



C/2024/1038

9.2.2024

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Boosting lasting and effective cross-border cooperation with our neighbours**

(C/2024/1038)

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**I. GENERAL REMARKS**

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

1. stresses that cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries, whether at land or sea borders, is a key part of EU policy; it helps meet the cohesion, neighbourhood and enlargement objectives in a cross-cutting way;
2. points out that EU cooperation programmes with neighbouring regions, financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument — Global Europe and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), cover 184 regions, 33 countries and 260 million inhabitants<sup>(1)</sup>;
3. notes, however, that, as shown in the European Court of Auditors' special report<sup>(2)</sup>, cooperation programmes have fallen behind schedule due to successive crises such as COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine; these crises have more severely affected EU border regions and areas bordering Ukraine, Russia and Belarus respectively;
4. points out, furthermore, that cooperation between neighbouring countries without the EU being involved is still lacking;
5. points out that the emergency situation that is seriously affecting the regions of the Atlantic route and the Mediterranean Sea has largely been generated by the instability, the increase in armed conflicts, the political tension and the serious humanitarian crisis that Mediterranean countries have been suffering;

**Cross-border cooperation at the heart of the EU's political, economic and societal challenges**

6. would like to emphasise, in light of these observations, that cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries contributes to sustainable development by improving living standards and reducing welfare gaps on both sides of the border while enabling the relevant countries to address shared challenges together; it also helps promote mutual understanding, reconciliation and rebuilding where conflicts arise;
7. stresses that the Interreg programmes, which have been running for 35 years, and the numerous cooperation programmes implemented at the EU's borders<sup>(3)</sup>, have significantly increased cooperation between cross-border communities and, above all, have helped create mutual trust, which is essential for living together and is a catalyst for democracy and peace;
8. firmly believes that local and regional authorities (LRAs) play a key role in cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries through knowledge of the geographical and social situation, opportunities, constraints and shared challenges; calls on the Member States to provide them with the tools and resources they need to foster ambitious cross-border cooperation;

<sup>(1)</sup> Inforegio — Interreg NEXT programmes ([https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/policy/cooperation/european-territorial/next\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/cooperation/european-territorial/next_en)).

<sup>(2)</sup> Special report: Cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries (<https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/cross-border-27-2022/en/index.html>).

<sup>(3)</sup> Phare CBC and Credo, Tacis CBC, CARDS, MEDA, LACE, ENPI CBC, ENI CBC, IPA CBC and Interreg Next.

9. argues that cross-border cooperation is an essential step in EU pre-accession processes in that it encourages candidate countries and especially their LRAs to learn about how the EU institutions work, share experiences, build mutual understanding and trust through people-to-people projects and begin the economic convergence process. Emphasises furthermore the role EU regions can play in supporting the neighbouring LRAs with capacity building, sharing of best practices, infrastructure development, and in promoting economic and cultural ties during the pre-accession process;

### **Renewed interest during the Conference on the Future of Europe and a broad range of programmes**

10. draws attention to its 2021 resolution<sup>(4)</sup> stressing the central role of cross-border cooperation and permanent cross-border organisations in achieving sustainable development within the EU and beyond its external borders, as well as the need to put cross-border cooperation back at the top of the EU's political agenda;

11. supports the call for strengthened cross-border cooperation set out in the final report on the Conference on the Future of Europe<sup>(5)</sup> in order to enhance cohesion and resilience in border regions;

12. stresses that Article 174 TFEU stipulates that particular attention should also be paid to cross-border regions; cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries is essential for effectively supporting the people living in these areas;

13. welcomes the fact that territorial cooperation programmes at the EU's external borders have been included in the Interreg regulation for the 2021–2027 programming period (former European Neighbourhood Instrument cross-border cooperation programmes (ENI CBC) programmes, current Interreg VI NEXT programmes), which should also help to simplify the implementation and management of programmes;

14. commends the Commission's decision to suspend cooperation with Russia and Belarus under the ENI CBC programmes following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and to redirect the funds to Ukraine and Moldova. Notes however that this has had negative repercussions for EU regions that previously benefited from these programmes, and calls for the implementation of a mechanism to compensate for the drop in access to funding in these border regions;

15. strongly believes that the Interreg IPA CBC and NEXT (Global Europe) programmes are also essential for developing the expertise of officials in neighbouring LRAs as their countries prepare to join the EU;

16. notes, however, that local and regional players do not know enough about the existing cooperation opportunities and are often unable to navigate the complexity of the various mechanisms provided by the EU;

17. welcomes the fact that the URBACT programme and Interreg Europe are open to Ukraine and Moldova as members and that ESPON was recently opened to candidate countries, including these two countries;

18. applauds the creation of joint cross-border local government councils, such as the ones established between Romania and Moldova, and between Switzerland, Baden-Württemberg and Alsace, which will help develop joint projects of mutual interest and could inspire other areas;

19. emphasises that the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) is a stable tool for stepping up cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation and a suitable legal entity for implementing EU-funded projects while helping to make the integration of border regions more robust and more structured. Other territorial cooperation structures should also be borne in mind, such as the Working Communities, which have proved to be a successful formula for advancing cross-border cooperation;

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(4) RESOL-VII/014: Resolution of the European Committee of the Regions on a vision for Europe: The Future of Cross-border Cooperation, adopted at the 145th CoR plenary session, held on 1 July 2021 (OJ C 440, 29.10.2021, p. 6).

(5) <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20220509RES29121/20220509RES29121.pdf>, proposal number 12.

20. recognises, however, that other forms of multilevel and cross-border governance such as Euroregions, macro-regions, bilateral agreements such as the Treaty of Aachen on Franco-German Cooperation and Integration and the Quirinal Treaty between France and Italy, agreements based on the Council of Europe's Madrid Outline Convention and others are essential for improving the quality of life of people living in cross-border areas and could provide appropriate temporary solutions with a view to setting up EGTCs;

## II. OBSTACLES TO CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION WITH NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

21. stresses the importance of overcoming cross-border obstacles, as already pointed out in its opinions on 'People-to-people and small-scale projects in cross-border cooperation programmes' <sup>(6)</sup> and 'Cross-Border Public Services in Europe' <sup>(7)</sup> and in its resolution on a vision for Europe: the Future of Cross-border Cooperation <sup>(8)</sup>;

22. highlights lack of trust as a major obstacle to cross-border cooperation, hence the importance of European territorial cooperation programmes in boosting border regions' knowledge of each other, improving inter-state relations and fostering more resilient, stable and integrated societies;

23. recognises that there are disparities, asymmetries and imbalances between neighbouring countries, in particular in border regions, hampering cooperation due to geographical, economic, administrative and fiscal differences;

24. notes in particular that LRAs in neighbouring countries are often unable to join EGTCs because national regulations prevent them from doing so; encourages the EU's neighbouring countries to adopt legislation allowing LRAs and public bodies to join these mechanisms;

25. welcomes efforts to identify, map, analyse and overcome these obstacles to cooperation, in particular where they are of a legal, linguistic and administrative nature;

26. points out that many of these obstacles were overcome at the EU's internal borders through the development of the single market, Schengen provisions and so on, but notes that others still persist and are increasing, especially at the external borders;

27. highlights the success of the ongoing *b-solutions* <sup>(9)</sup> initiative, which the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy has been promoting and which the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) has been carrying out since 2018;

28. stresses the importance of networking and benchmarking in eliminating obstacles to cross-border cooperation; networking and benchmarking should enable better use to be made of current (and future) tools, such as EGTCs, the integrated territorial investment (ITI) tool, the community-led local development strategy and any other mechanism to facilitate cooperation; supports the idea of allocating funds to developing a regional approach in rural cross-border areas, through the community-led local development strategy, for non-agricultural rural development. The aim would be to complement actions supported under the Leader approach, and would also provide a key means of addressing the so-called 'geography of discontent';

29. points out that the lack of adequate transport infrastructure and networks, particularly when it comes to maritime and inter-island cross-border cooperation, hampers trade and mobility and complicates cooperation;

30. emphasises the lack of coordination resulting from institutional differences between neighbouring countries; points out that cooperation can often be particularly difficult when competences lie at different levels of government on each side of the border, for example in healthcare and civil protection;

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<sup>(6)</sup> COTER-VI/023, rapporteur: Pavel Branda (CZ/ECR), adopted at the 124th CoR plenary session, held on 12 July 2017 (OJ C 342, 12.10.2017, p. 38).

<sup>(7)</sup> COTER-VII/005, rapporteur: Pavel Branda (CZ/ECR), adopted at the 142nd CoR plenary session, held on 4 February 2021 (OJ C 106, 26.3.2021, p. 12).

<sup>(8)</sup> RESOL-VII/014.

<sup>(9)</sup> <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>.

31. regrets that complex administrative procedures and legal obstacles, reinforced by language barriers and red tape, are slowing down or even obstructing the implementation of cross-border cooperation projects;

32. considers the need for cross-border cooperation at all levels of society to be more crucial than ever, to increase cohesion between people, to find solutions for the necessary climate transition, to counteract negative competition and, in particular, to prevent conflicts;

### III. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **LRAs key to cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries**

33. stresses that, due to the current geopolitical situation, LRAs must be considered key players in European cross-border cooperation with neighbouring and/or candidate countries and calls for them to be given greater administrative and financial support;

34. undertakes to step up cooperation with LRAs in neighbouring countries through the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (Corleap), Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM), the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine and working groups and joint consultative committees with candidate and pre-candidate countries; calls on the EU to also pay particular attention to the countries of West Africa;

35. emphasises the need to keep an eye on the situation at Finland's and Poland's external borders and to maintain strong cooperation between Ireland, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK, even after Brexit;

36. welcomes the increase in the overall budget for IPA III and calls for the overall budget for cross-border territorial cooperation to be increased;

37. calls for further simplification of Interreg projects and stresses that the corresponding funding should be flexible enough to meet the actual needs of cross-border areas in line with a bottom-up approach;

38. calls on the EU to increase the use of clear indicators to measure the impacts of EU policy in its relations with neighbouring countries;

39. emphasises the need to promote synergies and complementarities between cross-border cooperation actions and EU funding programmes under direct, indirect and, in particular, shared management;

40. stresses the urgent need to support LRAs in the Ukraine reconstruction process while continuing to support neighbouring regions and encouraging increased cooperation;

41. thinks that the decentralisation process initiated in Ukraine must continue to be a priority because it will open up new opportunities on the path to EU membership; in this regard, highlights the role played by the Tisza EGTC, the first involving a member from a third country;

42. encourages the EU to adopt appropriate measures to implement the REPowerEU plan and to actively promote cross-border cooperation in order to address shared challenges related to clean energy, climate resilience, pollution reduction and ecosystem protection;

43. suggests that European Union regions bordering the Russian Federation and Belarus, could be identified as special cases requiring greater attention, analysis and political action. Due to their exceptional situation, and the restrictions imposed by border closures, it would be appropriate to design specific, tailored instruments to promote the development of these border regions;

44. draws attention to the tense geopolitical situation in the Black Sea due to the war in Ukraine, relations with Türkiye and the complicated situation on the eastern shore, and calls for continued and enhanced cooperation in this area around the Mediterranean basin;

45. notes that a certain mistrust towards the EU is spreading in the Western Balkans over the issue of accession; stresses that it is essential to counter this trend in order to ensure peace and give the European project a chance in this area, including through large-scale cooperation projects;
46. points out that, since 2015, the Mediterranean basin has been facing a major migration crisis and calls on the regions affected on both sides of the Mediterranean to strengthen their collaboration in an attempt to keep migratory movements under control and foster the development of the areas concerned;
47. emphasises that cross-border cooperation and cross-border life are realities on the island of Ireland and that any obstacles should be removed; highlights the vital role that the PEACE PLUS programme plays in maintaining good neighbourly relations in the region and ensuring its socioeconomic development, as well as in consolidating long-term cooperation between Ireland and the UK after the discontinuation of previous programmes;
48. stresses the need for maritime cross-border cooperation to be better structured, given that many of the EU's neighbouring countries share borders with it in both the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. With regard to the outermost regions of the EU which cooperate in their respective geographical basins, the focus should be on cooperation between civil servants, politicians, businesses and members of the public;
49. is convinced that permanent cross-border organisations could help make cross-border cooperation more efficient and sustainable and calls on the Commission to work on simplifying existing mechanisms;
50. points out that the bilateral relationship between Switzerland and the EU has not been clarified since the collapse of the framework agreement between the two parties, creating obstacles to cross-border cooperation; in this regard, calls on the Commission to keep striving to conclude a new agreement so that the relationship can be clarified as soon as possible;
51. considers that, in order to meet the various social, demographic, economic, environmental and climatic challenges, the Union must step up its efforts to facilitate more effective cooperation between the authorities of border regions in order to remove the remaining cross-border legal and administrative obstacles;
52. emphasises the importance of the concept of cross-border functional areas and suggests working with the relevant Member States and LRAs to consider supporting the implementation of these types of areas in regions that already have proven experience of cross-border cooperation with their neighbours;
53. stresses the importance of ensuring that stakeholders have easy access to information on and training in project engineering to stimulate participation in cross-border cooperation;
54. stresses that regional and local authorities should be involved in a meaningful and inclusive way in the formulation and implementation of measures aimed at removing cross-border obstacles, and that business groups, local civil society actors and community groups should be consulted and kept duly informed of the process;
55. emphasises the role of small project funds and people-to-people projects in establishing ties across national borders;
56. proposes extending the *b-solutions* initiative at the EU's external borders towards neighbouring countries and possibly new candidates, even outside the IPA;
57. points out that regions with legislative powers or autonomous regions have specific competences and responsibilities that therefore allow them to design their own European cross-border cooperation projects within their autonomous competences, while respecting the prerogatives of the Member States in the relevant field. Moreover, it is stressed that shared management remains the most appropriate method of implementation;
58. stresses that, for regions with permanent structural disadvantages such as the outermost regions and many mountain regions, islands and external border areas of the EU, territorial cooperation in general — and cross-border cooperation in particular — is vital for maintaining ties with the EU mainland and with their neighbours.

Brussels, 29 November 2023.

*The President*  
*of the European Committee of the Regions*  
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