea region are also essential** for tackling emerging challenges in the region in a future-oriented way. In the consultations, the stakeholders expressed a clear wish for cooperation beyond the Programme area.

Currently, including **EU partners from outside the Programme area** to Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects requires high administrative efforts from the applicants and the MA/JS. It often fails due to a country's lack of willingness to take liability for their partners. To improve the situation, an EU-wide framework that ensures the liability for project partners outside the Programme area is crucial. This could be, for instance, based on the agreement and system established in the context of Interreg Europe, or similar Interregional funding programmes.

Furthermore, stakeholder consultations emphasised the importance of strengthening ties with **Ukraine**. Ukrainian expertise, particularly in civil protection, offers valuable insights that could enhance resilience and security in the Baltic Sea region. Cooperation with Ukraine in water management was also seen as important. Ways how Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme projects could connect to partners from Ukraine should be further explored.

2.3 Implementation of the Programme and projects

Stakeholders have affirmed that the Programme and its projects are well aligned with the needs of transnational cooperation in the region. **The elements of the Programme that the stakeholders have appreciated should be continued and further strengthened.** These are, in particular, the focus on cooperation activities of organisations on the local and regional level, project types enabling capacity building and piloting, the broad variety of Programme communication tools and the use of simplified cost options to reimburse the costs of the project partners.

The **need for improvements** in the Programme implementation is recognised as well. These relate in particular to further **simplification** of procedures and making the **access of new target groups and smaller organisations to cooperation easier.**

The intensified use of **simplified cost options** (SCO) was a major step in simplification in the current Programme period. Due to the wide use of SCOs, the Programme was able to reduce the administrative burden on projects and significantly accelerate payments to projects. For the future, the existing SCOs should be further harmonised across Interreg programmes and new SCO opportunities should be explored.

The Programme should continue supporting and making use of the **strong existing cooperation networks in the region**, for example the networks connected to the policy areas of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. At the same time, there is a need to work further to get new organisations to join the cooperation. The Programme should look for further opportunities **to ease access for small local authorities and NGOs, including youth.** This should be done keeping the Programme focus on transnational cooperation for a transition to a more resilient and secure, green and climate-neutral Baltic Sea region. Incentives and enablers for including smaller partners in the currently existing project types could be, for example, additional funding for including these types of partners or for activities specifically



designed to engage these groups. A higher co-financing rate for the selected type of organisations could be a solution as well.

Another aspect to strengthen in the future Programme is the uptake and further use of project outcomes. Project platforms have been a successful **capitalisation** tool in the Programme consolidating outcomes from multiple projects of the Programme and other funding sources, and so enhancing their value to the target groups. In the future, the project platform approach should be continued while considering also further ways to enhance the capitalisation of project outcomes, in particular under the framework of EUSBSR.