

# Position Paper on the Improvement of Interreg Cross-Border Cooperation Programmes Post-2027

including the result of the post27  
survey for

Interreg VI-A Hungary-Slovakia  
Interreg VI-A IPA Hungary-Serbia  
Interreg VI-A NEXT Hungary-  
Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine

# 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The position paper provides **a comprehensive analysis and perspective** in the future development of cross-border cooperation Interreg programmes beyond 2027. The document outlines strategic recommendations, derived from comprehensive analysis, to improve the impact, efficiency, and inclusivity of these programmes. It underscores the strategic importance due to its central geographic position, emphasizing the need for more targeted and effective cross-border interventions to address regional challenges and opportunities. The methodology combines **stakeholder and citizen surveys** in conducted in the Interreg VI-A Hungary-Slovakia, Interreg VI-A Hungary-Serbia, and Interreg VI-A Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine Programmes. The survey is complemented with other elements including the output of the Art of Cooperation event, the content of the Interreg 35 Declaration as well as professionals' opinion and further desk-based research.

The survey results identify several **key thematic priorities** for future CBC programmes. These include preserving cultural heritage and promoting sustainable tourism, enhancing infrastructure connectivity, fostering environmental sustainability and climate adaptation, integrating labour markets, boosting economic competitiveness, and strengthening social inclusion through cross-border healthcare and education initiatives. These thematic focuses align with broader EU goals such as green and digital transitions, ensuring that future CBC efforts contribute to both regional and European cohesion objectives.

The paper highlights **significant obstacles** that hinder the success of CBC initiatives. These include complex legal and administrative frameworks, rigid funding mechanisms, and language barriers, all of which complicate project implementation. Additional challenges such as limited institutional capacity, political uncertainties, and insufficient technological infrastructure exacerbate these difficulties. These barriers not only reduce efficiency but also limit the participation of smaller stakeholders, such as local NGOs and municipalities, in cross-border projects.

Stakeholder and citizen feedback collected through surveys points to several **areas for improvement**. Simplifying administrative procedures, enhancing funding flexibility, and promoting small-scale initiatives are seen as critical to improving participation and project outcomes. There is also a call for stronger place-based approaches to address the unique needs and characteristics of the border regions.

Proposed initiatives for the post-2027 period focus on **transformative projects** that enhance regional connectivity, environmental sustainability, and cultural exchange. These include building cross-border transport networks, developing green infrastructure, improving healthcare access, and fostering collaborative educational and vocational training programs. Other priorities include supporting small and medium enterprises through innovation hubs and promoting social cohesion through community-driven projects.

**The paper recommends policy changes** that enhance the flexibility, sustainability, and impact of CBC programmes. The recommendations advocate for increased use of simplified cost options, fostering long-term partnerships through capacity building, mutual understanding, and inclusive frameworks that bridge cultural and institutional divides.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

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### 2.1 Scope and objective of the position paper

This position paper seeks to address the future evolution of the Interreg Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) programmes. Originating from the European Commission's mandate to review and enhance CBC initiatives post-2027, this document outlines **strategic recommendations, derived from comprehensive analysis, to improve the impact, efficiency, and inclusivity** of these programmes. It underscores our role in promoting regional cohesion and its commitment to fostering sustainable, cooperative development across European borders.

Cross-border cooperation under the Interreg framework has been pivotal in bridging socio-economic and cultural gaps between neighbouring regions in Europe. These programmes aim to address shared challenges, foster regional integration, and enhance mutual benefits through joint initiatives. We, with our central geographic position and shared borders with more countries, is deeply invested in the success of these programmes. The nation's border regions, often characterized by unique socio-economic dynamics, necessitate targeted interventions that CBC programmes are well-placed to deliver.

#### Programmes reviewed

The position paper specifically examines involvement of the CBC regions in various CBC programmes, including:

- **Interreg VI-A Hungary-Slovakia Programme,**
- **Interreg NEXT Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine Programme,**
- **Interreg IPA Hungary-Serbia Programme.**

Each programme is assessed based on its thematic focus, operational challenges, and contributions to regional development also by taking into account the stakeholder and citizen survey and methodology provided by the European Commission.

### 2.2 Methodology

The **basic document was the Guide for shaping together the Future Interreg** (EC 2023) which served as a foundational framework for developing thematic priorities and operational recommendations, leveraging insights from surveys, reports, and consultation processes.

Based on this, partially **standardized surveys of stakeholders and citizens** were carried out in the above-mentioned bordering regions. The questionnaires targeted a diverse audience, including public sector entities, private businesses, non-profits, and citizens, to gather comprehensive input on thematic priorities, challenges, and improvement areas. Most questions are open-ended, allowing respondents to provide detailed, unstructured answers in their own words about the CBC programmes (see the annexes for detailed analyses of the surveys).

Major conclusions from **other relevant documents and initiatives** support the above primary research, such as the Art of Cooperation conclusions and the Interreg 35 Declaration.

## 3 KEY FINDINGS FROM STAKEHOLDER AND CITIZEN FEEDBACK

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### 3.1 Thematic focus of the cross-border cooperation

#### 3.1.1 Relevance of thematic focus in cross-border cooperation

Thematic focus in CBC programmes is critical for ensuring that interventions are both effective and sustainable, addressing the shared challenges and opportunities faced by neighbouring regions. The rationale for thematic concentration stems from the need to streamline resources, foster cooperation, and achieve measurable impacts within the limited financial envelopes of CBC programmes. A well-defined place-based thematic approach for the programmes, since one size does not fit all, better addresses sustainable economic growth, social inclusion, environmental protection, and the transition to a green economy. Furthermore, prioritization of objectives ensure that the specific needs of border regions are adequately addressed, considering their unique socio-economic, environmental, and infrastructural characteristics.

Thematic concentration also fosters enhanced cooperation between public, private, and civil society actors from both sides of the border. By concentrating on areas of common interest, such as economic development or environmental sustainability, cross-border partnerships can leverage synergies and develop joint solutions to shared challenges. Moreover, thematic focus enables the identification of relevant stakeholders and the effective allocation of resources to achieve tangible outcomes, while avoiding the fragmentation of efforts that may dilute the impact of the programme.

#### 3.1.2 Proposed thematic focus for post-2027 cross-border cooperation programmes

Based on stakeholder consultations, feedback from regional actors, and an analysis of cross-border experience, the following thematic areas are recommended for inclusion in the post-2027 CBC programmes:

##### **Cultural heritage preservation and sustainable tourism**

Hungary accentuates the importance of common cultural heritage as a driver of regional identity, cross-border social cohesion, and sustainable economic development. The preservation of cultural and historical assets, alongside the promotion of sustainable tourism, is key to the social and economic revitalization of border areas. We recommend the continuation and expansion of initiatives that foster cross-border cultural exchange, heritage preservation, and the development of integrated, sustainable tourism opportunities for both the inhabitants of the border regions and visitors from outside the areas concerned. The key recommendations are as follows:

- Joint conservation and promotion of cultural and historical heritage sites, with a focus on sustainable tourism practices that preserve the integrity of the region's cultural assets,
- Development of cross-border tourism packages that integrate joint local tangible and intangible heritage, natural resources, and sustainable practices to create cross-border tourist destinations and brands,

- Strengthening cultural exchanges and cooperation in the creative industries, arts, and heritage education,
- Fostering people-to-people cooperation through cross-border cultural exchanges, joint educational programs, and shared community development initiatives.

### **Infrastructure development and connectivity**

A critical enabler of economic and social development in border regions is infrastructure, particularly transport connectivity. The stakeholders emphasized the need for targeted investments in cross-border transport and infrastructure networks to reduce logistical barriers, improve accessibility, and enhance the mobility of people and goods. This includes the development and modernization of transport corridors, including road, rail, and multimodal connections, the (re)construction of bridges, the building of cross-border bicycle routes, the opening of new border crossing points, as well as the advancement of digital infrastructure. Priority actions may focus on:

- Upgrading cross-border transport infrastructure, with a focus on sustainable mobility solutions, such as integrated railway systems, modernized border crossing points, improved road and bicycle networks (including bridges where necessary),
- Developing smart cross-border transport solutions that incorporate digital technologies for traffic management, logistics, and border controls,
- Enhancing regional connectivity and interoperability through digital platforms that support real-time data exchange for logistics, trade, and tourism sectors.

While there is a clear need and expectation for this type of investment, it is essential to consider the significant resource requirements and the limited financial resources plausibly available in the future. We can build upon the complementarity character of Interreg funds.

### **Environmental sustainability and climate adaptation**

The growing challenges of climate change and environmental degradation demand urgent action across borders. We advocate for a robust focus on environmental protection, climate change adaptation, and sustainable resource management, and energy transition within cross-border cooperation. Given the shared environmental risks and vulnerabilities of border regions, such as water management, air pollution, biodiversity loss, and the increasing demand for sustainable energy solutions, we suggest an integrated approach to environmental sustainability, which may consist of:

- Joint management of transboundary natural resources, including rivers, forests, and wetlands,
- Collaborative actions on climate adaptation, including cross-border early warning systems for climate-induced disasters and the development of joint climate resilience strategies,
- Promoting circular economy practices through cross-border collaboration on waste management, recycling, and sustainable production,
- Supporting biodiversity conservation and transboundary protected areas to safeguard shared ecosystems,
- Advancing energy transition through cross-border collaboration on renewable energy projects, energy efficiency improvements, integrated energy markets, green technologies, and clean energy research.

## **Economic interconnections, innovations and labour market integration**

Economic development could be considered as a central pillar of cross-border cooperation efforts, given its critical role in fostering regional resilience and prosperity. The border areas face unique challenges such as discrepancy in economic activity of the population, different degrees of industrial diversification, and deficiencies in business-related infrastructure and its connectivity. To address these challenges, we recommend a strong emphasis on thematic focus related to economic competitiveness and innovation, particularly through support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), entrepreneurship, and digital transformation. In addition, labour market integration is crucial for reducing unemployment disparities, fostering economic resilience, and promoting social cohesion across border regions.

Cross-border initiatives can stimulate economic growth by fostering B2B collaborations, improving access to cross-border markets, and promoting innovation through joint research, development and innovation (R&D&I) projects. Specific areas of focus may include, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- Promoting cross-border entrepreneurship and the establishment of joint business incubators,
- Supporting the digitalization of SMEs and enhancing digital connectivity across borders,
- Strengthening collaboration between universities, research institutes, and industry players on innovation-driven projects,
- Supporting labour market integration through cross-border collaboration on job matching, skills development, and mobility initiatives to enhance workforce mobility and reduce unemployment gaps.

## **Social inclusion, health and education cooperation**

Social inclusion remains a central objective of the EU's cohesion policy, particularly in border regions where disparities in living standards and access to services are often more pronounced. Stakeholders and citizens proposed enhancing cross-border social cooperation, particularly in the fields of healthcare, social services, and education. Joint actions in these areas can address disparities in access to essential services and foster greater social cohesion among communities separated by borders. Specific initiatives should include:

- Cross-border healthcare cooperation to improve access to medical services and the provision of healthcare across regions, especially in rural and underserved areas,
- Development of joint social service programmes that address the needs of marginalized groups, including the elderly, younger generations, Roma communities, and people with disabilities,
- Strengthening educational cooperation through cross-border school exchanges, joint vocational training programmes, and language learning initiatives.

## **3.2 The main obstacles to cooperation**

Cross-border cooperation has shown tremendous potential in fostering regional development, economic growth, and social cohesion. However, despite its successes, a range of barriers impede the full realization of these benefits, affecting project efficiency, partnership development, and overall programme success. The obstacles identified by beneficiaries and other actors across cross-

border cooperation initiatives point to challenges that are both structural and operational, requiring strategic interventions to overcome. Only through a concerted effort to mitigate these obstacles can the full potential of cross-border cooperation be realized in future programming periods.

### **Legal and administrative barriers**

One of the most significant obstacles to effective cross-border cooperation is the complexity of legal and administrative frameworks across national borders. Beneficiaries frequently report challenges related to differing legal systems, regulations, and administrative procedures of the CBC programmes. These differences complicate the project application process, delay approval times, and create confusion in compliance requirements. The need to adhere to multiple regulatory frameworks often results in increased administrative costs and time-consuming processes.

For example, the varying rules concerning procurement, public tenders, state aid and reporting requirements hinder smooth project implementation, leading to delays and reduced project efficiency. These barriers create additional burdens on project partners, which, in turn, reduces the overall impact of the projects. Furthermore, complex administrative systems can discourage potential beneficiaries from engaging in cross-border initiatives, particularly smaller entities such as local NGOs or SMEs that lack the capacity to navigate these bureaucratic hurdles.

### **Funding and financial constraints**

Funding remains another critical barrier. While CBC programmes are crucial in supporting joint regional development, the available financial resources are often limited and not sufficiently flexible to accommodate the diverse needs of cross-border projects. Stakeholders have highlighted the rigid nature of funding rules, including tight eligibility criteria, the allocation of funds based on narrow thematic focuses (in some ways contradicting the previously interpreted thematic focus, which is otherwise encouraged at EU level and in principle beneficial for the use of resources), and cumbersome reporting obligations. These constraints can lead to difficulties in securing funding for projects, especially for small-scale initiatives or those requiring adaptive approaches to meet evolving regional challenges.

The fragmentation of funding streams across different European and national programmes, coupled with the lack of clear guidelines on how to combine or complement funding sources (avoiding the mistake of double-funding), complicates financial planning for cross-border projects. Beneficiaries have expressed concerns about the uncertainty surrounding the sustainability of funding, as well as the lack of long-term financial commitments for ongoing projects. This uncertainty stifles innovation and reduces the ability of cross-border partnerships to plan for future initiatives.

### **Language and cultural barriers**

Language differences continue to be a notable barrier to effective communication and collaboration. The diversity of languages spoken across border regions often creates misunderstandings and inefficiencies in project implementation. Language barriers hinder effective communication between project partners, making it difficult to establish a shared understanding of objectives, outcomes, and methodologies. This issue becomes particularly prominent during meetings, negotiations, and the preparation of project documentation, where translation or interpretation costs can further complicate the process.

In addition to language, cultural differences also pose challenges. Diverging work practices, attitudes towards time management, decision-making processes, and differing expectations around cooperation can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts between project partners. In some border regions, latent or real conflicts between ethnic groups may arise due to historical tensions, competition for resources, or differing national identities, which can hinder cross-border cooperation and the development of trust between communities. These cultural barriers may result in reduced trust, fragmented partnerships, and missed opportunities for synergy. Stakeholders have indicated that more cross-border cultural training and mutual understanding initiatives could mitigate these issues and facilitate smoother cooperation.

### **Institutional and organizational capacity**

Cross-border cooperation often requires coordination between multiple institutions, including local authorities, regional development agencies, research organizations, SMEs and NGOs. However, the capacity of these institutions to manage and implement complex cross-border projects is not always sufficient. Many regional actors, especially smaller institutions or municipalities, lack the experience, expertise, and staffing to handle the intricacies of CBC project management, which can lead to inefficiencies and poor outcomes.

Moreover, there is often a mismatch between the scale of the projects and the institutional capacity of the partners involved. Larger, more established organizations may dominate the project, sidelining smaller but equally valuable stakeholders. This imbalance can reduce the effectiveness of the partnership, as smaller organizations may struggle to contribute meaningfully due to lack of capacity or resources. Strengthening the institutional capacity of stakeholders, particularly in underfunded or less experienced regions, is critical for improving the overall success of CBC initiatives.

### **Political and geopolitical factors**

Although CBC programmes are designed to promote regional integration, political tensions between/in neighbouring countries or changing national policies can create obstacles for cross-border initiatives. Shifting government priorities, particularly in the context of the EU's evolving political landscape, can result in misalignment between national and regional strategies, further complicating the development of joint cross-border projects.

For example, changes in government leadership or policy orientations may lead to reduced support for cross-border cooperation, a shift in funding priorities, or a lack of enthusiasm for international collaboration. Such changes can destabilize ongoing projects, delay their implementation, or limit future cooperation opportunities. The political climate and war conflicts can also create uncertainty about the stability of cross-border partnerships, with beneficiaries expressing concerns about the continuity of funding and political support.

### **Technological barriers**

The digital divide between border regions, particularly between urban and rural areas, is another obstacle that impacts cross-border cooperation. Differences in access to modern digital technologies, infrastructure, and internet connectivity can limit the ability of partners to communicate effectively, share data, and collaborate on joint projects. In particular, the lack of a unified digital platform for cross-border cooperation or data exchange exacerbates the challenges of managing joint initiatives.



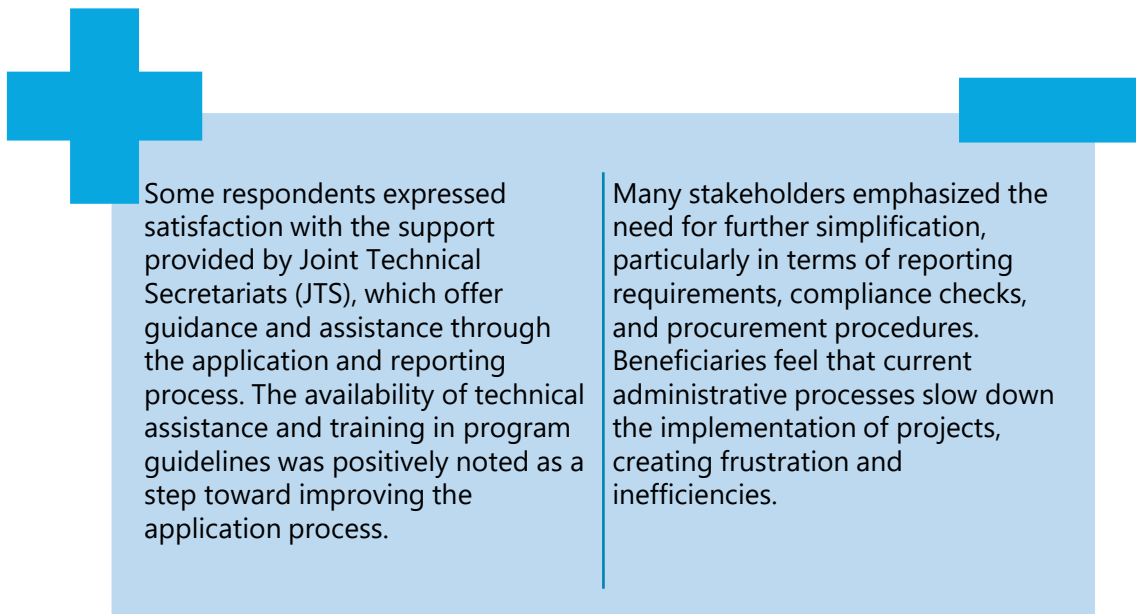
Stakeholders have suggested that better technological infrastructure and the development of interoperable digital platforms could significantly improve the efficiency of cross-border collaboration, especially in areas like logistics, tourism, and business development. Investments in digital solutions are necessary to enhance cross-border communication, simplify administrative processes, and enable real-time data sharing.

### 3.3 Areas for improvement

As can be deduced from the preceding sub-chapter, the beneficiaries have identified several areas for improvement to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of these programmes in the post-2027 period. The following section summarizes the main areas for improvement identified by respondents, together with the factors with which stakeholders are both satisfied (elements that should be maintained) and dissatisfied (phenomena that need to be improved).

#### Simplification of administrative processes

A common theme among respondents is the need for the simplification of administrative procedures. Beneficiaries have expressed dissatisfaction with the complexity and length of the application and reporting processes, which can delay project initiation and increase costs. Many stakeholders, particularly smaller organizations and local authorities, find the bureaucratic burden challenging, particularly when navigating the differing legal and regulatory frameworks of neighbouring countries. Respondents suggested that streamlining the administrative procedures and reducing the number of steps required to apply for and manage projects would significantly improve the efficiency of CBC programmes.




Some respondents expressed satisfaction with the support provided by Joint Technical Secretariats (JTS), which offer guidance and assistance through the application and reporting process. The availability of technical assistance and training in program guidelines was positively noted as a step toward improving the application process.


Many stakeholders emphasized the need for further simplification, particularly in terms of reporting requirements, compliance checks, and procurement procedures. Beneficiaries feel that current administrative processes slow down the implementation of projects, creating frustration and inefficiencies.

#### Flexibility and adaptability of funding rules

Funding constraints and rigid eligibility criteria are another major area for improvement. While CBC programmes are crucial for financing joint regional development projects, the rules governing the allocation of funds are often seen as too rigid and limiting. Respondents highlighted that the thematic focus for funding allocation in many cases did not align with the dynamic needs of cross-border initiatives, often restricting their ability to adapt to emerging local challenges.




Respondents appreciated the financial support provided through CBC programmes, which has enabled many successful projects. The funding opportunities were seen as valuable in addressing regional needs and facilitating cooperation between stakeholders.




Beneficiaries expressed dissatisfaction with the limited flexibility of funding rules. Many felt that the strict thematic focus and inflexible fund allocation mechanisms do not allow for the integration of new ideas or adaptive changes in response to evolving regional needs. There is also concern about the fragmentation of funding sources, which increases the complexity of managing cross-border projects.

### Improved coordination and collaboration

Beneficiaries highlighted the need for better coordination between institutions involved in cross-border cooperation. While the programmes aim to bring together local authorities, SMEs, research organizations, and civil society, stakeholders pointed out that there is often a lack of effective communication and collaboration across sectors and borders. This lack of coordination often results in duplication of efforts, inefficient resource use, and fragmented partnerships.




Some respondents noted that the creation of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) and other collaborative platforms has helped improve communication and coordination between regional stakeholders. The growing interest in joint R&D&I projects was seen as a positive outcome of these collaborative efforts.




Respondents voiced concerns about the lack of formal mechanisms for ensuring ongoing collaboration among project partners. There is a need for stronger institutional coordination to avoid overlaps and enhance the effectiveness of cross-border initiatives. Beneficiaries suggested that more structured and sustained cooperation frameworks could improve the integration of different stakeholders.

### Focus on capacity building and support for smaller entities

Many actors, particularly from smaller municipalities, NGOs, and SMEs, expressed concerns about the lack of capacity to fully engage in cross-border cooperation. Smaller stakeholders often lack the resources, expertise, and staff to navigate the complex project management processes required by CBC programmes. This disparity in capacity can result in uneven participation in projects, with larger organizations dominating and smaller ones being left behind.




Larger institutions and more experienced stakeholders were generally satisfied with the technical and financial support they received, particularly in terms of project management and implementation. They noted the value of the capacity-building programs provided by the JTS and other support bodies.




Smaller entities expressed discontent with the lack of targeted capacity-building initiatives that would allow them to fully engage in cross-border projects. Respondents emphasized the need for tailored support and training programs that cater specifically to smaller organizations, enabling them to develop the skills and expertise necessary to manage complex CBC initiatives effectively.

### Enhancing stakeholder involvement and people-to-people cooperation

Stakeholders have emphasized the importance of fostering deeper people-to-people cooperation across borders. While cultural exchanges, joint educational programs, and community development initiatives have been successful in some areas, respondents indicated that there is still room for improvement in engaging local communities and fostering cross-border social cohesion to build trust and solidarity. Some respondents felt that the emphasis on economic and infrastructure projects often overshadowed social initiatives that are equally important for strengthening cross-border relationships.



Respondents were generally satisfied with the cultural exchange programs and joint educational initiatives that have fostered stronger relationships and mutual understanding between local communities on both sides of the border. These activities were viewed as essential for building trust and long-term cooperation.



Respondents highlighted the need for more support for people-to-people initiatives, particularly in rural and underrepresented areas. There is a need for greater emphasis on fostering cross-border social cohesion, not just through economic cooperation, but by encouraging deeper cultural, educational, and community-based exchanges.

### Addressing political and geopolitical uncertainties

Political factors, including changing national priorities and geopolitical tensions, were identified as significant challenges for CBC programmes. Stakeholders expressed concerns that shifts in political leadership, both at the national and regional levels, could undermine cross-border cooperation

efforts and create uncertainty regarding the continuity of funding and institutional support. This uncertainty can deter long-term planning and collaboration.



Respondents acknowledged that EU funding mechanisms have provided a degree of stability, even in times of political change. Many respondents expressed confidence in the EU's commitment to regional integration and cooperation.

There was dissatisfaction with the perceived vulnerability of cross-border cooperation to political shifts. Respondents called for greater political and institutional support at both national and regional levels to ensure that cross-border initiatives remain unaffected by political changes.

### 3.4 Project ideas proposed by the stakeholders and citizens

For the post-2027 period, respondents have envisioned a diverse range of transformative "dream projects" that reflect the regions' aspirations for sustainable development, deeper integration, and cross-border cooperation. These projects focus on several key areas including infrastructure, cultural heritage, environmental sustainability, healthcare, education, and law enforcement. The planned initiatives are designed to foster long-term growth, improve quality of life, and strengthen the connections between neighbouring countries. Below is a comprehensive summary of the project ideas.



#### Infrastructure and connectivity development

Infrastructure remains a critical area for cross-border cooperation, with stakeholders emphasizing the need for improvements that enhance connectivity, mobility, and regional integration. The following are key projects proposed by respondents:

- **Cross-border cycling routes:** One of the most prominent ideas is the creation of cross-border cycling paths that connect natural and cultural landmarks as well as foster sustainable mobility for inhabitants. offering eco-friendly travel option while promoting eco-tourism.
- **Upgraded transportation infrastructure:** Stakeholders and citizens are advocating for the expansion of road networks, including the construction of new highways, bridges, and improved cross-border transportation links. There is a focus on creating multimodal transport hubs that integrate rail, road, and air transport, facilitating the movement of goods and people across borders.
- **Sustainable mobility solutions:** There is a strong interest in the development of green infrastructure, including electric vehicle charging stations and green cycling paths. Projects aimed at enhancing public transportation networks with electric mini-busses and promoting

sustainable transport solutions are seen as vital for reducing the environmental impact of cross-border travel.

### Cultural heritage and tourism development



Cultural exchange and heritage preservation are key components of the "dream projects," with a strong emphasis on preserving shared cultural assets and fostering tourism:

- **Restoration and preservation of cultural landmarks:** Proposed initiatives include the renovation of historic castles, fortresses, and other cultural sites to attract tourists and preserve regional heritage. These projects aim to preserve the region's historical identity while promoting tourism and cross-border cultural exchange.
- **Cultural centres and visitor spaces:** Several respondents have suggested the creation of cultural spaces, such as visitor centres and community hubs, at border points. These facilities would serve as platforms for cultural exchange and tourism, highlighting the shared cultural heritage of the region.
- **Cross-border festivals and events:** In addition to preserving cultural attractions, respondents recommend organizing joint cultural festivals and events that celebrate the shared history and traditions of Hungary and its adjoining countries. These could include music festivals, art exhibitions, and gastronomy events that promote tourism and foster greater community ties across borders.

### Environmental sustainability and climate adaptation



Environmental sustainability is another focal point for cross-border projects, with several initiatives aimed at enhancing ecological preservation, improving resource management, preventing pollution and addressing climate change:

- **Water management and flood protection:** Respondents have emphasized the need for cross-border water management systems, particularly for shared river basins. Project ideas include the development of flood protection measures, water conservation initiatives, and the improvement of water quality in these regions to promote ecological health and support sustainable development.
- **Green infrastructure projects:** Several respondents have proposed the creation of green corridors, forest restoration, afforestation, urban greening and the development of renewable energy infrastructure, including solar, wind, and hydropower projects. These initiatives are designed to reduce carbon emissions, promote energy efficiency, and improve regional environmental quality.
- **Cross-border waste and wastewater management:** Respondents propose the development of joint waste management systems to address pollution and improve sustainability, including shared recycling and waste disposal facilities. In addition, there is a focus on building and modernizing wastewater treatment facilities in border areas lacking proper infrastructure, improving environmental quality and public health.
- **Sustainable agriculture and eco-tourism:** Projects focused on promoting sustainable farming practices and eco-tourism are also key to environmental sustainability. Respondents have suggested the establishment of circular economy initiatives and the development of eco-

friendly cycling paths and hiking trails that support environmental conservation while promoting tourism.

### Healthcare and social services



Improving healthcare services and social inclusion are important goals for the planned projects, with several initiatives focusing on enhancing accessibility and cooperation between border regions:

- **Cross-border healthcare networks:** Respondents have proposed the creation of joint healthcare facilities, including hospitals and mobile clinics, to improve medical services in rural and underserved areas. Additionally, the establishment of telemedicine infrastructure to enable cross-border consultations and enhance healthcare delivery is a priority for stakeholders.
- **Social services for vulnerable groups:** Several initiatives are focused on improving access to social services, particularly for marginalized groups such as the elderly, Roma communities, and people with disabilities. These projects aim to improve social inclusion and address inequalities in access to essential services across borders.

### Education and research cooperation



Education and research are vital for fostering long-term cooperation and innovation in the region. Project ideas aim to strengthen cross-border educational ties and support joint research efforts:

- **Educational and cultural centres:** Respondents have proposed the development of cross-border education and cultural centres that focus on topics such as sustainable development, climate change, and environmental science. These centres would provide a platform for research and collaboration, fostering mutual understanding and knowledge sharing between the communities.
- **Student mobility and vocational training:** Projects aimed at improving student mobility (e.g. scholarships, internships, sport academies) and facilitating vocational training programs across borders have also been suggested. These initiatives would provide young people with the skills and experiences necessary to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.
- **Study visits for researchers:** Study visits can foster cross-border knowledge exchange and collaboration between academic and research institutions. They would allow researchers to share best practices, access specialized facilities, and co-develop innovative solutions to common regional challenges.

### Economic development and job creation



Economic growth and job creation are essential components of the proposed "dream projects," with several initiatives focused on fostering entrepreneurship, innovation, and small business development:

- **Business incubators and innovation hubs:** Respondents have suggested the creation of cross-border business incubators and innovation hubs to support SMEs. These centres would provide resources, mentorship, and networking opportunities for entrepreneurs, particularly in sectors such as renewable energy, digital technologies, and sustainable tourism.

- **Economic integration and cooperation:** Several recommended initiatives focus on improving economic cooperation across borders, particularly in sectors like agriculture, trade, and technology. These projects aim to strengthen regional economies, create jobs, and enhance cross-border market access for local businesses.



### Social integration and youth programs

Promoting social integration and fostering opportunities for youth are also important themes in the project ideas:

- **Youth exchange programs:** Respondents emphasized the importance of initiatives that engage young people in cross-border activities, such as sports, arts, and entrepreneurship programs. These initiatives are seen as crucial for building lasting relationships between youth from different countries and fostering a sense of shared regional identity.
- **Community support and inclusion:** Several initiatives focus on reducing cultural barriers and improving access to services for marginalized groups. These projects aim to create inclusive communities by promoting social integration, cross-cultural dialogue, and equal access to opportunities for all residents of border regions.



### Law enforcement cooperation

Cross-border law enforcement collaboration is essential for maintaining regional security and addressing crimes that affect multiple countries. Respondents came up with several projects to enhance security and coordination between law enforcement agencies:

- **Cross-border police training and coordination centre:** A regional police training centre is expected to enhance joint training and improve cross-border security coordination, with a focus on issues such as cybercrime, human trafficking, and terrorism.
- **Real-time intelligence sharing:** The creation of systems for real-time data sharing between law enforcement agencies across borders is highlighted to improve operational efficiency and enhance the effectiveness of cross-border policing.



### Digital connectivity

Digital infrastructure plays a crucial role in fostering economic growth, enhancing communication, and improving public services. Several initiatives were proposed to strengthen digital connectivity across the region:

- **Development of digital infrastructure and expansion of digital connectivity:** There is a strong emphasis on creating interoperable digital platforms and services to facilitate better data exchange between Hungary and neighbouring countries, improving communication in areas such as customs, logistics, and public safety. Many respondents stress the importance of expanding digital infrastructure, especially in rural and underserved areas, to improve communication and connectivity across borders.

## 4 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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### 4.1 Strengthening thematic focus

The strategic and thematic focus of CBC programmes with clearly defined thematic directions and needs is essential for maximizing their socio-economic and environmental impact. The following principles should continue to be enforced in the future:

- **Regional needs assessment:** Member States should conduct in-depth territorial analyses to identify challenges, opportunities and shared values specific to border regions. These analyses will ensure that programme priorities reflect genuine cross-border issues such as shared environmental concerns, labour market imbalances, or infrastructure deficiencies. This approach appreciates the diversity of European regions and highlights the need to preserve the unique characteristics of increasingly integrated and permeable border regions.
- **Concentration for efficiency:** By reducing the number of thematic areas funded within a programme, limited resources can be allocated more effectively, yielding measurable and lasting results.
- **Flexibility:** It is essential to retain full flexibility throughout both the programming and implementation phases, given the increasingly unpredictable and rapidly changing circumstances. It can be achieved, for instance, through fewer, broader objectives.

### 4.2 Fostering place-based approaches

Place-based approaches are fundamental to tailoring CBC programmes to the unique needs and opportunities of specific regions. We highlight the importance of integrating territorial instruments and strategies that focus on regional specificity, community involvement, and sustainable outcomes. This may involve the use of existing instruments or the development of new initiatives tailored to the needs of programmes and regions.

### 4.3 Supporting collaboration, project planning and onboarding

The process of project conceptualization and partner onboarding represents a critical phase where many stakeholders – particularly smaller or less experienced organizations – face challenges. Linguistic, cultural and administrative barriers frequently impede successful partnership. Effective support systems during these initial stages can greatly enhance project quality and participation diversity. It is also vital to reinforce and expand the mechanisms that facilitate cross-border partnerships if sustainable collaboration is to be achieved. A number of tools are already being used – and can be used – to further strengthen these processes in the future:

- **Capacity building:** Targeted workshops and online courses tailored to the needs of different stakeholder groups can focus on project design, result-based management, and compliance with EU rules, such as State Aid and public procurement directives. This is of great importance for the potential beneficiaries from the accession and candidate countries.
- **Digital tools for partner matching:** On digital matchmaking platforms entities can find suitable cross-border partners, enhancing inclusivity and ensuring better project alignment



with regional goals. They can work as cross-border innovation hubs to build long-term connections, networks and partnerships, while simultaneously reinforcing existing bonds.

- **Assessing and improving the maturity of the project ideas:** Pre-implementation studies enable applicants to conduct feasibility assessments, risk analyses, and initial stakeholder consultations. In the case of large-scale, multiannual projects, the possibility of providing financial support for preparatory studies should be considered.

## 4.4 Improving funding flexibility and sustainability

Rigid funding structures frequently lack the capacity to accommodate the dynamic and multifaceted needs of cross-border projects, which are often characterized by varying contexts and evolving challenges. Enhancing funding flexibility is crucial for adapting to unforeseen challenges and ensuring the long-term sustainability of project outcomes.

- **Flexible reallocation mechanisms:** Projects should be allowed to reallocate funds across budget categories with minimal administrative burden, especially when addressing unexpected challenges like natural disasters or economic shocks.
- **Promoting co-financing models:** Efforts should be made to encourage the mobilization of additional funding sources, such as private investments, national budgets, or even philanthropic contributions, while providing financial incentives for projects that effectively secure external funds.
- **Emphasizing life-cycle costs for sustainability:** It is recommended that projects be required to include mandatory sustainability assessments and long-term financial planning in their initial applications. This will ensure that the outputs remain viable post-funding.
- **Crisis-response mechanism:** The incorporation of rapid-response frameworks enables the prompt addressing of emerging challenges, such as those posed by pandemics or geopolitical tensions, which enhance resilience and adaptability of both the cross-border cooperation programmes and the Member States.
- **Strategic projects:** A highly recommended project format is the so-called strategic project, which can respond to the common challenges and assets of the border regions on a larger scale. However, it should be noted that they may also pose a risk to the efficiency and effectiveness of CBC programmes in case of failure or underperformance, precisely because of their high absorption of resources.

## 4.5 Simplifying project implementation and reporting

Administrative complexity and inconsistent rules between Member States often create unnecessary obstacles for project implementers. Further simplification of these processes is vital for improving the efficiency of cross-border cooperation at both the programme and the project levels. The sometimes unrealistic expectations should be replaced by a more collaborative approach on the part of the funding authority and by relevance and added value on the part of the beneficiaries.

- **Clear rules:** There is a clear need to eliminate the persistent legal and administrative obstacles that hinder the achievement of objectives at the project, programme, and EU levels. Nevertheless, it is crucial to avoid an excessively inflexible approach to unification and instead pursue a more balanced and pragmatic harmonization.

- **Small-scale funds with simplified rules:** Micro-grants for preliminary networking activities and small-scale actions such as workshops, site visits, and collaborative planning sessions help build strong, trust-based partnerships and gain experiences in newcomers in the CBC programmes in a more protected and simplified administrative environment.
- **Data-driven decision-making:** The integration of AI and big data analytics facilitates the identification of emerging trends, enables accurate forecasting of future needs, and enhances decision-making processes, thereby supporting more strategic and data-driven approaches to planning and implementation. It is recommended to consider utilizing AI specifically during the eligibility check and project evaluation phases to improve efficiency, consistency, and accuracy in these critical processes.
- **The widespread use of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs):** SCOs simplify financial management by replacing detailed expenditure reporting with pre-defined amounts, unit costs, or lump sums. This reduces the workload for project implementers and managing authorities while maintaining accountability and transparency.

## 4.6 Encouraging dissemination

Maximizing the long-term value and impact of CBC projects necessitates the effective dissemination of their results. It involves the thorough analysis, documentation, and sharing of successful practices, innovative approaches, and lessons learned to ensure that these valuable insights are not confined to the original project scope. Dissemination, on the other hand, focuses on strategically communicating these outcomes to a wide range of stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners, and local communities, to foster broader awareness and uptake. It would enable the scaling and replication of successful interventions in other regions and contexts, enhancing their utility and relevance. Furthermore, integrating these outcomes into local, national, and EU-level policymaking frameworks ensures that the projects' achievements contribute to broader strategic goals, thereby reinforcing the sustainability and transferability of their results. Enhancing the communication of CBC project impacts can be effectively realized through a combination of targeted digital campaigns and strategically organized regional events, ensuring broader visibility and stakeholder engagement.

## 4.7 Strengthening monitoring and impact evaluation

By enabling both real-time adjustments and evidence-based decision-making, monitoring and evaluation frameworks contribute to the overall efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of projects and programmes. It would be beneficial to use and reinforce the following tools also in the post-2027 period:

- **Stakeholder-inclusive evaluation:** Engaging a broad range of stakeholders, including beneficiaries, in programme evaluation processes ensure that assessments reflect on-the-ground realities. Developing participatory feedback loops contributes to the continuous improvement of programme processes, result-orientation and transparency.
- **Longitudinal impact assessments:** The conduct of impact evaluations extends beyond the life of the project to measure the long-term contribution to regional development and cross-border integration.

## 5 ANNEXES

### 5.1 Key findings regarding the Interreg HUSK Programme

#### 5.1.1 Stakeholder survey

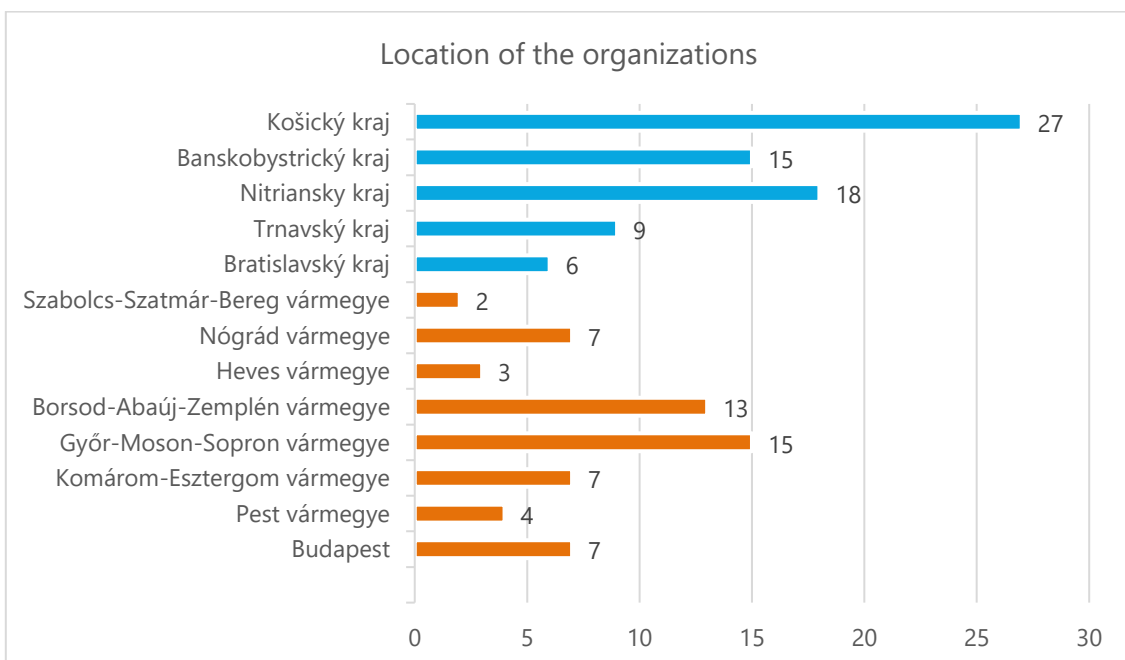
The stakeholder survey in connection with the Interreg VI-A Hungary-Slovakia Programme gathers detailed insights for the post-2027 programming period. The questionnaire was sent to 1,014 beneficiaries, including legal representatives and contact persons of projects supported in the period 2014-2020. It was also distributed to 1,832 recipients, specifically legal representatives and contact persons of organisations that submitted applications in the period 2021-2027. Additionally, 71 members of the Monitoring Committee received the questionnaire, and a Facebook campaign was also used to extend the reach. A total of **133 respondents** participated: **70 from Hungary** and **63 from Slovakia**. Each section introduces the findings for each survey question, including, if relevant, the number of valid respondents, detailed figures for each answer and a brief summary of the results.

#### About respondents

##### Territorial distribution

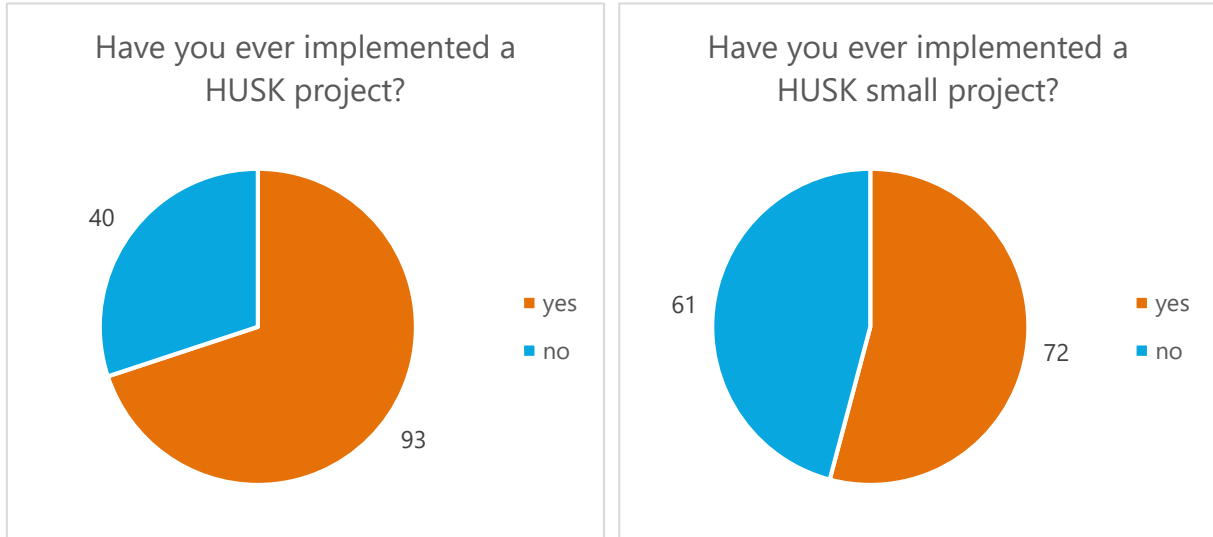
**The majority of respondents from Slovakia are located in Košický county**, followed by Nitriansky county and Banskobystrický county, which also have a significant number of respondents. This indicates that the eastern and central regions of Slovakia are more represented, with Košický county having the highest concentration of respondents.

**In Hungary, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén and Győr-Moson-Sopron counties have the highest number of respondents**, suggesting strong engagement in the northeastern and western parts of the country. Other Hungarian regions, such as Pest and Budapest, have fewer respondents, showing a more dispersed distribution across the central and capital areas.



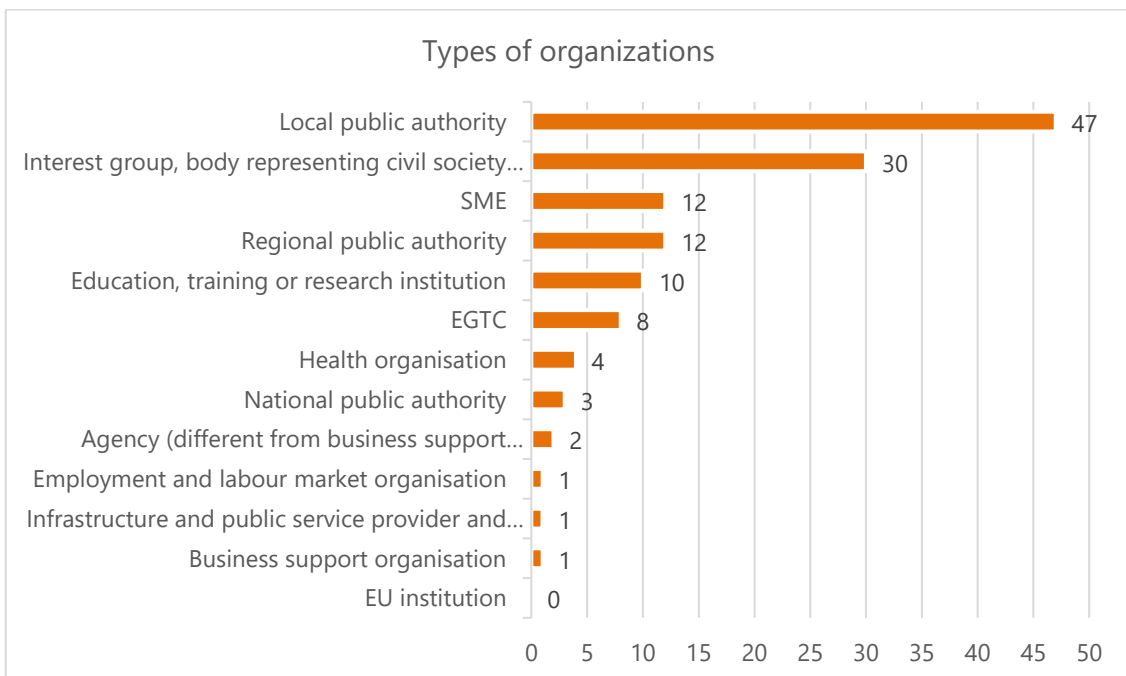
### Experience in the HUSK Programme

The results suggest that **most respondents have had experience with implementing Interreg “normal” projects**; however, fewer respondents have participated in small projects within this framework.



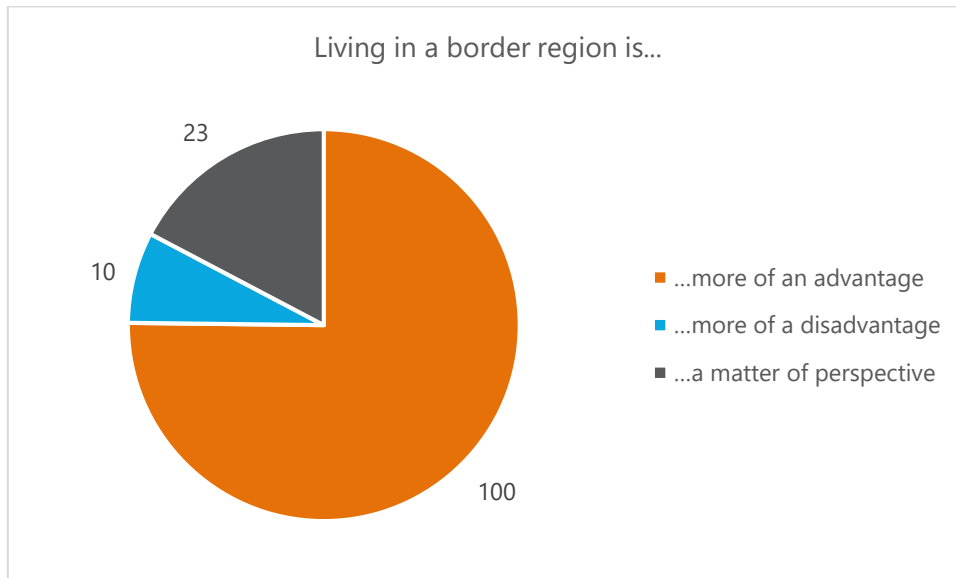
### Types of organizations

The diversity of respondents spans **government bodies, civil organizations, businesses, and educational institutions**, showcasing a wide range of stakeholders involved in various sectors and providing a well-rounded view of organizational participation.



## Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

The results show that **most respondents view living in a border region as more of an advantage** (75.2%), while a smaller portion considers it more of a disadvantage (7.5%). A few respondents (17.3%) believe that the experience of living in a border region largely depends on one's perspective. This suggests that while border regions offer significant benefits, there are some challenges that people may perceive differently based on their individual circumstances.



The detailed responses reveal a complex picture of both advantages and disadvantages. Many respondents emphasize the **opportunities for cross-border cooperation as one of the key benefits**. These include joint cultural events, tourism development, and economic collaborations between neighbouring countries. The proximity to another country provides several practical advantages, such as **easier access to job markets, services, and cheaper goods**. In addition, the border area's **cultural diversity** and multilingual environment are seen as enriching, offering residents a unique chance to broaden their horizons and enhance their cultural understanding.

However, there are also notable disadvantages associated with border regions. Respondents frequently mention the **peripheral location** of border areas, which can lead to less focus from national decision-makers. This, in turn, can result in **fewer resources, inadequate infrastructure**, and limited development opportunities. Some respondents pointed out that while border regions might offer economic opportunities, they often lack support for long-term development. As a result, there can be a **brain drain**, with younger and more educated individuals leaving the area in search of better prospects.

Despite these challenges, many also see the border area as a space that offers **increased mobility**, making it easier to move between countries for work or personal reasons. For instance, cross-border commuting is highlighted as a key advantage, allowing people to maintain strong family and social ties while working in a neighbouring country. Moreover, the ease of accessing a variety of cultural, historical, and natural attractions across borders contributes to the **tourism potential** of the region, providing both economic and personal benefits.

Several responses also pointed out that cross-border cooperation brings significant benefits in education, business, and cultural exchange. The availability of funding from the European Union for

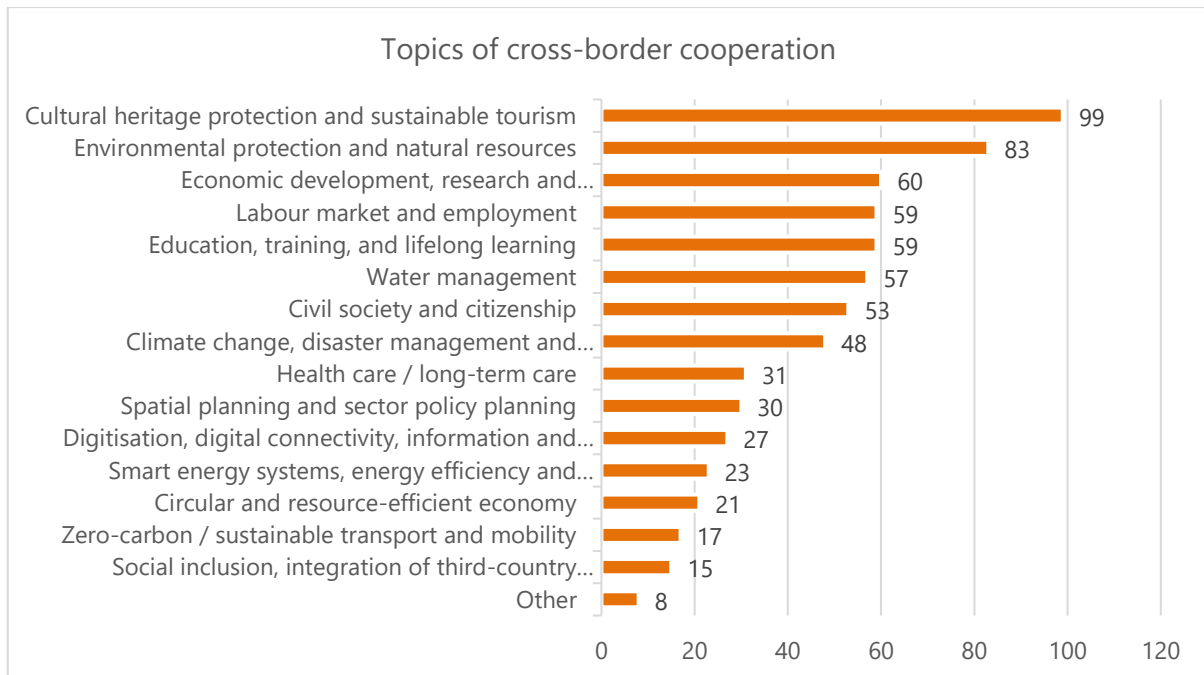
cross-border projects is seen as a potential resource to foster local growth and development, although some respondents mentioned that these opportunities are not always fully exploited.

On the negative side, some mentioned **bureaucratic hurdles and linguistic barriers**, which can complicate cooperation and hinder the smooth exchange of resources or ideas. The physical distance from national capitals and economic hubs is also a common concern, especially regarding access to services and investment.

In conclusion, while border regions have great potential for cooperation and development, these areas face unique challenges that can limit their full realization. Respondents generally feel that cross-border opportunities should be better supported, and more attention should be given to bridging the gap between border regions and central government policies.

### Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area?

The responses highlight that **cultural heritage protection and sustainable tourism is the most prioritized topic** for cross-border cooperation, **followed by environmental protection and natural resources**, and economic development, research, and development. Other key issues include labour market and employment, education and lifelong learning, and water management. Topics such as climate change, health care, and spatial planning are also important but with somewhat lower priority. Areas related to digital connectivity, smart energy systems, and sustainable transport are less emphasized, reflecting a stronger focus on cultural, environmental, and economic collaboration across borders.



Once all the relevant issues have been selected, the respondents should choose the most important issue from the list. Based on the answers provided, the most frequently highlighted area of importance for cross-border cooperation is cultural heritage protection and sustainable tourism, with a significant number of respondents emphasizing this topic. Additionally, economic development, research and innovation, and environmental protection (including water management and climate change adaptation) are also key areas of focus. Other topics mentioned frequently include labour market and employment, healthcare, civil society, and education. Several

respondents also stressed the need for cooperation in natural resource protection and disaster management. These areas reflect the need for collaboration in protecting both natural and cultural assets, supporting local economies, and addressing shared environmental challenges.

### What currently works well and does not in this cooperation?

The next three questions provide a more detailed insight into how stakeholders assess each area of cooperation. They had to detail areas of cross-border cooperation

- that work well and need to be PRESERVED,
- that work well and need to be STRENGTHENED,
- that DO NOT work well and need to be IMPROVED.

Given the interdependencies between these thematic focus areas, the responses naturally overlapped, making it important to merge and analyse them holistically.

Areas of cooperation	Strengths	Weaknesses	Improvements
<b>Cultural heritage and sustainable tourism</b>	<p>Cultural events and exchanges are a successful area of cooperation, with cross-border festivals and cultural initiatives thriving.</p> <p>Tourism development is strong, especially in the protection of natural and cultural resources, which is vital for future growth. Cross-border infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, has improved mobility of tourist and economic exchange.</p>	<p>Funding and coordination issues hinder progress in cultural heritage preservation and tourism infrastructure development. Sustainability of cross-border tourism initiatives needs further attention.</p> <p>There is insufficient infrastructure to support tourism, such as poorly integrated transport facilities, inadequate signage, and limited visitor services. This results in a fragmented tourism experience, which reduces the overall appeal of the border region.</p>	<p>Enhancing tourism infrastructure and integrating services across the border will create a more seamless experience for tourists to explore the region, boosting the attractiveness of both countries as a joint tourist destination.</p> <p>Promoting sustainable tourism initiatives will ensure that tourism growth does not harm the environment or local communities.</p>
<b>Civil society, citizenship, social inclusion</b>	<p>Collaboration between local authorities and civil society is robust, particularly for projects in local development, infrastructure, and environmental sustainability.</p>	<p>Limited cross-border cooperation in social inclusion and community projects weakens the overall impact of civil society efforts. While there are collaborations, they may lack the scale or coordination needed to address broader issues like social exclusion or equal opportunities for marginalized groups.</p>	<p>Strengthening cross-border civil society cooperation will enhance social inclusion, particularly in addressing issues like unemployment, education gaps, and social services access for vulnerable groups. Expanding community-driven projects and supporting grassroots organizations will improve quality of life in the whole region.</p> <p>Enhancing institutional cooperation between local governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders will facilitate more efficient responses to common challenges.</p>
<b>Environmental protection, climate change, zero carbon solutions, energy efficiency</b>	<p>Ongoing efforts in water management, disaster prevention, and natural resource protection are crucial for Hungary and Slovakia as they share key water resources like the Danube River and face similar environmental challenges. Cross-border collaboration helps address issues like flooding, water pollution, and climate</p>	<p>Cross-border energy systems are underdeveloped, with inadequate infrastructure and coordination between the two countries. This leads to inefficiencies, unreliable energy supply, and challenges in meeting the growing demand for sustainable energy solutions.</p>	<p>Improving energy infrastructure will allow for better access to reliable, sustainable energy sources. This could involve building more efficient cross-border electricity grids, integrating renewable energy solutions, and reducing reliance on non-renewable resources.</p>



Areas of cooperation	Strengths	Weaknesses	Improvements
	<p>change, ensuring effective resource management and improved resilience for both countries.</p>	<p>Without coordinated policies in managing shared natural resources like water, countries might pursue independent agendas that conflict or fall short of comprehensive environmental goals, leading to inefficiencies in resource management.</p>	<p>Strengthening joint efforts in water management and climate change adaptation will improve resilience to environmental crises like floods, droughts, and water shortages, ensuring long-term ecological health for both countries.</p>
<p><b>Education, labour market integration and economic development</b></p>	<p>Universities and research institutions from both countries engage in joint research projects, fostering academic collaboration.</p>	<p>Discrepancies in education systems, mainly in adult education and vocational training, hinder the labour market integration. Workers may struggle to transition between countries because their qualifications are not recognized or aligned with the needs of the other country's job market.</p> <p>Lack of alignment between education systems and labour market needs means that graduates may not be adequately prepared for jobs in high-demand sectors, leading to workforce shortages or inefficiencies.</p>	<p>Respondents mentioned the need for improved cross-border mobility of the workforce and job opportunities that can be enhanced through continued collaboration. Align educational systems (especially in adult education and vocational training) to meet the needs of the cross-border labour market.</p> <p>Improve workforce development programs for industries like tourism and environmental services.</p>
<p><b>Health care</b></p>	<p>There is a growing recognition of the importance of cross-border healthcare services.</p>	<p>Medical service exchanges are poorly coordinated, with insufficient integration between healthcare systems on both sides of the border. This leads to delays in emergency response times and limited access to medical services for cross-border populations.</p>	<p>Improving cross-border medical service exchanges will ensure that residents on both sides of the border can access healthcare services without facing delays or barriers. This will increase the overall quality of life and ensure that both countries are better prepared for healthcare emergencies.</p> <p>Strengthening healthcare cooperation will also involve joint funding for healthcare initiatives, ensuring that both countries benefit from improved health outcomes, better healthcare infrastructure, and more equitable access to medical services.</p>

Areas of cooperation	Strengths	Weaknesses	Improvements
<p><b>Infrastructure development</b></p>	<p>The creation of better transport networks and cross-border links to facilitate economic and cultural exchanges must continue.</p>	<p>Roads, bridges, and railways are often underdeveloped, leading to poor connectivity and restricted mobility for both people and goods. The lack of efficient transport links hinders economic exchange and limits the potential growth of cross-border tourism.</p> <p>The partial absence of comprehensive cycling paths further reduces sustainable travel options and restricts the growth of eco-friendly tourism initiatives.</p>	<p>Expanding and modernizing transport infrastructure will improve connectivity, reduce travel time, and support economic growth. It will also enhance mobility for both tourists and workers, creating a more integrated region.</p> <p>Investing in cycling paths and eco-friendly transport options will support sustainable tourism, encourage healthier travel choices, and help reduce the environmental impact of transportation.</p>

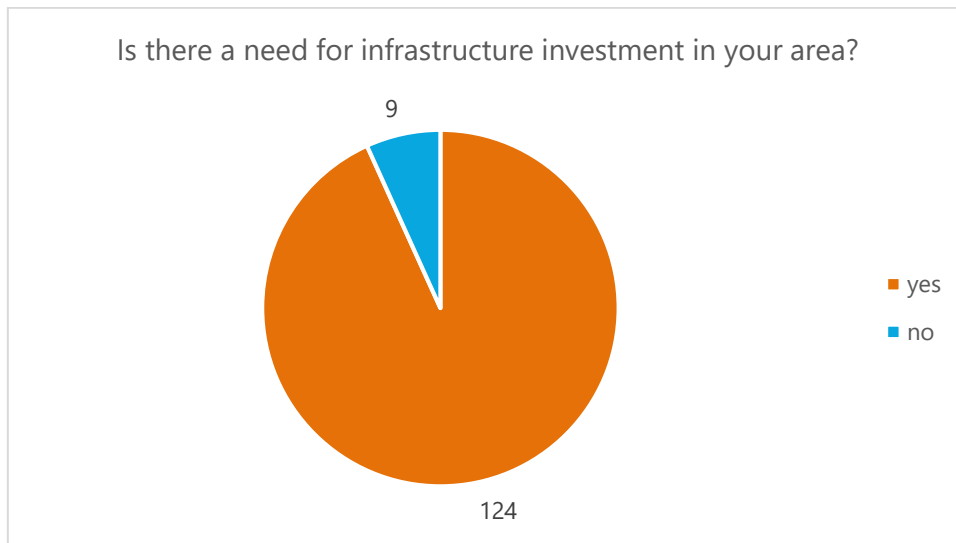
## What are the major obstacles for a good cooperation in your area?

While there are strong desires for cross-border cooperation, these barriers significantly limit its potential, and many believe that overcoming these obstacles would require coordinated efforts. The most commonly mentioned barriers include:

- **Language barriers:** Numerous respondents pointed out that the differences in language between Slovakia and Hungary pose a significant challenge to communication and effective cooperation.
- **Financial constraints:** A critical issue for many was the lack of sufficient funding. Many respondents noted that financial limitations hinder the ability of local governments and organizations to co-finance projects or even carry out essential tasks. This financial scarcity also impacts the ability to implement larger infrastructural and developmental projects.
- **Administrative burdens:** The complexity of administrative procedures, including bureaucracy and the need for extensive documentation, makes it difficult to navigate the process of securing funding and implementing cross-border projects. Some also mentioned delays in payments after project approval, which further complicates financial planning.
- **Legislative differences:** There are significant differences in the legal frameworks of the two countries, which complicates project execution and the coordination of efforts across the border. The mismatched regulations also affect the ease of securing permits and ensuring compliance with both countries' legal requirements.
- **Political and social challenges:** A few responses indicated that political motivations, intergovernmental disagreements, and even past conflicts among local partners sometimes hinder the smooth functioning of cooperation. These political and social issues can sometimes override the technical or financial benefits of collaboration.
- **Lack of expertise and capacity:** Some respondents mentioned a shortage of qualified personnel, project managers, and experts to manage the projects effectively, which further slows down cooperation efforts. Without the right capacity and know-how, partnerships struggle to thrive.
- **Infrastructural limitations:** The lack of proper infrastructure, such as roads, transport networks, and communication channels, was also identified as a barrier. This affects both economic development and the ease of collaboration between border regions.

## Is there a need for some infrastructure projects?

The vast majority of respondents believe that **there is a need for infrastructure investment** in their area, with only a small proportion expressing the opposite view.



The respondents have highlighted several critical infrastructure issues in the border regions, pointing out the urgent need for improvements in various sectors. Improving infrastructure was universally recognized as a priority to enhance the living conditions, economic development, and connectivity of the border regions. This would not only address basic needs but also foster long-term regional cooperation and growth. Key issues include:

- **Transportation and mobility:** Many respondents emphasized the need for improved road infrastructure, including road repairs, expansion of highways, and better road connectivity across borders. Specific needs such as the completion of missing highway sections, upgrading old infrastructure, and improving public transportation (including cross-border rail services) were noted as significant barriers to economic and social development.
- **Water and wastewater infrastructure:** A recurring issue mentioned was the lack of potable water systems and proper wastewater management, which were considered crucial for the sustainable development of the region. Several areas are lacking the necessary infrastructure for clean water and sewage, which is affecting both the quality of life and future development potential.
- **Cultural and heritage infrastructure:** Infrastructure for cultural heritage preservation was also noted as an area requiring attention. Many respondents stressed that historic buildings and heritage sites need restoration and modernization to enhance tourism and preserve regional identity. Without proper investment, these cultural assets cannot reach their full potential.
- **Economic and technological development:** The need for innovation-driven infrastructure, such as digital connectivity and technology parks, was highlighted. Many respondents pointed out that the region's economic development is hindered by the lack of modern infrastructure, which in turn affects competitiveness and job creation.
- **Environmental and sustainable infrastructure:** Environmental infrastructure, particularly in areas like waste management, water management, and renewable energy, was also emphasized. Several respondents called for investments in eco-friendly infrastructure,

including sustainable transport options like cycling paths, as a means to improve both environmental quality and regional connectivity.

- **General observations:** Some respondents mentioned the need for better coordination between regions and the importance of securing funding for cross-border projects to ensure sustainability. The lack of sufficient financial resources for local governments to carry out infrastructure projects was noted as a significant obstacle.

### Are there things you would like to do under Interreg?

**Most of the respondents** stated that they **have future project ideas** that should be implemented with the co-financing of the Programme – with the aim of promoting stronger Hungarian-Slovak cooperation and improving the quality of life in the border regions.

- **Cultural and historical heritage:** Many ideas focus on restoring and utilizing historical landmarks like castles, churches, and parks for tourism, education, and local development. Projects include the restoration of historical buildings, preservation of cultural heritage, and creating cultural centres. There's also interest in developing historical walking or cycling trails and promoting local heritage via joint projects.
- **Tourism and infrastructure:** Several ideas propose building and enhancing tourism infrastructure, including bike paths, tourism information platforms, and cultural festivals. Promoting cross-border tourism, especially around environmental and historical sites, is a key theme. Notable suggestions include creating a tourism centre for the UNESCO Geopark, creating tourist routes through historic sites, and supporting eco-tourism projects like wine tourism.
- **Environmental projects:** There is a significant focus on environmental protection, such as water conservation, flood protection, and projects aimed at mitigating climate change. Specific ideas include water management projects (like utilizing artesian wells), creating sustainable energy systems, and enhancing green areas through joint climate change adaptation.
- **Social and economic development:** Ideas also address social and economic development, such as creating cross-border innovation centres, enhancing cooperation among small and medium enterprises, and expanding educational opportunities. Some proposals emphasize social inclusion, such as creating job opportunities for marginalized communities (e.g. Roma inclusion through social businesses) and offering support for elderly care.
- **Public and educational cooperation:** Several ideas include fostering academic and cultural exchanges, such as creating joint education programs, establishing youth projects, and enhancing financial literacy for the younger generation. Some respondents also propose fostering connections between universities, particularly in fields like forestry, environmental science, and sustainable development.
- **Infrastructure and mobility:** There are proposals for improving transportation networks, including expanding railway connections, upgrading roads, and building infrastructure that facilitates easier travel across borders. Ideas also include establishing cross-border public transport systems and improving road conditions for both local residents and tourists.

## Are there things you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? Why?

Many respondents shared ideas for projects within the Hungary-Slovakia Interreg Programme that they were unable to implement. These – sometimes overlapping – ideas often encountered significant barriers, mainly financial challenges, lack of support, or administrative difficulties.

Topic	Ideas	Barriers
<b>Cultural and historical heritage preservation</b>	Cultural heritage protection: Renovations and restorations of various historical landmarks, castles, and churches, protected parks.	Lack of funding: Some projects did not receive the necessary support, even though preparations were made (e.g. historic fountain restoration).
<b>Tourism Development and Eco-Tourism</b>	Cyclotourism: Establishing bike paths, such as the Danube cycling route, providing tourists with the opportunity to enjoy nature directly. Agrotourism and local tourism: Initiating various programs and collaborations, such as Danube wetlands agrotourism, and other local tourism programs like gastronomic festivals and cultural heritage events.	Administrative difficulties: The necessary administrative requirements, such as local regulations and documentation, were too complicated, which slowed down the implementation of these ideas. Lack of funding opportunities: The necessary funding opportunities were not available to support projects like agrotourism.
<b>Environmental and sustainability projects</b>	Water management: Utilizing artesian wells for irrigation purposes, the protection of natural water sources, and other eco-friendly water management projects to enhance environmental sustainability. Biodiversity: Creating programs focusing on sustainable farming and biodiversity protection in the Aggtelek National Park and Muránska Planina areas, with an emphasis on cross-border cooperation.	Financial barriers: Lack of financial support was a common reason these projects could not be implemented, particularly for larger eco-projects involving natural resource management, and some ideas were not eligible for existing funding programs.
<b>Health and social inclusion projects</b>	Senior care projects: Some respondents proposed creating facilities for elderly care and developing cross-border social initiatives for seniors, like joint community events and educational programs.	Lack of financial resources: These projects were hindered by insufficient funding for the required investments and operational costs. Lack of partners: Some projects, like senior care centres, faced difficulties in finding reliable partners for cross-border cooperation.
<b>Infrastructure development and connectivity</b>	Building better infrastructure: Proposals included new transport links, such as bike paths, and improvements to local roads to enhance cross-border connectivity between Slovakia and Hungary.	Lack of funding opportunities: Financial limitations prevented the realization of these infrastructure projects, and some respondents found that there were no specific calls for such projects. Lack of strategic alignment: Some ideas did not align with the available funding frameworks or regulations governing cross-border infrastructure projects.

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

The suggestions reflect a **desire for more flexibility, efficiency, and sustainability** in the future Programme, with a focus on improving infrastructure, enhancing cross-border collaboration, and ensuring that projects contribute to long-term benefits for both countries.

<p><b>1. Simplified processes and reduced bureaucracy</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Streamlining the application process to make it more accessible to both civil organizations and smaller projects (e.g. easier project proposals and faster decision-making).</li> <li>• Reducing administrative burdens, particularly the paperwork and approval times.</li> <li>• Simpler financial management processes, including upfront financing (50% pre-financing), with an emphasis on transparency and simplicity in paperwork.</li> <li>• Fewer bureaucratic obstacles and faster processing times.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1. Increased financial support and resources</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calls for increased funding and a greater number of opportunities for financing of both infrastructural projects and smaller organizations.</li> <li>• More funding opportunities for infrastructure development, especially for tourism and environmental projects.</li> <li>• A more flexible financing system, such as higher allocation for specific project types like eco-tourism and environmental protection.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1. Focus on sustainable and future-oriented projects</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for projects connected to sustainable development, particularly those addressing climate change, eco-tourism, and green technologies.</li> <li>• Stronger emphasis on long-term sustainable projects and solutions, focusing on ecological issues and environmental protection.</li> <li>• Including multi-disciplinary, future-focused topics, such as smart governance, and eco-friendly infrastructure projects.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1. Streamlined collaboration and communication</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better communication and stronger collaboration between project partners, particularly across borders, to facilitate effective cooperation.</li> <li>• Stronger focus on cross-border cooperation and more seamless partnerships, with specific calls for mentor programs for civil organizations new to the funding process.</li> <li>• The introduction of more effective communication tools and systems to enhance the sharing of information across countries.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1. Increased focus on infrastructure and health</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calls for more opportunities to fund health-related projects and initiatives, especially those benefiting the local communities.</li> <li>• Proposals to improve tourism infrastructure, such as eco-tourism and accommodation development, and to improve public health infrastructure.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1. Fewer restrictions and more flexibility</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reducing the constraints on project themes, allowing for a wider range of eligible projects.</li> <li>• Fewer restrictions on which themes projects can address, enabling more diverse areas to be covered under the programme.</li> <li>• A more flexible and less restrictive system would encourage better collaboration and more innovative solutions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1. Mentoring and capacity building</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A call for mentorship programs for organizations unfamiliar with the application process to support them in navigating the programme successfully.</li> <li>• Mentorship on thematic topics, enabling better knowledge-sharing and improved capacity for project management, especially for smaller or newer organizations.</li> </ul>

## Is there any element of the Interreg that must be maintained?

The elements suggested by the respondents reflect the **shared vision for the continuation and development of the Programme**, which values both cooperation and efficiency in supporting sustainable development across the border.

- **Interconnected partnership:** Many respondents emphasized the importance of maintaining collaboration across various sectors and different organizations, including cultural, environmental, and social areas.
- **Thematic focuses:** A focus on cultural heritage protection, on tourism development, especially cross-border tourist routes, cultural events, and the development of tourism infrastructure, such as biking routes and accommodation as well as on green initiatives, including environmental innovation, sustainable tourism, and the conservation of natural resources, was highlighted as important to maintain. In addition, the inclusion of health and educational cooperation, such as promoting shared health initiatives and educational partnerships, was seen as vital.
- **Financial transparency and fair distribution:** Maintaining transparency in the funding process and ensuring fair distribution of resources were mentioned repeatedly.
- **Simplicity in financial processes:** Respondents advocated for an uncomplicated financial system, including upfront financing and simplified project reporting.

### What should be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in other country?

Making cross-border collaboration more effective requires efforts to simplify bureaucratic procedures, enhance communication, support capacity building, and ensure financial support and equality for all involved organizations.

- **Increased communication and networking:** Regular joint meetings, conferences, and workshops should be held to facilitate communication and mutual understanding between organizations from both countries. This could include tailored networking events where potential partners can meet and explore opportunities.
- **Simplification of processes:** Many respondents emphasized the need for simpler application processes, with fewer bureaucratic hurdles. Reducing administrative burdens and streamlining documentation requirements would make collaboration smoother, especially for smaller organizations.
- **Language support:** Overcoming language barriers is essential for effective communication. Providing language support, including translation services and bilingual platforms, would ensure that all partners are on the same page.
- **Capacity building and training:** Organizing joint training sessions to enhance organizational and technical capacity was mentioned as crucial. This includes both general administrative training and sector-specific knowledge sharing, especially in terms of financial management and project implementation.
- **Funding and financial flexibility:** Some respondents suggested the introduction of partial pre-financing and the simplification of financial procedures to ensure smoother access to funds. Additionally, equal funding conditions on both sides of the border would level the playing field for all partners.
- **Fostering long-term partnerships:** Long-term collaborations should be prioritized over short-term project-based partnerships. Building trust through consistent communication and shared values would lead to more sustainable and impactful projects.



- **Improved institutional support:** A focus on strengthening the institutional framework for cross-border partnerships was seen as necessary. This includes better cooperation between regional authorities and consistent, reliable support from both Slovak and Hungarian institutions.
- **Transparency and equal treatment:** Ensuring that both sides of the border are treated equally in terms of project evaluation, funding allocations, and eligibility is crucial for maintaining fairness in the Programme.

## What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?

The dream projects reflect the aspirations of local communities for greater collaboration, sustainable development, and shared cultural heritage, making the border region a more integrated and vibrant area.



### **Bicycle and tourism infrastructure**

Development of cross-border cycling routes, connecting various natural and cultural landmarks. For example, a bicycle path connecting Pácin and Veľký Kamenec, both rich in cultural heritage, with further attractions like castles, parks, and recreational areas. This would significantly enhance tourism and local economies. A bike path along the Ipoly/Ipel' River, spanning both countries, would support eco-tourism and provide a sustainable travel option.



### **Environmental and sustainable projects**

Water management initiatives, such as improving the water retention capabilities of local regions and building water management systems along the Ipoly/Ipel' River.

Development of green infrastructure, such as solar panel installations, and promotion of sustainable agriculture through circular economy practices.

Green cycling paths and hiking trails to promote eco-tourism and environmental conservation.



### **Cultural heritage and tourism**

Restoration of historic castles, fortresses, and other cultural sites across the border to boost tourism and preserve the shared history of the region. Projects such as the renovation of the Esterházy Castle and the Baradla Cave and Domica Cave systems, with joint management between Slovakia and Hungary, are highlighted.

Creating cultural spaces and centres, including the restoration of local cultural hubs like old farmhouses or castles for community activities.



### **Education and health**

Establishing joint educational and cultural centres, with a focus on sustainable development, history, and climate change. This would promote mutual understanding and stronger cooperation between Hungary and Slovakia.

Improving healthcare infrastructure and services through cross-border collaboration in healthcare insurance systems, making healthcare more accessible to communities on both sides of the border.



### Mobility and connectivity

Upgrading transport infrastructure, including high-speed train connections between Hungary and Slovakia, to improve mobility for both residents and tourists. Also, the development of cross-border bus and railway services to better connect remote regions.

Enhancing pedestrian and cycling bridges over rivers, like the planned bicycle bridge between Komárom (Hungary) and Medveďov (Slovakia), to foster stronger cross-border interactions and tourism.



### Festivals and social events

Creating joint cultural festivals, such as a major annual festival celebrating the shared cultural heritage of Slovakia and Hungary. This would not only promote tourism but also foster a stronger sense of community and unity across the border.

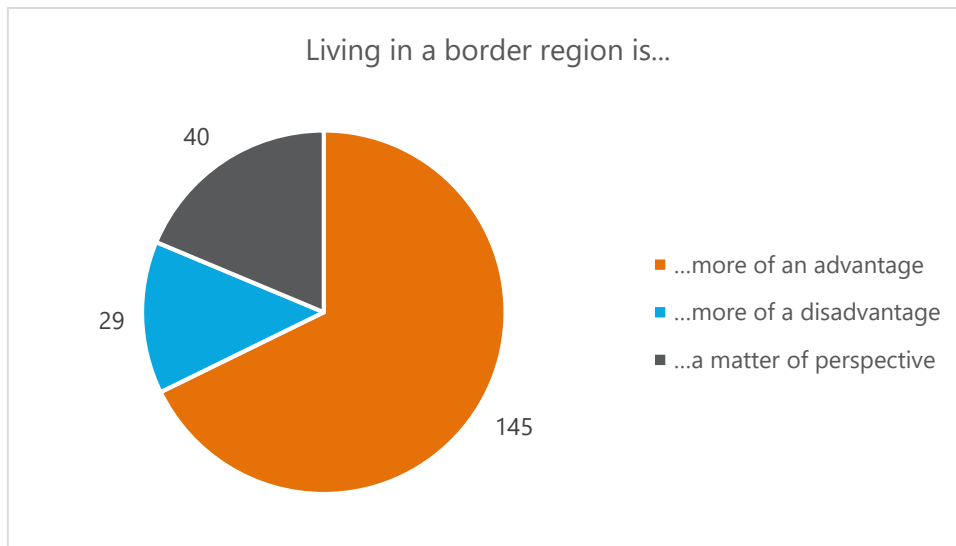
Events focusing on youth exchange, arts, and culture, with an emphasis on building lasting relationships and collaborative projects between young people from both countries.

## 5.1.2 Citizen survey

A total of **214 individuals** participated in the citizen survey, with 56 responses provided in Slovak and 158 in Hungarian.

### Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

The majority of the respondents viewed **living in a border region as an advantage** (67.8%), though there are some who expressed it as a disadvantage (13.5%) or a mix of both (18.7%).



- **Advantage:** A large portion of participants highlighted that living in a border region offers various benefits, such as cultural enrichment, easier cross-border communication, and access to more opportunities. Many respondents emphasized the bilingual, bicultural environment, economic potential, and social advantages. In particular, respondents appreciated the ease of

moving between neighbouring countries, access to multiple services, and the enrichment of cultures.

- **Disadvantage:** A smaller portion of responses pointed out disadvantages, such as the complications related to border regulations, limited cross-border infrastructure, or the feeling of being disconnected from both countries. A few respondents also mentioned challenges like economic disparities, outdated infrastructure, and limited job opportunities in some border areas.
- **Both advantage and disadvantage:** Some respondents provided mixed views, suggesting that living in a border region has both positive and negative aspects, often depending on specific circumstances such as local governance, proximity to border crossings, or the availability of services.

### Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area?

The most important areas identified for cooperation between Hungary and Slovakia include economic development, transport and infrastructure, tourism, cultural exchange, education, healthcare, environmental protection, and public administration. There is a strong desire to build on shared history and cultural ties while also addressing practical concerns such as cross-border mobility, economic integration, and sustainable development. The focus is on fostering stronger bilateral relations through joint initiatives that benefit both countries and their border regions.

- Many responses emphasized the need for stronger **economic relations**, including cross-border business development, investment, and support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). There is a strong focus on enhancing trade, industry, and job creation through joint projects and initiatives. Additionally, both sides expressed interest in improving economic networks and opportunities for business growth, especially in border regions.
- A significant number of respondents highlighted the importance of developing **transport infrastructure**, especially cross-border road and rail connections. Improvements in public transport, including bus and train services, were also considered crucial for increasing mobility and fostering economic ties. There is also a need for better border crossing facilities and new transport links.
- **Tourism** is another key area for cooperation, with many responses advocating for joint tourism development and shared tourist programs. Cross-border tourist attractions, hospitality, and initiatives that promote the region's natural and cultural heritage were frequently mentioned. Many respondents suggested promoting eco-tourism and expanding cultural tourism opportunities, as well as improving tourist infrastructure.
- **Cultural cooperation** is seen as vital, especially in preserving and promoting shared cultural heritage and history. Respondents emphasized the importance of developing cultural exchanges, artistic collaborations, and preserving traditional customs across the two countries. There is a desire for joint efforts to celebrate common traditions, festivals, and events that bring people together.
- Many answers highlighted **education** as an area requiring collaboration, with a focus on cross-border educational programs, student exchanges, and the development of language skills. There was also interest in creating opportunities for students to learn both Hungarian and Slovak and promoting joint educational initiatives.

- **Healthcare cooperation** is considered important, with a particular focus on improving cross-border healthcare access and emergency services. Some responses specifically mentioned the need for shared medical services and **disaster management** cooperation, ensuring residents on both sides of the border have access to medical care.
- **Environmental cooperation** is a critical topic, particularly concerning water management, waste management, and nature conservation. Respondents emphasized the need to address shared environmental challenges, including the protection of rivers, forests, and other natural resources.
- Several responses mentioned the need for simplified administrative processes and reducing bureaucratic barriers for citizens and businesses across the two countries. The idea of making cross-border **public administration** more accessible was also frequently discussed.

### Have you come across any Interreg project that was beneficial in your area?

The most frequently mentioned projects are related to cross-border tourism (including cycling routes, cultural events, and heritage preservation), infrastructure development (especially bridges and transport connectivity), environmental protection, health care and social services. Many responses highlight the importance of cooperation in preserving shared cultural heritage, facilitating sustainable development, and improving cross-border mobility. Some examples of these projects are shown in the table below.

TOURISM AND CULTURAL HERITAGE	MOBILITY	CULTURAL EVENTS, P2P ACTIONS
DANUBE BIKE&BOAT Fortresses of Komárom/Komarno SacraVelo Via Sancti Martini Dialogue of Museums Rowing in one river Madách memorial sites Tourism development linked to the Moson-Danube coast with small boat harbours Renovation of the Tallós water mill	Railway connection between Lučenec and Salgótarján Bridge connection between Dobrohošť and Dunakiliti Bridge Komárom/Komarno Shared bicycle rental in Komárom/Komarno Mária Valéria Bike Neszmély-Dunaradvány ferry Building bridges over Ipoly/Ipeľ Construction of local border crossing roads Ecoregion SKHU	Csallóköz szíve - Pannontáj / Srdce Žitného ostrova – Pannontáj GASTROCOOP IpolyFeszt LehárFeszt Fairytale Tokaj Festival WINEFEST Gömör Expo Kultúrbár Intercult Taste of Danubian Nature Illumination Festival CULTPROFCOOP CultPlay
EDUCATION AND LABOUR MARKET	ENVIRONMENTAL AND NATURE PROTECTION	HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES
Construction of a forest school in Levice Meet the local needs RE-START Creating Needs Based Employment in the Lower Ipeľ Valley EduCoop	Nat-Net Duna/Dunaj Novohrad - Nógrád Geopark Ipoly/Ipeľ Valley projects Cooperation in the territory of Aggtelek Karts & Slovak Karst Fragments of Nature	HEALTH4ALL GENERATIONCOOP EURO-KEY Cooperation between emergency services IpOLD Developing an integrated age-friendly region

## What difficulties do you encounter in everyday life because you live in the border region?

People living in border regions face a range of difficulties related to language barriers, transportation issues, economic underdevelopment, cultural differences, and insufficient infrastructure. While some view these as challenges, others perceive them as part of the region's unique dynamics. In general, economic and social isolation, combined with legal and bureaucratic challenges, are the most common struggles, with some people benefiting from better access to resources in certain border areas. However, the difficulties related to cross-border mobility, job opportunities, and public services are significant barriers for many residents.

- **Language barriers:** Some respondents mention challenges related to language, especially when crossing the border between Hungary and Slovakia. This includes communication problems due to the differences in languages.
- **Transportation and connectivity:** Many respondents mention difficulties related to lack of sufficient transportation links across the border. This includes limited public transport, missing bridges, poorly maintained roads, missing bus/train connections, and insufficient border crossings. In addition, some respondents face traffic congestion at border crossings, especially due to heavy cross-border traffic and delayed trains.
- **Cultural challenges:** There are mentions of cultural diversity and the challenges that arise from it, including cultural misunderstandings, and difficulties in accessing cultural programs due to geographical and logistical barriers. In some cases, respondents note that ethnic conflicts or tensions arise due to cultural differences, although they are often seen as challenges that people adapt to rather than direct obstacles.
- **Economic and employment issues:** Challenges such as economic disparity, migration, unemployment, lack of job opportunities (particularly for young people and skilled workers) are also noted, which affect daily life in the border regions. Mainly in peripheral regions far from the economic and political centres suffer from economic underdevelopment, leading to lack of investments and high unemployment rates. These economic disparities between border regions and urban hubs create challenges for residents.
- **Infrastructure deficiencies:** Many respondents pointed out the lack of adequate infrastructure, such as missing or poorly maintained bridges, roads, and rail connections, especially in remote border areas. Additionally, issues like electricity and internet access were mentioned as significant difficulties, particularly in more isolated regions. The poor quality of roads and public transportation further complicates travel to essential locations, creating a major inconvenience for those who live in these areas.
- **Administrative and legal obstacles:** Cross-border bureaucracy also poses challenges. Respondents noted difficulties dealing with differing legal systems and paperwork, particularly in areas such as diploma recognition, healthcare administration, and school enrolment processes due to varying regulations between countries. Moreover, issues related to residency, work permits, and taxation can create additional complications, especially for those who move between countries for work or family purposes.
- **Lack of information and services:** Another common difficulty faced by border residents is the lack of information about available services, tourism opportunities, and cultural programs across the border. The availability of essential services such as healthcare or government

assistance is often limited, partly due to geographical distance or language barriers, which make it harder for residents to access the help they need.

- **Political and geographic isolation:** Living in a border region also means dealing with political and geographic isolation. Many people feel disconnected from the main decision-making centres, such as capital cities, making it harder to access resources, political representation, and social support. Some respondents mentioned that their region is often overlooked by both the Slovak and Hungarian governments due to its peripheral location, and others noted the physical geographic isolation, where traveling to urban areas or services becomes challenging because of distance and poor infrastructure. Remote villages in particular face fewer services and opportunities than those in more urbanized locations.
- **Environmental and health issues:** A few respondents highlighted environmental challenges, such as pollution or poor environmental conditions, particularly in the border areas. Additionally, health issues were raised, with some respondents indicating that the healthcare system in these regions faces certain limitations due to both logistical and resource challenges.
- **Other issues:** Several respondents mentioned currency exchange issues, particularly with the Euro/Forint difference in border areas, which can cause inconvenience in daily transactions. Additionally, negative social attitudes or prejudices against border residents, especially in areas with high ethnic diversity, were mentioned as obstacles in daily life. These social issues sometimes create divisions and contribute to a sense of marginalization among border communities.

### What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?

The dream projects listed by citizens primarily revolve around several core themes, including infrastructure development, tourism, culture, environmental sustainability, and cross-border cooperation. These projects aim to improve the quality of life in border regions and strengthen cooperation between neighbouring countries. Below is a summary of the key themes and specific project ideas:



**Infrastructure and transportation development:** The development of infrastructure is a key priority, with a focus on improving roads, bridges, rail connections, and public transportation systems. Projects aimed at enhancing cross-border connectivity – such as new bus and train routes, bicycle paths, and ferry services – are critical for improving mobility between neighbouring regions. Additionally, sustainable transport solutions, including the promotion of eco-friendly technologies and green energy, are seen as essential for long-term development.



**Tourism development and cultural exchange:** There is a strong emphasis on promoting tourism and cultural exchange. Citizens envision projects that create shared cultural destinations, such as heritage sites and nature reserves, and revitalizing historical monuments. These projects would include cross-border festivals, art exhibitions, and gastronomy events designed to strengthen cultural ties between the two countries. Efforts to preserve and promote cultural heritage through joint initiatives are also a priority, with a particular focus on educational exchanges and cultural tourism.



**Community and economic development:** Job creation is a central theme, with initiatives aimed at developing business parks, supporting local entrepreneurs, and promoting small and medium-sized enterprises. Citizens advocate for projects that boost the agricultural sector, particularly agrotourism, by connecting local farmers with tourists and markets. There is also a push for improving economic cooperation across borders, particularly in sectors like trade, agriculture, and technology.



**Environmental sustainability:** Environmental protection is another key area, with projects designed to safeguard natural resources and improve waste management systems. The development of eco-friendly tourism and the restoration of water management systems are also significant priorities. Citizens emphasize the importance of sustainable practices to ensure long-term ecological health in the region.



**Education, health care and social services:** Proposed initiatives include the creation of cross-border educational programs, vocational training, and language exchange opportunities. Additionally, citizens seek to enhance access to healthcare and social services to ensure equitable support for all residents, regardless of national borders.



**Mutual understanding and exchange programs:** Fostering deeper cross-border collaboration is a critical theme, with citizens advocating for joint projects that promote mutual understanding and strengthen social and economic ties. This includes the development of shared infrastructure, business ventures, and cultural exchange programs, which can help bridge the divide between the two countries.



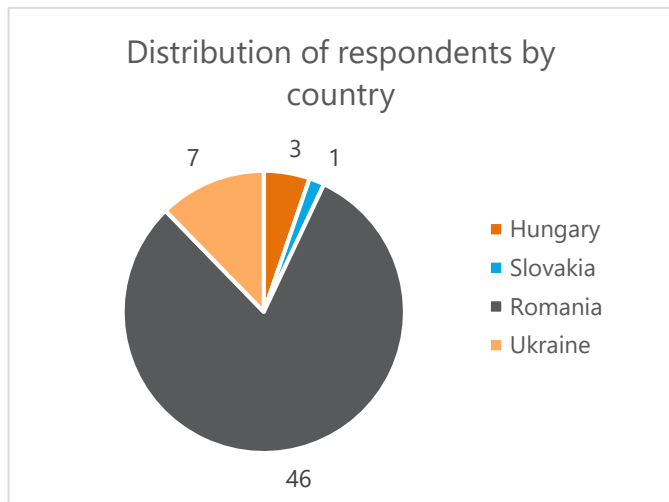
**Youth and future generations:** Many citizens also emphasize the importance of programs that benefit youth, including sports, arts, and entrepreneurship opportunities. Encouraging youth participation in cross-border initiatives is seen as a key step in building a sustainable future for these regions.

## 5.2 Key findings regarding the Interreg NEXT HUSKROUA Programme

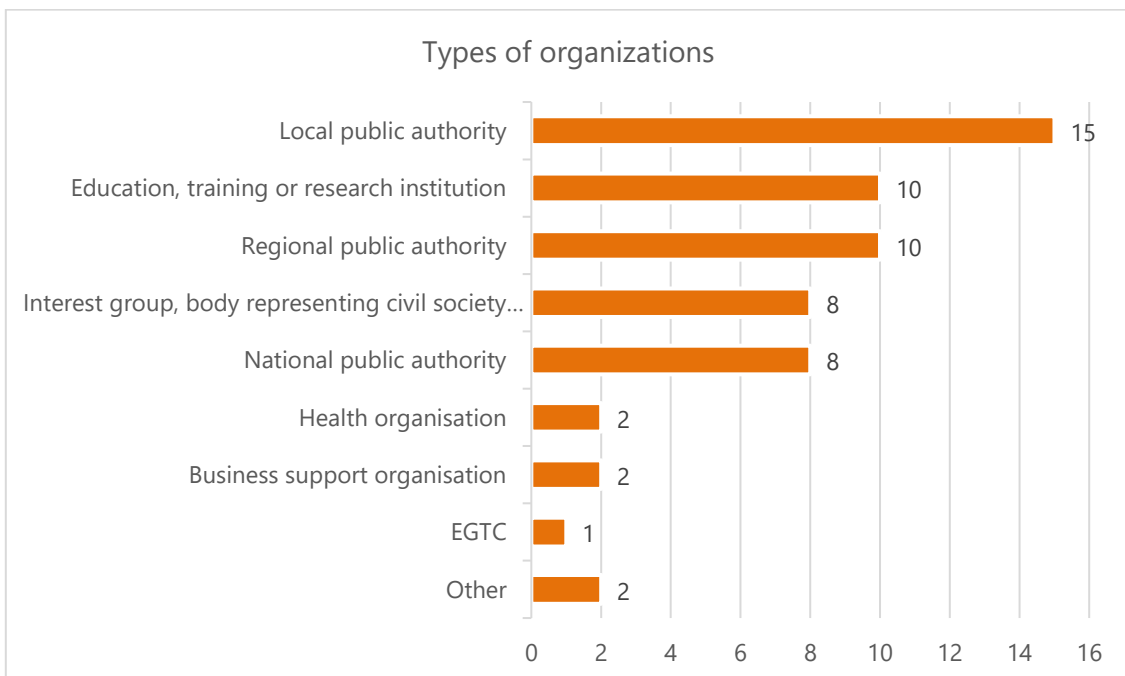
### 5.2.1 Stakeholder survey

The stakeholder survey for the Interreg NEXT Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine Programme collects in-depth feedback to inform the programming period following 2027. Each section presents the results for every survey question, highlighting, where applicable, the number of valid respondents, detailed response data, and a concise summary of the findings.

A total of **57 respondents** participated, with a significant portion living in Romania. Consequently, the results of the survey should be approached with due caution in terms of broader applicability<sup>1</sup>.



The respondents come from a **variety of sectors**, including public authorities, educational institutions and civil organizations. Smaller representations came from health organizations, business support organizations, EGTC and a few other categories. Nevertheless, it reflects a broad spectrum of stakeholders and offering a comprehensive perspective on their needs.

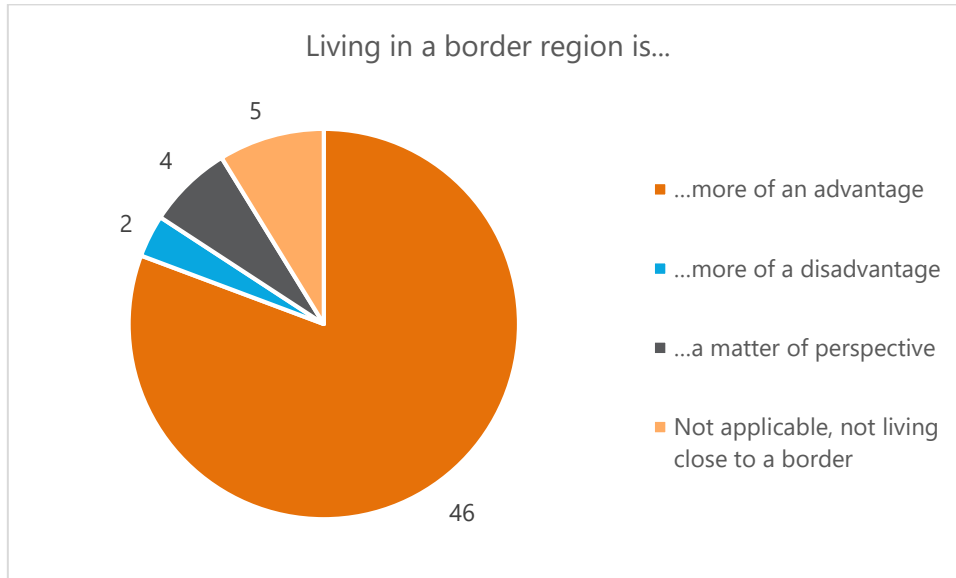


<sup>1</sup> We assume that lower level participation might be caused by the fact that the language was English.



## Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

The responses to the question "Is living next to a border an opportunity or disadvantage?" show a strong belief that **living near a border is more of an advantage** (80.7%). A smaller portion of respondents view it as a disadvantage (7%), while a few consider it a matter of perspective (3.5%). Additionally, some respondents (8.8%) indicated that the question was not applicable to them, as they do not live near a border.



The general sentiment is that living in a border region offers a mix of opportunities and challenges, with a strong emphasis on the benefits of cross-border cooperation and cultural exchange.

Opportunities	Disadvantages
<p><b>Economic and trade opportunities:</b> Many respondents highlighted the potential for economic growth through access to markets in neighbouring countries, the opportunity for cross-border trade, and job creation. Proximity to different markets allows businesses to expand and create new economic opportunities, particularly for SMEs. There's also a significant potential for accessing EU funds to support border region development and joint projects.</p>	<p><b>Economic disparities:</b> Economic imbalances between neighbouring countries were seen as a challenge. When one side of the border is economically stronger, it can lead to disparities in wages, employment opportunities, and living standards, which may cause tensions or increased migration to wealthier regions.</p>
<p><b>Infrastructure and services:</b> Proximity to the border can lead to better infrastructure, including roads and bridges, which enhances mobility and access to services like healthcare and education. Some respondents also noted that cross-border infrastructure projects, such as improved connectivity, benefit local communities and businesses.</p>	<p><b>Environmental and health risks:</b> Certain responses mentioned that border regions may be prone to environmental or health risks, such as the spread of diseases, which can be more easily transmitted across borders. The cooperation of health organizations and monitoring cross-border epidemics was seen as an important aspect of managing such risks.</p>
<p><b>Cultural exchange:</b> Border regions are seen as rich areas for cultural diversity, with respondents mentioning the blending of cultures, languages, and traditions. This cultural diversity is viewed as</p>	<p><b>Bureaucratic and legal challenges:</b> The complexity of navigating different legal systems and regulations between countries can create difficulties for cross-border residents. Issues such</p>

Opportunities	Disadvantages
<p>an opportunity for mutual understanding, creativity, and tourism development. Many respondents also pointed out that living near the border allows for learning new languages, customs, and exploring new perspectives.</p>	<p>as taxes, residency permits, and access to national services are viewed as potential hurdles for those living near the border.</p>
<p><b>Cross-border cooperation:</b> Respondents frequently emphasized the advantages of cross-border collaboration, especially through programmes like HUSKROUA. Cooperation in fields like trade, cultural exchange, public safety, and environmental management provides a platform for shared growth and development. The opportunity for joint projects across borders was noted as a strong point for improving the region's economic and social conditions.</p>	<p><b>Social and political tensions:</b> Some respondents noted the potential for political or social tensions due to historical conflicts between neighbouring countries. These tensions could impact cross-border cooperation and the social fabric of border communities.</p>
<p><b>Social benefits:</b> There were multiple mentions of the potential for improving the quality of life for people living along the border through better access to services, job opportunities, and the possibility of participating in cross-border partnerships. The sense of interconnectedness and cooperation between neighbouring countries was viewed positively.</p>	<p><b>Security and crime:</b> Some respondents raised concerns about the security risks associated with living near a border, particularly related to illegal migration, smuggling, and organized crime. The need for enhanced border security and cooperation between police forces from neighbouring countries was frequently mentioned.</p>

### Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area?

The responses to the question on the biggest need and potential for cross-border cooperation in the Interreg Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine region can be categorized into the following themes.

- 
1.Security and law enforcement
- 
1.Economic development and infrastructure
- 
1.Environmental protection and climate change
- 
1.Public health and social care
- 
1.Education, labour market and social inclusion
- 
1.Tourism and cultural exchange
- 
1.Technology and digital security

**Security and law enforcement:** A significant number of responses highlight the need for enhanced cross-border security, particularly in managing border control, combating illegal migration, and addressing issues like human trafficking and smuggling. Stronger cooperation between law enforcement agencies such as the Romanian Gendarmerie and border police from neighbouring countries was suggested. Additionally, cooperation on cybercrime and environmental crime enforcement was identified as essential, given the increasing risks of cross-border digital threats and environmental issues like illegal logging and wildlife trafficking.

**Economic development and infrastructure:** There is a strong call for improving cross-border transport infrastructure to enhance the movement of goods and people, which would support economic growth and reduce disparities between urban and rural areas. Improving connectivity through transportation and digital infrastructure was identified as a top priority for facilitating trade, business opportunities, and regional cooperation. Economic development initiatives, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises, the establishment of innovation hubs and using green technologies were viewed as key areas for fostering economic growth.

**Environmental protection and climate change:** The region's shared ecosystems and the growing challenges posed by climate change led many respondents to emphasize the need for environmental protection. This includes addressing issues like pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. Joint initiatives for water management, especially in shared water bodies like the Tisa River, were noted. The region's efforts should also focus on climate change mitigation, such as adopting renewable energy solutions and managing natural resources sustainably.

**Public health and social care:** The COVID-19 pandemic revealed gaps in cross-border public health cooperation, and many respondents underscored the need for better collaboration on health systems. Emergency preparedness, disaster management, and medical system improvements were identified as areas requiring greater cross-border coordination. Healthcare access, especially in rural or underserved areas, as well as public health programs for pandemic response, were discussed as urgent needs. The importance of biosecurity in animal health and food safety was also highlighted.

**Education, labour market and social inclusion:** Many respondents emphasized the need for more robust cross-border educational programs to promote cultural exchange, reduce skill gaps, and strengthen social cohesion. Vocational training initiatives were particularly seen as a way to address labour market disparities and foster youth development. There is a notable interest in creating shared educational opportunities and mobility initiatives that would benefit both students and teachers. Social inclusion programs, particularly for marginalized groups like Roma communities, were mentioned as a priority for reducing cultural divides.

**Tourism and cultural exchange:** Tourism was highlighted as an area with significant potential for cross-border cooperation, particularly by promoting the region's cultural heritage and tourism infrastructure. Several respondents discussed initiatives to develop local tourism between the four countries, focusing on cultural promotion, historical preservation, and fostering people-to-people cooperation. Tourism-related collaboration could improve both economic growth and cultural understanding across borders.

**Technology and digital security:** The need for technology-driven initiatives was also emphasized, especially in fostering digital infrastructure and cybersecurity. With growing digital transactions across borders, the region faces risks such as digital fraud and identity theft. Collaborating on cross-

border digital infrastructure and cybercrime prevention was seen as essential to ensure a secure digital environment for businesses and individuals.

### What currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced?

The cross-border cooperation in the Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine region has yielded **significant progress in several areas, including security, transport infrastructure, environmental protection, cultural exchange, and public health**. EU funding has played a central role in these successes. There is a strong consensus that these initiatives should not only be preserved but also reinforced through continued collaboration, investment in technology, and the strengthening of shared networks. However, challenges such as border congestion and the need for further infrastructure development in certain regions must also be addressed to ensure the sustainability of these efforts. The following thematic focuses should be maintained based on the responses:

- **Transport infrastructure and connectivity:** Significant investments in cross-border transport infrastructure, such as roads and railways, have improved the movement of people and goods. The construction and modernization of border crossing points have eased border traffic, although some respondents suggest further expansion of border crossings in regions like Ivano-Frankivsk. Continued efforts to improve logistical efficiency and sustainable public transportation systems across borders are highly valued.
- **Cultural and educational cooperation:** Cultural cooperation between museums, cultural institutions, and educational programs across the borders has been productive, fostering mutual understanding and promoting regional identity. Joint exhibitions, events, and exchanges between workers in the cultural field have contributed to strong connections. Expansion of cultural exchange programs and language initiatives should be continued to deepen ties, especially for younger generations.
- **Environmental protection and joint initiatives:** The region has seen success in environmental protection projects, particularly in areas like biodiversity conservation, water management (e.g. the Tisa River basin), and climate change adaptation. Cross-border cooperation in renewable energy projects, as well as the development of sustainable resource management plans, should be reinforced. Monitoring of illegal logging, pollution, and wildlife trafficking through joint patrols and environmental crime units has also proven effective.
- **Security and law enforcement:** Cross-border border security initiatives, including joint patrols, data-sharing systems, and surveillance technologies (such as drones and surveillance cameras), have improved border surveillance and illegal migration prevention. Cyber-intelligence networks and joint training in digital forensics have been beneficial in tackling cybercrime. Enhanced collaboration between the law enforcement agencies and the sharing of criminal intelligence should be preserved and expanded.
- **Crisis response and disaster management:** Cross-border collaboration during emergencies, such as natural disasters, has been effective. The joint response to floods and disaster preparedness initiatives have shown the ability to mobilize quickly across borders. The development of shared early warning systems and disaster response mechanisms should be reinforced to improve regional resilience.

- **Public health and disease control:** Cooperation on public health, particularly in terms of disease control and health crisis management, has been effective. Cross-border information exchange and joint responses to outbreaks, including the purchase of equipment for health institutions, should continue to ensure efficient management of health risks.

In addition, the respondents highlighted that the Interreg programmes and other EU-funded initiatives have provided the necessary funding and support for cross-border projects. This structured framework has enabled partnerships and the development of key infrastructure projects. **Continued financial and administrative support** for such programmes is crucial for sustaining their success. Cooperation between municipalities, NGOs, and other stakeholders has fostered a collaborative environment for project implementation. The ability to pool resources and share knowledge has strengthened partnerships and has been key to many successful projects. **Building on existing networks and expanding stakeholder engagement** will further enhance cross-border cooperation in various sectors.

### What currently does not work well in this cooperation and should be improved?

While cross-border cooperation in the region has had successes, several areas require significant improvements. These include addressing **congestion at border crossings, improving security communication, harmonizing regulations, and enhancing infrastructure**, particularly in remote areas. Additionally, **more coordinated efforts in environmental protection, public health, and education** are essential for strengthening regional collaboration. **Streamlining administrative processes**, increasing funding for long-term projects, and **investing in modern technology** will be crucial for overcoming these challenges and ensuring more effective cooperation moving forward.

#### **Border crossing and infrastructure:**

- Congestion at border crossings and insufficient facilities at certain checkpoints remain significant issues, especially where facilities are outdated or inadequate. Delays in border traffic, particularly at crossing points involving non-EU countries like Ukraine, continue to hinder smooth movement of people and goods.
- There is a need for better coordination and streamlining of border crossing processes, especially with non-EU countries, by improving infrastructure, expanding customs facilities, and implementing more efficient procedures.
- Inconsistent infrastructure development in rural or remote areas of the border region hinders efficient cross-border movement. To address this, it is necessary to harmonize infrastructure development across the entire region, ensuring that underserved areas benefit from transport improvements.

#### **Security and law enforcement:**

- Slow communication and lack of real-time coordination during emergencies or border incidents, particularly among the Romanian Gendarmerie and neighbouring countries, remain critical problems. Delays in information transfer between border authorities hinder rapid responses to illegal border crossings or smuggling.
- Cyber-intelligence sharing between police forces is inadequate, with critical data on cybercrime not being shared in real time. Additionally, the technology and infrastructure available to law

enforcement agencies for cybercrime investigations and environmental crime enforcement are often outdated, impeding effective cross-border coordination.

- Cross-border environmental patrols are limited by insufficient coordination and resource constraints. There is a need for joint patrols and data-sharing systems that monitor and enforce environmental crimes like illegal logging and pollution.

#### **Administrative and bureaucratic barriers:**

- Administrative complexity and bureaucratic hurdles, such as differing regulations, tax policies, and legal frameworks across countries, make the implementation of cross-border projects slow and cumbersome. These regulatory differences can increase project costs and delay their execution.
- Inconsistent evaluation processes and long approval cycles for cross-border projects need improvement. Simplifying administrative procedures, harmonizing regulations, and creating standardized processes across borders would help speed up project implementation and reduce costs.

#### **Environmental and energy cooperation:**

- Despite ongoing efforts, coordination on environmental policies across the region remains inconsistent. There are significant gaps in the harmonization of environmental regulations, particularly in areas like pollution control and resource management, hindering the effective execution of joint environmental projects.
- The adoption of renewable energy projects has been slow due to regulatory differences and insufficient funding. Accelerating cross-border renewable energy cooperation, creating clear frameworks, and securing funding are essential to achieving regional energy sustainability goals.

#### **Public health and emergency response:**

- Fragmented healthcare systems create challenges for residents seeking cross-border medical services, with bureaucratic and legal barriers complicating access to healthcare. During crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, the emergency response coordination across borders was limited, revealing the gaps in cross-border health collaboration.
- There is a need to streamline access to healthcare across borders, coordinate emergency health responses, and establish cross-border healthcare agreements to improve the region's capacity to respond to health crises.

#### **Education and vocational training:**

- Language barriers and curriculum differences complicate cross-border educational exchanges. These issues, along with limited recognition of professional qualifications, hinder opportunities for students and professionals to fully participate in mobility programs and cross-border employment.
- Harmonizing education systems and creating multilingual educational programs would help overcome these barriers, while facilitating the mutual recognition of qualifications would enhance the region's labour mobility.

#### **Financial and project support:**

- Funding limitations remain a significant challenge for many cross-border initiatives. Most projects rely on short-term funding, which is insufficient to ensure long-term sustainability. The short-term nature of funding programmes hampers the development of self-sustaining projects.
- To address this, there is a need for multi-phase funding models, particularly for high-impact projects, as well as public-private partnerships to secure additional funding sources.

#### **Coordination and communication:**

- Coordination challenges arise due to language and cultural differences, as well as the lack of standardized procedures across countries. The limited coordination between stakeholders impedes effective collaboration, particularly in urgent situations.
- Improved communication channels and multi-lingual support are needed, alongside regular dialogue between stakeholders to ensure smooth coordination and better collaboration on cross-border initiatives.

#### **Crisis and emergency management:**

- There is insufficient cross-border coordination during crisis situations, such as floods, natural disasters, or surges in migrant flows. Response systems are often inadequate, and information sharing is slow.
- Enhancing joint crisis management plans, improving real-time data exchange, and ensuring coordinated emergency responses across borders will help strengthen the region's resilience to crises.

These various aspects, common challenges and experiences lead us to the barriers to cross-border cooperation.

### **What are the major obstacles for a good cooperation in your area?**

The key obstacles to effective cross-border cooperation in the Interreg Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine Programme largely stem from **bureaucratic inefficiencies, language barriers, economic disparities, and infrastructure gaps**. Addressing these challenges requires harmonizing legal frameworks, improving border control and mobility, and enhancing communication systems. Additionally, increased financial support, better strategic coordination, and enhanced public engagement will be crucial in fostering smoother and more effective cross-border cooperation in the future.

- **Administrative and bureaucratic barriers:** The most frequently mentioned obstacle is the administrative and bureaucratic challenges caused by different legal systems, regulations, and procedural norms in each country. These include lengthy decision-making processes, slow project evaluations, differing tax policies, and variations in legal frameworks, particularly between EU and non-EU countries (like Ukraine). These barriers cause delays, inefficiencies, and increase the cost of cross-border projects. Solutions suggested including streamlining regulations, creating standardized procedures, and establishing cross-border coordinating bodies to simplify processes and facilitate smoother communication.
- **Language and cultural barriers:** Language differences are a significant hurdle, as many people speak only their native languages, which complicates communication, particularly in project management and law enforcement. Additionally, cultural differences may create

misunderstandings and delays. Recommendations to address this include language training programs, multilingual documentation, and organizing cultural exchange initiatives to build mutual understanding and trust among partners.

- **Economic and infrastructure disparities:** Economic differences between countries, especially between the EU countries and Ukraine, create imbalances in resource availability and project participation. Countries like Ukraine may lack the infrastructure, funding, or technology that their EU counterparts have, limiting their ability to engage in joint projects. Solutions include providing targeted funding, capacity-building programs, and support for underdeveloped regions, particularly in Ukraine, to ensure equal participation.
- **Border control and mobility issues:** Delays at border crossings, particularly between Ukraine and the EU, are a frequent concern, especially during holidays and peak periods, due to inadequate border facilities and the non-Schengen status of Romania. Nevertheless due to Schengen Accession of Romania will contribute to better mobility. These delays hinder the flow of goods, services, and people, impacting project timelines. To address this, it is suggested to modernize border facilities, implement digital customs processing, and simplify visa and work permit requirements for non-EU citizens to improve mobility and reduce delays.
- **Communication infrastructure and coordination:** There is a lack of real-time communication infrastructure, particularly during emergencies or border incidents. This limits the ability of border security forces to respond swiftly to issues such as illegal crossings or smuggling. Suggestions to improve this include establishing shared communication systems, creating digital platforms for real-time data sharing, and improving surveillance technologies like drones and satellite imaging.
- **Limited funding and financial management challenges:** Accessing and managing funds for cross-border projects remains difficult due to varying financial rules and procedures across countries. Additionally, there is limited financial support for small-scale projects or underfunded areas, particularly in Ukraine. Recommendations to address these include simplifying access to funding, increasing the flexibility of financial mechanisms, and creating co-funding models to involve the private sector and local communities in project funding.
- **Geopolitical instability and security concerns:** Geopolitical instability, particularly the ongoing war in Ukraine, has created security concerns, making it difficult to maintain consistent cooperation, especially near conflict zones. The instability can affect border security, mobility, and economic development. Proposals to mitigate this include promoting peacebuilding efforts, enhancing security cooperation, and creating cross-border crisis management frameworks to better address political instability and security risks.
- **Lack of strategic coordination and long-term vision:** Many cross-border projects suffer from a lack of strategic coordination between governments, businesses, and civil society. Without a long-term vision or comprehensive planning, projects are often fragmented or short-term, leading to insufficient impact. To improve this, it is suggested to develop long-term strategies for cross-border cooperation that align national and regional goals, ensure sustainable development, and foster stronger partnerships across borders.
- **Public awareness and stakeholder engagement:** Limited public awareness of cross-border cooperation programmes and opportunities affects participation and support, particularly in local communities. Solutions include launching public awareness campaigns, engaging



communities in project planning, and involving local businesses and NGOs to increase visibility and participation in cross-border initiatives.

### Are there things you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? Why?

Some of the respondents shared some ideas for projects within the Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine Programme that they were unable to implement. The main barriers preventing stakeholders from implementing their desired projects under Interreg are related to **funding limitations, bureaucratic hurdles, legal and regulatory discrepancies, political instability, and lack of sufficient infrastructure**. These obstacles hinder the successful launch of a variety of cross-border initiatives, from law enforcement and healthcare to infrastructure and environmental protection. The following table presents an overview of these concepts.

Topic	Ideas	Barriers
<b>Cross-border police training facilities</b>	Establishing a cross-border training facility for police forces	Feasibility studies and technical project plans require significant upfront investment, but Interreg funding often doesn't cover these early-stage costs
<b>Advanced joint border surveillance systems</b>	Implementing advanced joint border surveillance systems and rapid-response units	Funding limitations and differing national priorities, along with legal restrictions on sharing sensitive intelligence, hinder the implementation of such projects
<b>Infrastructure projects in water management</b>	Large-scale infrastructure projects in water management, including flood prevention and ecological improvements	Limited funding from Interreg and insufficient financial resources to support the scale of such initiatives
<b>Unified cross-border healthcare systems</b>	Creating a seamless healthcare system for residents to access medical services across borders without bureaucratic hurdles	Divergent healthcare systems, complex legal agreements, and administrative burdens prevent the creation of a unified system
<b>Simplified mobility for workers and students</b>	Promoting easier mobility for workers, students, and researchers across borders, similar to the EU's freedom of movement	Visa restrictions, recognition of qualifications, and economic disparities between countries hinder free movement
<b>Ai-based projects in public administration</b>	Implementing AI-based projects in public administration and local services	Differences in data governance and privacy regulations across borders limit the feasibility of such initiatives
<b>Projects with photovoltaic panels</b>	Developing photovoltaic panel projects	Challenges related to funding and project size limitations
<b>Cross-border crisis response centres</b>	Establishing joint crisis response centres across borders	Legal and financial constraints make such initiatives challenging to implement
<b>Small-scale initiatives</b>	Implementing small grassroots-level projects without extensive documentation	Current administrative requirements favor larger projects and limit participation from smaller organizations
<b>Long-term multi-phase projects</b>	Implementing large-scale, long-term infrastructure projects	Short-term funding cycles of Interreg do not accommodate multi-phase projects that require sustained funding

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

The suggestions reflect a **desire for capacity building, stakeholder engagement, flexibility and thematic concentration** on various topics in the future Programme, with a focus on improving infrastructure, enhancing cross-border collaboration, and ensuring that projects contribute to long-term benefits for all countries.

<p><b>1. Cross-border training and professional development</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishment of cross-border training centres and academies for law enforcement, crisis response, cybercrime, and environmental crime, using advanced technologies like virtual reality and AI.</li> <li>• Development of cross-border educational hubs and research institutes addressing regional challenges, along with expanded student and teacher mobility programs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1. Integrated transport solutions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of multimodal transport systems connecting railways and roads across borders to promote efficient movement of people and goods.</li> <li>• Development of smart transport hubs and green transport corridors (with eco-friendly vehicles and energy-efficient systems).</li> </ul>
<p><b>1. Cross-border digitalization</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishment of a cross-border digital ecosystem linking smart cities with unified digital identities for residents to access services across borders.</li> <li>• Implementation of 5G connectivity and cross-border digital innovation hubs to support technology and e-health solutions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1. Environmental and climate change initiatives, disaster respons</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of "Green Corridors" for reforestation, renewable energy projects, and eco-tourism.</li> <li>• Development of a centralized digital hub for cross-border environmental protection collaboration and tools for monitoring climate change impacts.</li> <li>• Establishment of a cross-border crisis management system, including a centralized crisis management centre, shared emergency resources, and early warning systems for natural disasters.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1. Stakeholder engagement</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing private SMEs to participate as direct partners or beneficiaries, enabling greater business involvement in cross-border projects.</li> <li>• Emphasis on people-to-people projects, including international festivals, cultural exchanges, and community-driven initiatives to strengthen cross-border ties.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1. Flexible and sustainable funding mechanism, improved platform</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A better platform for data management and reporting, with easier ways to keep and view project data.</li> <li>• A more user-friendly platform for reports and simplified application and reporting processes.</li> <li>• Introduction of rolling multi-phase projects with long-term funding, micro-grants for small-scale initiatives, and differentiated co-financing rates for under-resourced regions.</li> </ul>

## Is there any element of the Interreg that must be maintained?

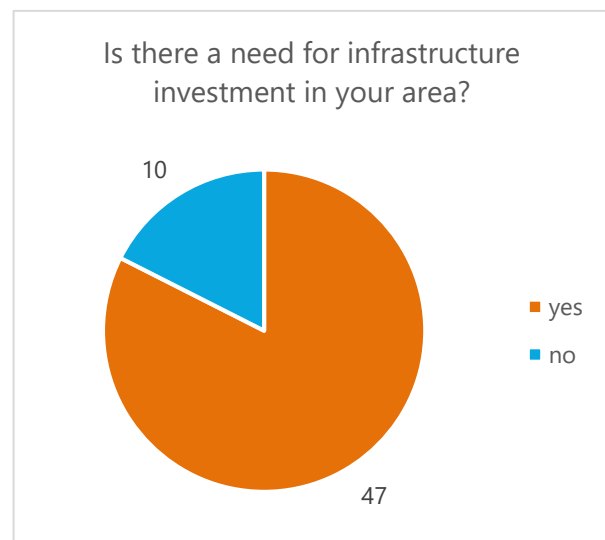
The stakeholders propose that several key aspects of the Programme should remain unchanged:

- **Commitment to cross-border cooperation:** The focus on promoting regional development, fostering cooperation between neighbouring countries, and addressing shared challenges like health care, tourism, environmental protection, and crime prevention should continue.

- **Community engagement and local partnerships:** The emphasis on grassroots involvement, including multilevel partnerships between local authorities, NGOs, and other community organizations, should be preserved. This community-driven approach ensures that projects are relevant, sustainable, and impactful.
- **Thematic focus:** The commitment to environmental protection, climate adaptation, and sustainable development should remain a core principle of the Programme. Initiatives addressing biodiversity conservation and promoting green infrastructure are also crucial. Similarly, projects that preserve and promote shared cultural and historical heritage, as these initiatives contribute to regional identity and cooperation.
- **Thematic flexibility:** Interreg’s adaptability in addressing evolving needs, such as new environmental, educational, or health priorities, should remain a hallmark of the Programme. The focus on economic development, infrastructure, and public health must continue, along with the ability to address emerging issues.
- **Capacity building and training:** Ongoing support for training and capacity building ensures that all project partners can effectively implement and manage their initiatives.
- **Co-financing and support for local development:** The co-financing structure and support for local development, especially in border regions, should continue, as it helps foster economic growth and social cohesion.
- **Organizational structure:** The Programme's institutional support, including the assistance provided by the Joint Technical Secretariat and other authorities, should remain a key feature, as it helps build trust and facilitates the smooth implementation of projects.

### Is there a need for some infrastructure projects?

The majority of respondents (over 80%) indicated that **investment in infrastructure is necessary** in their region, with only a small minority expressing opposition to this view. Respondents' specific recommendations underscore the necessity for integrated, sustainable, and accessible infrastructure to support cross-border cooperation, improve security, foster economic development, and promote environmental sustainability. The development of shared facilities, digital infrastructure, and transportation networks would significantly enhance the region's ability to address common challenges and promote regional integration.



#### Cross-border transportation infrastructure:

- Expansion of road networks, including the construction or modernization of cross-border roads and highways to improve accessibility, reduce congestion, and shorten travel times.
- Development of cross-border railway links for passengers and freight, to facilitate easier and more sustainable transport across borders.

- Creation of multimodal transport hubs that integrate road, rail, and air transport, streamlining the movement of goods and people across borders.
- Establishment of bicycle lanes and pedestrian pathways to promote eco-friendly mobility across borders.
- More investment in electric vehicle infrastructure, such as charging stations, to promote sustainable transportation.

#### **Cultural and historical infrastructure:**

- Renovation and preservation of cultural heritage sites, with a focus on integrating modern amenities while maintaining the historical value of the structures.
- Development of cultural centres and shared visitor spaces at border points to foster cultural exchange and tourism.

#### **Police and security infrastructure:**

- Construction of cross-border training facilities for police forces, which would allow for joint training exercises and improve cross-border policing and security coordination.
- Investment in green and sustainable renovations of police facilities to improve working conditions and contribute to environmental sustainability.

#### **Environmental and water management infrastructure:**

- Development of cross-border water management systems to improve flood prevention, water quality, and ecological conservation, particularly for shared river basins like the Tisza/Tisa River.
- Joint waste management and environmental conservation projects to address pollution and promote sustainability in the region.
- Implementation of green infrastructure initiatives, including green corridors and renewable energy projects (solar, wind, hydropower).

#### **Healthcare infrastructure:**

- Establishment of cross-border healthcare facilities, including hospitals and mobile clinics, to serve communities near borders and ensure access to medical services.
- Investment in telemedicine infrastructure to allow cross-border consultations and enhance healthcare delivery in underserved regions.

#### **Educational and research infrastructure:**

- Creation of cross-border education centres and research institutes focusing on regional challenges, such as climate change, renewable energy, and environmental protection.
- Facilitation of student mobility and vocational training through improved infrastructure, including transport and accommodation, to support cross-border educational initiatives.

#### **Crisis and emergency response infrastructure:**

- Construction of cross-border crisis response centres to handle natural disasters, pandemics, and other emergencies. These centres would improve regional preparedness and response.
- Shared resources, such as disaster management stations and emergency response units, would enhance collaboration during crisis situations.

### Tourism infrastructure:

- Development of cross-border tourism routes, including cycling paths and hiking trails, supported by new or improved visitor centres and accommodations to enhance tourism and regional integration.
- Preservation and enhancement of shared cultural and natural heritage sites to promote eco-tourism and cultural tourism in the region.

### Energy infrastructure:

- Development of cross-border energy grids to enable the efficient distribution of renewable energy across the region, including the establishment of solar, wind, and hydroelectric power projects.
- Energy storage systems and smart grids to ensure a stable energy supply, particularly in areas with fluctuating renewable energy production.

### What should be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in other country?

To facilitate collaboration with counterparts in another country, respondents emphasize the importance of **enhanced communication**, the establishment of joint initiatives, regular exchanges, mutual respect, and a common understanding of programme and project objectives. Key factors include improved communication tools such as **multilingual platforms** for real-time interaction and collaboration, which would help **overcome language barriers** and foster more efficient cooperation. The idea of creating a shared online collaboration portal, where resources can be accessed in national languages, would further streamline the process and make cross-border cooperation more efficient.

Regular virtual **meetings** and workshops are seen as essential for maintaining alignment, building trust, and sharing new ideas. Respondents also note the need for more face-to-face meetings, which help foster stronger relationships and improve understanding between counterparts.

**Capacity-building initiatives** such as joint training programs focused on project management, funding applications, and compliance are highlighted as critical for developing skills and enhancing cross-border collaboration. Another important recommendation is the creation of dedicated platforms for sharing experiences and best practices, with the possibility of organizing specific sessions for project development in sectors such as water management.

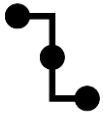
Additionally, there is a strong call for **dedicated cross-border coordination bodies** like the Joint Secretariat and other officers, to streamline cooperation and ensure issues are addressed in real time. Access to funding, especially through **simplified co-financing models and clearer guidelines for small-scale projects**, is also seen as a crucial facilitator for collaborative efforts.

Finally, the respondents stress the value of fostering good communication, to ensure successful collaboration across borders.

### What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?

The dream projects proposed focus on establishing a comprehensive network of collaboration, encompassing modern infrastructure, enhanced security measures, sustainability initiatives, and cross-border cultural and educational exchange. These projects seek to address shared regional

challenges while fostering long-term prosperity and cooperation across Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Ukraine.



**Infrastructure development and connectivity:** A key focus of many respondents is the development of cross-border transportation systems. This includes proposals for enhanced road networks, more border crossings, electric mini-busses, and better communication infrastructure. Additionally, there is a strong emphasis on improving transportation for people and goods through integrated multimodal transport networks, including rail and cycling paths, as well as creating green infrastructure like electric vehicle charging stations.



**Security and law enforcement:** One of the central proposals is the creation of a regional cross-border police training and coordination centre. This facility would serve as a hub for joint training, operational coordination, and developing best practices for police forces across the region, focused on issues such as cybercrime, human trafficking, and cross-border terrorism. It would incorporate modern training methods, including virtual simulations, and real-time intelligence sharing.



**Environmental protection and sustainability:** Several respondents suggest projects focused on sustainability, including cross-border green corridors for wildlife conservation, flood protection, and promoting eco-tourism. Other proposed joint water management systems for shared river basins, as well as green energy grids and renewable energy projects such as solar and wind farms that cross national borders.



**Healthcare and social services:** Some respondents highlight the creation of a cross-border healthcare network, which would enhance access to medical services particularly in rural and underserved areas. This would include shared medical facilities, telemedicine infrastructure, and cross-border emergency response systems. There is also an emphasis on improving accessibility for people with disabilities, fostering inclusiveness in cross-border projects



**Cultural and educational exchange:** Proposals also include the development of cross-border cultural centres, as well as educational and research facilities that foster collaboration in areas such as environmental science, digital innovation, and public health. Cultural exchange programs and joint university collaborations are seen as essential for strengthening cross-border ties and building mutual understanding.

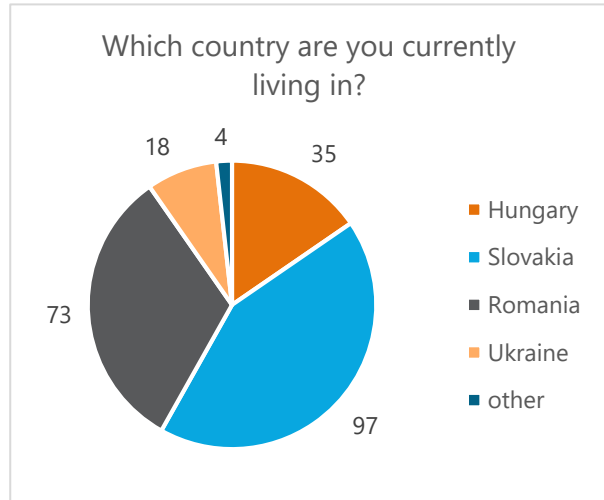
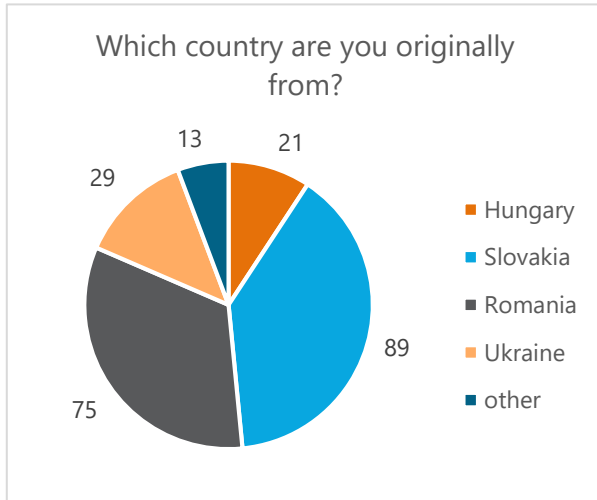


**Economic and social development:** Other suggested projects focus on economic development, including support for small and medium enterprises, tourism infrastructure, and sustainable business practices., and supporting local businesses.

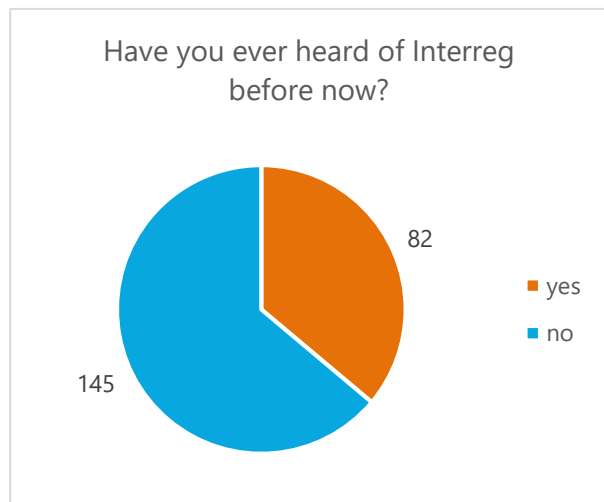
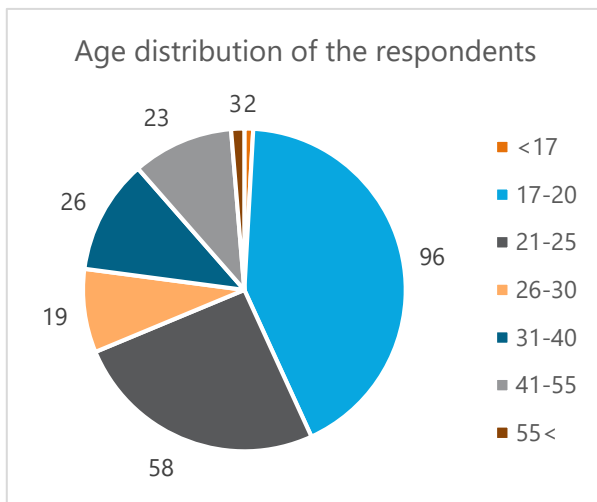
## 5.2.2 Citizen survey

### About respondents

A total of **227 citizens** completed the questionnaire. Slovakia has the highest number of respondents both in terms of origin and current residence, with **a significant portion born and living in Slovakia and Romania**. Conversely, Hungary and Ukraine are underrepresented in both categories.



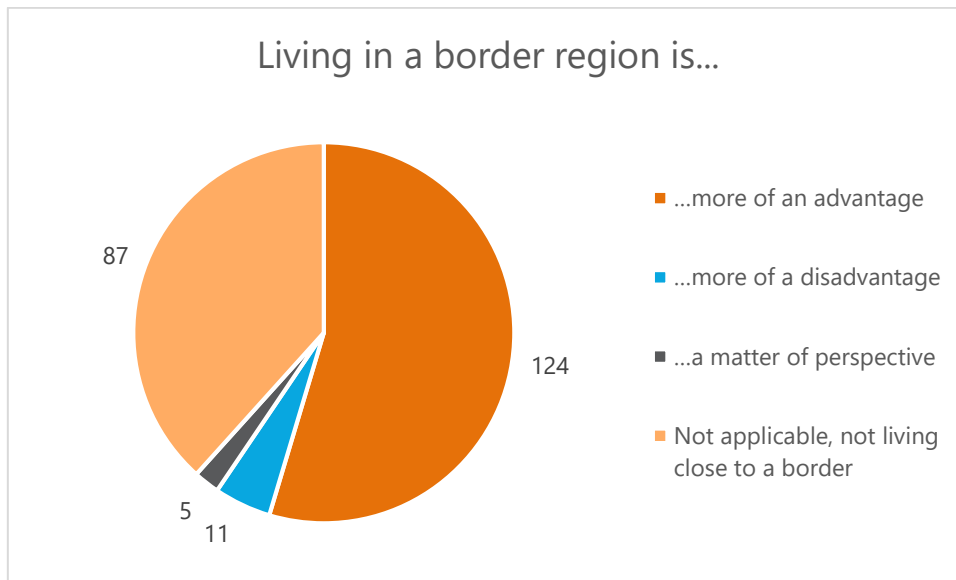
The data indicates that **younger age groups are overrepresented** in the survey sample, with a notable proportion of respondents falling within the younger age brackets. The observed overrepresentation of younger age groups in the survey sample is largely attributable to the methodology and outreach approach employed during the public consultation. The involvement of IVY (Interreg Volunteer Youth) volunteers, who represent youth and are instrumental in our efforts to engage younger generations, naturally directed a significant portion of the consultation activities towards this demographic. This focus aligns with the Programme's objective to actively include and amplify the voices of youth in shaping the future of cross-border cooperation. While this introduces a certain bias, it is reflective of a deliberate strategy to ensure robust youth participation in the consultation process. A mere 36% of respondents indicated **prior awareness of the Interreg programme**; the vast majority have never heard of it.



### Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

**The majority of respondents see living next to a border as an opportunity (54.7%)**, indicating that they perceive the proximity to neighbouring countries as beneficial. A small portion sees it as a disadvantage (4.8%), while others view it as a matter of perspective (2.2%). Additionally, there is a significant group (38.3%) for whom the question is not applicable because they do not live close

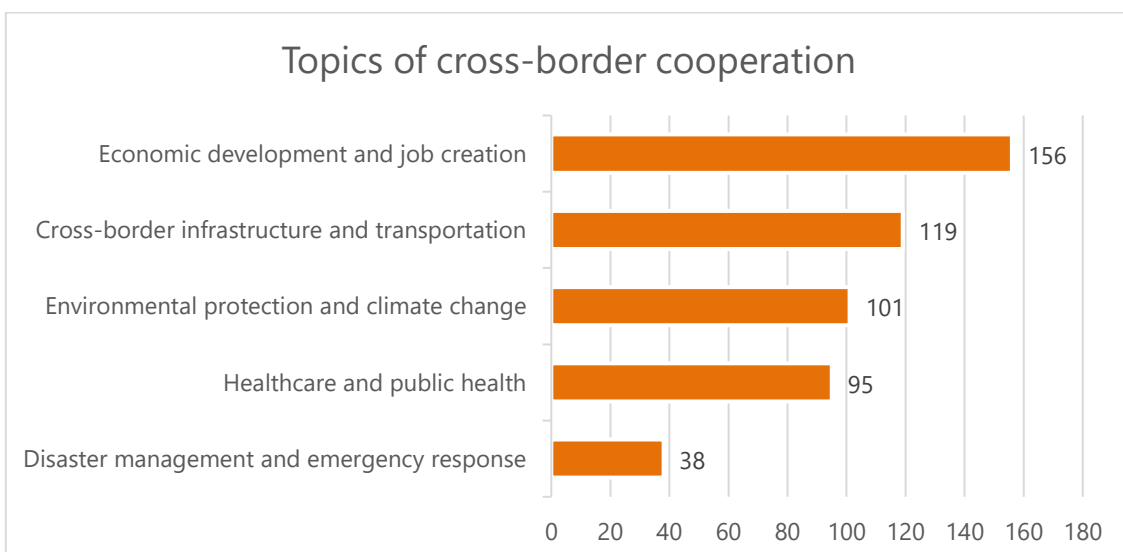
to a border. However, it is important to note that although they do not personally feel that they live close to a border, their location is considered a cross-border area by the programme and the EU.



For those who view a location close to the border as advantageous, the responses emphasize the benefits of easier travel, cultural exchange, job opportunities and the capacity to engage with neighbouring countries for shopping, work and tourism. Many respondents also mentioned the benefits of living near the border for economic reasons, such as access to cheaper goods and lower housing prices. On the other hand, a few responses highlighted disadvantages, particularly when living near unstable regions such as Ukraine, where geopolitical tensions or wars create challenges. Some respondents also mentioned the need to learn additional languages to communicate across borders and the occasional misunderstanding with neighbouring cultures.

### Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area?

The most important topic for cross-border cooperation in the region is **economic development and job creation** (e.g. support for small and medium enterprises, innovation, cross-border trade), followed by cross-border infrastructure and transportation (e.g. road and rail development, logistics, improving connectivity).





Other significant areas include environmental protection and climate change (e.g. water management, pollution control, renewable energy projects) as well as healthcare and public health (e.g. improving access to healthcare services, disease prevention, medical research collaboration). The least mentioned but still important topic is disaster management and emergency response (e.g. flood prevention, forest fire management, cross-border coordination during crises), which shows a lower priority in comparison to the others.

### Have you come across any Interreg project that was beneficial in your area?

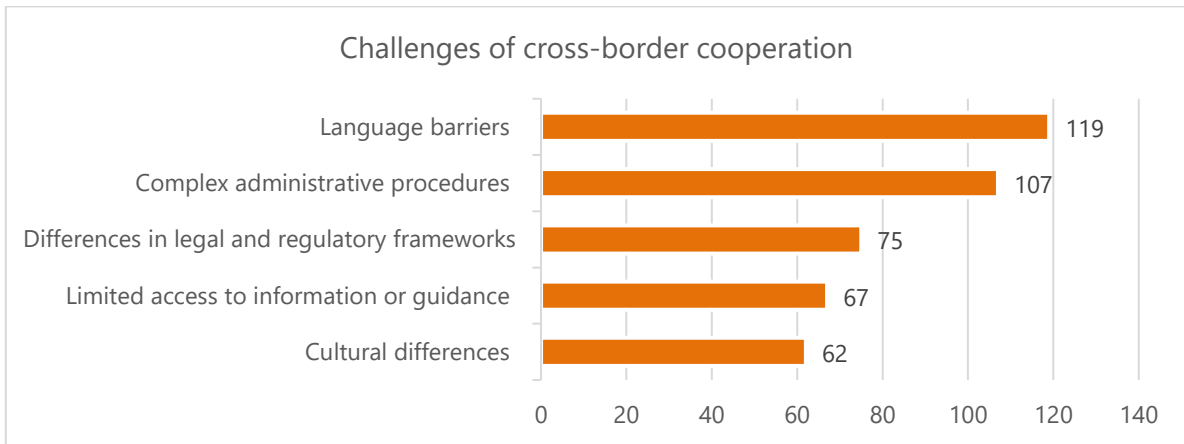
**16.7%** of the respondents indicated that they **were aware of at least one successful Interreg project**. Some of them provided the precise name of the project in question, which was part of the Interreg NEXT Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine Programme:

- Restore your heritage: Restore your common history and cultural heritage (including the renovation of Urban's Tower in Kosice),
- HICART: Valorization of the historical and cultural heritage through the development and promotion of the Carpathian Cultural Route.
- Smart Museum: Smart Museum as a way to present cultural heritage,
- CRIMIGE: Regional Center for Training and Monitoring of the Environmental Impact of Electrical Installations,
- NET4SENERGY: Cross-border Network of Energy Sustainable Universities,
- NESICA: New Energy Solutions in Carpathian area,
- GeoSES: Extension of the operational "Space Emergency System" towards monitoring of dangerous natural and man-made geo-processes in the HU-SK-RO-UA cross-border region,

In addition, other respondents referenced projects from other EU-cofinanced programmes, including Interreg Europe, Interreg SEE, and Interreg HUSK.

### What challenges do you face in cooperating with organizations and citizens from other countries using EU funds?

**The most common challenge** encountered in cross-border cooperation is the existence of **language barriers** (difficulty in communication due to different languages), followed by **too complex administrative procedures** (e.g. lengthy application processes, bureaucracy). Other notable challenges include differences in legal and regulatory frameworks (varying national laws and requirements), limited access to information or guidance (lack of knowledge about available funding or programmes), and cultural differences (differences in work practices or approaches to cooperation). This indicates that communication issues, administrative complexity, and legal disparities are the main hurdles when cooperating across borders with EU funding.



Respondents highlighted that the Covid19 pandemic forced them to move a significant number of activities online; then the war that started in 2022 made travel to and from Ukraine more difficult.

### What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?

The real dream cooperation projects shared by respondents span various areas, including economic development, environmental sustainability, cultural exchange, and social inclusion, showcasing the diverse visions for strengthening ties and creating positive change across neighbouring countries.



**Economic development and job creation:** Many respondents dream of cooperation projects focused on economic growth and job creation. They emphasize the importance of creating more job opportunities, especially for young people, and supporting small enterprises. Some suggested empowering the youth through technological and future-oriented training, while others proposed fostering entrepreneurship and innovation across borders to boost the region's economy.



**Environmental protection and sustainability:** There is a strong desire for environmental cooperation, with many ideas centred on sustainable practices. Respondents suggested projects that involve tree planting, renewable energy initiatives, and environmental conservation, such as creating green corridors for eco-tourism. Addressing climate change, improving water management, and promoting biodiversity were also seen as key areas for cross-border collaboration.



**Infrastructure and transportation:** Improving infrastructure is another high-priority area. Citizens highlighted the need for better goods transport and logistics across borders, with many advocating for the development or enhancement of transportation infrastructure such as roads and railways. Creating more border-crossing points and developing sustainable cities were also mentioned as critical for facilitating smoother movement and trade between adjacent countries.



**Cultural exchange and education:** Cultural exchange and education were frequently mentioned as essential components of cooperation. Ideas ranged from creating educational programs that promote healthy living to cross-border cultural sharing, including music festivals and art exhibitions. Many respondents expressed a desire for projects that support language learning and cultural exchange, as well as STEM education to improve future opportunities for the younger generation.



**Social inclusion and community support:** Social inclusion and support for vulnerable communities were also seen as crucial for cross-border cooperation. There were suggestions for initiatives that would support marginalized groups, such as Romani people, the elderly, and refugees. Respondents also mentioned youth development projects and ways to improve social integration across borders, with a focus on reducing cultural barriers and improving access to essential services for those in need.



**Health and public wellbeing:** Respondents also proposed healthcare access improvements, both in terms of medical services and health awareness. Some suggested projects focusing on environmental health, while others emphasized the need for cross-border cooperation during health crises, ensuring the swift and efficient delivery of healthcare services in emergency situations.



**Technology and innovation:** Technology and innovation were frequent themes, with many respondents suggesting projects that focus on digital and smart systems. Ideas ranged from intelligent communication systems and e-learning platforms to the use of technology in agriculture and sustainable production. Cooperation in the development of new technologies was seen as a way to boost both the region's economy and its global competitiveness.



**Tourism and historical preservation:** Tourism and the preservation of cultural heritage were also popular areas for cooperation. Respondents proposed creating and promoting cross-border tourist routes, as well as working on the restoration of cultural monuments and historical sites. There were also ideas to improve the visibility of local history and cultural landmarks, making the region more attractive to tourists and fostering a deeper appreciation of its shared heritage.

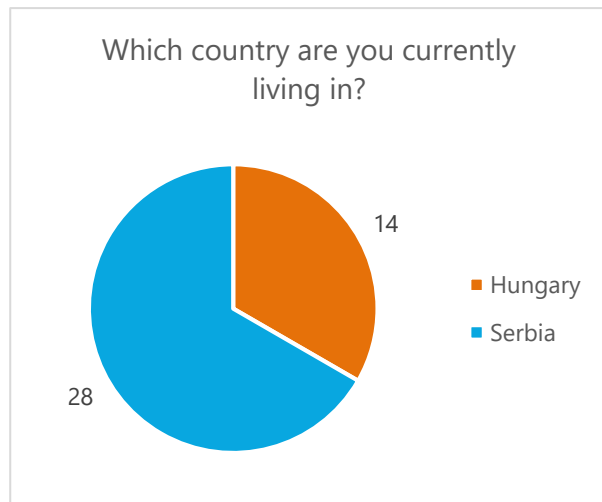
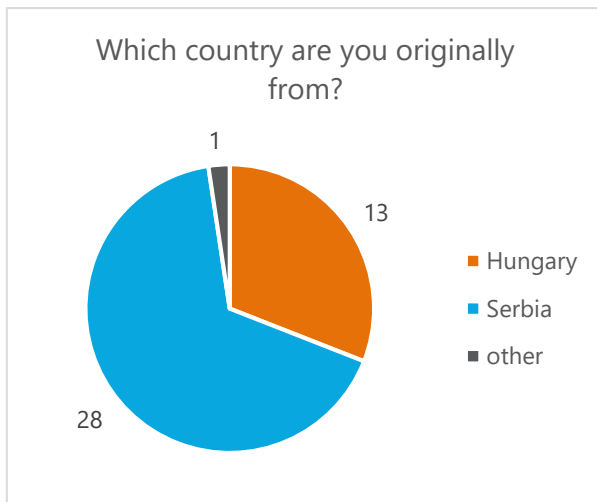
In addition, several respondents suggested projects beyond the typical categories, including the expansion of the Schengen area, promoting carbon neutrality, and improving governance across borders by reducing bureaucratic barriers. Some also expressed a desire to improve cross-border cooperation for better communication and coordination in addressing regional challenges.

## 5.3 Key findings regarding the Interreg IPA HUSRB Programme

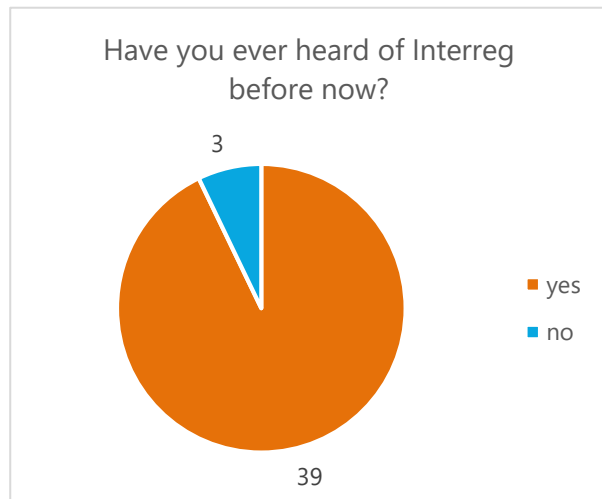
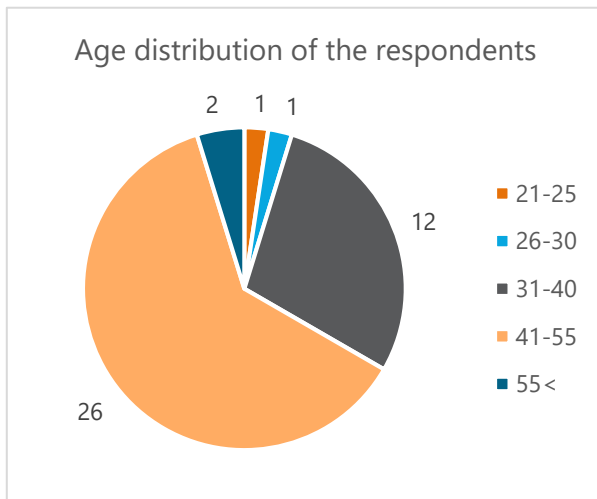
### 5.3.1 Citizen survey

#### About respondents

A total of **42 citizens** completed the questionnaire. Of these, two-thirds were from Serbia, with the remaining one-third hailing from Hungary.



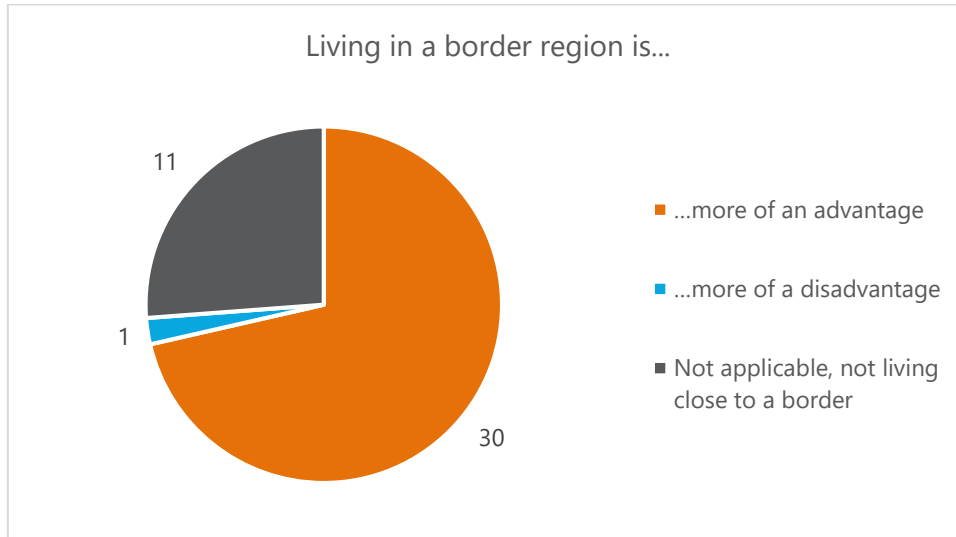
The majority of respondents fall within the **middle-aged** demographic group and possess **prior awareness** of the Interreg programme.



#### Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

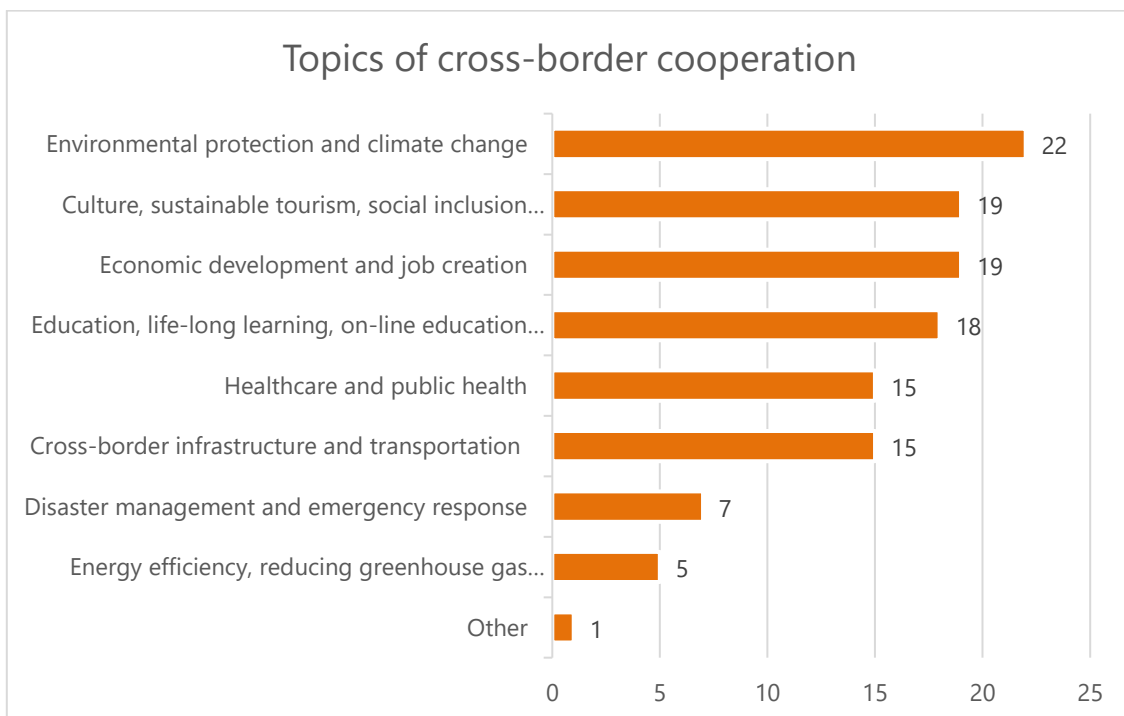
**Living close to a border is largely seen as an opportunity (71.4%)**, offering unique personal and professional benefits. According to respondents, it makes it easier to connect with neighbouring countries, promote cultural exchange, learn from different legal systems and adopt innovative ideas. Respondents also highlighted opportunities for cooperation in areas such as business, education,

tourism and trade, as well as access to different cultures, languages and traditions. Cross-border interactions make it easier to share knowledge, develop partnerships and achieve common goals. People also value improved access to goods, services and new experiences. While some challenges were identified (28.6%), such as regional disparities and infrastructure gaps, **the overall perception is positive**, focusing on the benefits of living in a culturally rich and interconnected environment.



### Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area?

**Environmental protection and climate change** is identified as the top priority, indicating a strong recognition of its critical importance across regions. **Culture, sustainable tourism, social inclusion, and social innovation**, along with **economic development and job creation**, are also highlighted as key areas, emphasizing the need for cooperation to enhance regional growth and societal well-being.



Education, lifelong learning, and training is another significant focus, showing the importance of developing skills and facilitating knowledge exchange. Healthcare and public health and cross-border infrastructure and transportation are considered equally important, reflecting the need for improved connectivity and access to essential services.

While disaster management and emergency response and energy efficiency, including the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, receive less emphasis, they still represent areas where cooperation could address specific regional challenges. Other topics are mentioned by very few respondents, suggesting a strong consensus on the main priorities for cross-border collaboration. This distribution underscores a focus on addressing shared challenges and fostering regional development through targeted efforts.

### Have you come across any Interreg project that was beneficial in your area?

**The majority of the respondents** (37) stated that they **were familiar with at least one successful Interreg project**. Among them, several identified the specific project by name, noting that it had been carried out under the Interreg Hungary-Serbia Programme – many of them focused on environmental issues:

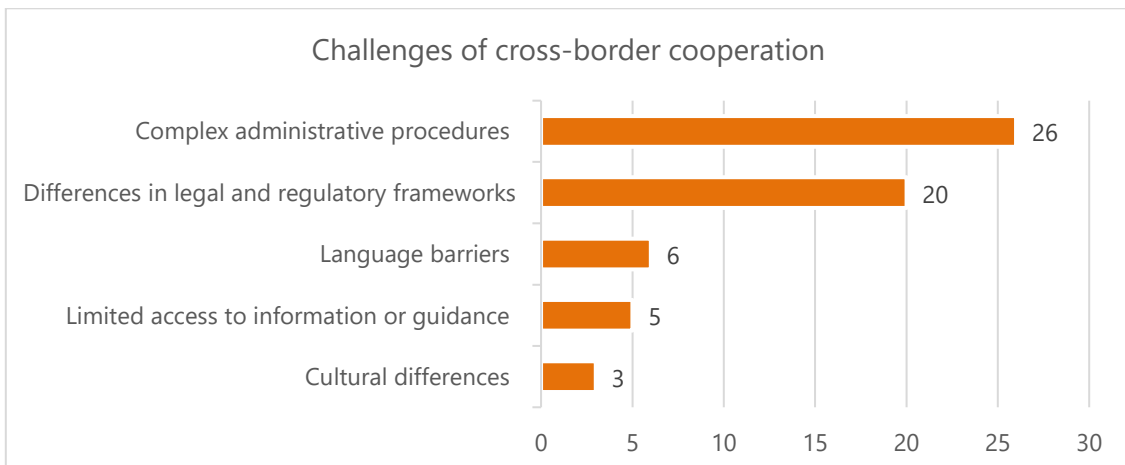
- Dream Railway: Elaboration of Technical Documentation of Subotica-Baja Railway Line,
- ITC MInd: Innovation and Technology Center for Metal Industry,
- ScholarSME: Increasing the Economic Competitiveness and Innovative Development of SMEs through Young People's Scholarships in the Mórahalom-Zrenjanin Program,
- FERTILEAVES: Innovative green foliar treatment solutions supported by advanced analytics for cross-border ecological agriculture,
- PLANTSVITA: Development of soil type adapted microbiological products promoting ecological pest management,
- BIOXEN: Development of xenobiotic-degrading bioaugmentation products,
- WATERFRIEND: Cross-border network for knowledge transfer and innovative development in wastewater treatment,
- SPARrow: Developing Sustainable Solutions for the Restoration of Local Ecosystems Through Pioneer Use of Discharged Thermal Waters,
- NAMap: Strategic Noise and Air mapping related to border crossings and related infrastructure,
- ARCCHAD: Alternative Responses to Climate Change Adaptation for Small-Scale Producers Focusing on Complex Economic, Environmental and Social Approach Through the Entire Value Chain,
- TWOZOSS: Two European ZOO's enhancing education and environmental protection (Palić and Szeged),
- BEE-Student: Building Entrepreneurial Ecosystem – Student entrepreneurship beyond borders,
- FeedingFuture: Empowering Food Science Professionals through Lifelong Learning for Bridging Borders,
- FPFSS: Fair play in the fields of sport and society,

- Baja-Sombor TOURISM4ALL: Development of barrier-free tourism in the Baja-Zombor cross-border area,
- 2B: Be Aware of the Problem – Be Part of the Solution!
- FAB: Renovation of an artist colony,
- CET: Car camping by Lake Backa Topola,
- LT-LV-LF: Strengthening local products and local producers,
- Border crossing points: Kikinda-Nakovo, Ásotthalom-Bački Vinogradi.

In addition, other respondents referenced projects from other EU-cofinanced programmes, including Interreg Danube, Interreg Romania-Serbia, Interreg Romania-Hungary and Interreg Croatia-Serbia.

### In case you have had experience with Interreg projects, what challenges did you face during the implementation?

The results of the survey indicate that **the most significant challenge** faced during the implementation of Interreg projects is **complex administrative procedures**, which was selected by the highest number of respondents. The second most significant challenge is the existence of **differences in legal and regulatory frameworks**, which makes it difficult to navigate diverse systems across borders. Language barriers and limited access to information or guidance were also identified as additional hurdles, though to a lesser extent. Finally, cultural differences were identified by the fewest respondents, suggesting that they are less of a challenge compared to administrative and legal complexities. These results emphasise the need for streamlined processes and clearer guidance to support effective project implementation.



Respondents also mentioned that social and health projects have had to deal with the global pandemic, which has led to tighter restrictions in border areas. In Serbia, there is no support for co-financing and advance payment for project implementation, civil society organisations are discouraged from applying, and support is selective.

### What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?

Responses reflect **a strong desire for** projects that not only address practical needs, such as **infrastructure and healthcare**, but also **foster cultural exchange, innovation, and**

**sustainability**, while promoting long-term collaboration across borders. The dream projects can be categorized into the following main themes:



**Cultural and cross-border exchange:** Many respondents envision projects focused on fostering cultural interaction and enhancing cross-border relations, such as cultural exchange programs along the Danube, preserving shared cultural heritage, and developing cultural management initiatives.



**Infrastructure and mobility:** A significant number of suggestions highlight the importance of developing cross-border infrastructure, such as railway and bus lines, bicycle paths, and faster, more efficient border-crossing systems.



**Environmental sustainability:** Numerous citizens expressed interest in projects addressing ecological issues, including water management, forest restoration, afforestation, urban greening, pollution prevention, and innovative solutions for climate change adaptation.



**Economic development and innovation:** Respondents emphasized the need for projects supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), promoting social innovation, and leveraging regional tourism potential to enhance local economies.



**Healthcare and social well-being:** Suggestions include establishing modern hospitals, addressing mental health challenges, and creating healthcare cooperation mechanisms to improve access to medical services across borders.



**Education and skills development:** Several dream projects involve opportunities for cross-border education and training, such as scholarships, internships, sport academies, and long-term study visits for researchers.



**Social inclusion and equality:** Some respondents focused on projects that address social challenges, including women's and children's rights, aging society issues, and inclusive para-sports initiatives.



**General cooperation and governance:** Suggestions also included projects aiming to streamline cross-border cooperation, synchronize legal frameworks, and enhance partnerships to deliver tangible and lasting regional benefits.



## REFERENCES

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