

Transnational Interreg programmes and macro-regional strategies – together unlocking benefits for regions and citizens

Working paper

Introduction

In 2024, amid discussions for the 2028+ programming period, it is crucial to reflect on lessons from 2021-2027 and enhance collaboration between EU macro-regional strategies (MRS) and the four transnational Interreg programmes that share their perimeter with an MRS.

Recent years have highlighted the complementary roles of both programmes and strategies, showing the benefits of close cooperation. This working paper consolidates comparable lessons learnt by the four transnational Interreg programmes, emphasising the importance of constructive dialogue. The working paper is developed based on the exchanges of the Managing Authorities and Joint Secretariats in the Network of transnational Interreg programmes supporting the implementation of the MRS.

The aim of this working paper is to facilitate discussions within programmes and with MRS stakeholders, presenting options for advanced collaboration in 2028+.

Transnational Interreg programmes and macro-regional strategies: complementary, with shared ambitions

Transnational Interreg programmes facilitate regional cooperation across member and non-member states, addressing contemporary challenges in a geographical area with shared opportunities and challenges. They operate within a set timeframe under the multiannual financial framework, supporting projects aimed at promoting sustainable regional development and reducing economic and social disparities and environmental threats. Transnational Interreg projects engage multiple types of partners, combine expertise across borders and specialisations and come up with solutions that benefit citizens, communities, companies and public authorities. With a bottom-up approach, the programmes nurture the evolvement of new approaches that may become important parts of regional strategies to overcome future challenges.

Four transnational programmes - Interreg Baltic Sea Region, Interreg Danube Region, Interreg IPA Adriatic and Interreg Alpine Space - directly support macro-regional strategies covering respective geographical areas.

EU macro-regional strategies (MRS) are overarching strategic frameworks initiated by countries and regions and endorsed by the European Council, addressing common challenges across defined geographical areas. Unlike Interreg programmes, MRS do not possess own

funding but rely on various sources at European, national, and regional levels to address identified challenges. MRS are aiming to bring about changes at the policy level, maintaining a cross-sectoral perspective and implementing a variety of actions on the ground. For that, they are pooling resources and bringing together relevant stakeholders. MRS serve as platforms for strategic networking, coordination of efforts and collaboration to address common challenges that know no borders, with action plans continuously updated to adapt to emerging territorial needs.

Interreg programmes and MRS complement and benefit from each other, with the four transnational programmes aligned with the strategies to achieve shared objectives and exploit synergies for the benefit of the covered regions and their inhabitants. To leverage their impact, a strategic collaboration of MRS and Interreg programmes is key.

The programmes have established good practices for efficient support of MRS governance structures and processes that could be continued and built on in 2028+.

Key roles of transnational Interreg programmes and MRS

In line with their respective mandates, MRS and Interreg programmes have assumed increasingly important roles in supporting and benefiting each other, effectively addressing the specific needs and challenges of the area they are covering. They have come to fulfil the following key functions.

Key roles of transnational Interreg programmes in supporting MRS

- Interreg programmes are enablers: Interreg programmes provide EU- funds for MRS governance structures, communication and capacity building of MRS thematic coordinators, making them crucial contributors to MRS implementation and success.
- Interreg programmes are think-tanks for MRS: transnational Interreg programmes contribute to strategic thinking in the region. Through funding projects, arranging dialogues with MRS stakeholders, carrying out studies and organising thematic events, they can facilitate collaboration and governance within the region. The programmes actively engage MRS thematic coordinators and stakeholders, sharing and discussing insights into major developments, fostering project development, and strengthening governance structures. They can serve as platforms for knowledge exchange and intensifying networks, contributing significantly to the advancement of MRS objectives.
- Interreg programmes are do-tanks for MRS: Interreg programmes support reaching the objectives set for MRS thematic fields by funding projects that directly address regional challenges, pilot innovative solutions, stimulate new or complementary MRS activities, provide platforms for capitalisation and collaboration, and increase capacity for enlargement.

Key roles of MRS in supporting transnational Interreg programmes

- MRS are drivers for policy action processes: MRS can leverage expertise from thematic groups to generate high-quality project ideas for various programmes, including transnational Interreg programmes. By bringing together leading experts from areas such

as policy making, research and business development, MRS can show where meaningful investment or policy changes are needed to address current challenges.

- MRS support connecting the transnational project results to policies, helping the projects to strengthen their transnational relevance: Interreg projects create valuable outcomes, which can be further transferred and applied in practice with the support of the MRS expert networks from local, regional, national administrations and pan-regional organisations. It enables MRS to ensure the durability and broader policy-level uptake of project results.
- MRS bring a fresh approach to regional development: MRS foster ongoing dialogue across topics, administrative boundaries, and borders. They raise political awareness and support for shared objectives, empowering the respective region with a stronger voice at the European level. Activities backed by MRS are more likely to lead to changes in legal provisions, political agreements and declarations, financial bundling and the integration of EU values and policies in national, regional and local policies and administrations. The close collaboration with MRS governance bodies and stakeholders allows Interreg programmes to expand their impact beyond traditional project partners, reaching out to new actors and generating innovative and fresh projects.

Potentials for improvements

The collaboration between transnational Interreg programmes and MRS can be further deepened and can have even more positive effects on the cooperation areas if programmes and strategies continued to further develop their complementary key roles and strengths.

More synergies could be exploited if **transnational Interreg programmes would continue and intensify efforts** to:

- explore alternative approaches for triggering innovative projects that serve the objectives of the MRS: e.g. by creating new types of events or platforms where people working for MRS and Interreg programmes can meet, reflect and develop new ideas or by calling for proposals addressing cross-cutting issues requiring collaboration among multiple MRS thematic groups and stakeholders.
- continuously look into options for enhancing collaboration with MRS throughout the programme implementation phase while ensuring compliance with provisions for Interreg-funds: e.g. when designing and organising calls for projects, implementing projects and later disseminating project results, foreseeing measures in the evaluation processes, organising thematic events aiming at capacity building and knowledge transfer.
- pilot initiatives to facilitate coordination of programmes and MRS with selected CBC-Interreg or mainstream programmes sharing the same geographical area, in order to test and learn.
- create evidence by taking measures to capture the impact of these measures through programme evaluations.

The geographical areas would profit from an **enhanced collaboration between MRS and transnational Interreg programmes if MRS would continue or intensify efforts** to:

- create a joint long-term vision for the development of the geographical area and foster measures to get stronger political ownership and support of this vision and the MRS objectives. This can serve as a valuable orientation for drafting the next Interreg-programmes. Clear and transparent work programmes in the thematic fields derived from

this macro-regional vision and objectives can be used by programmes to shape their calls for proposals accordingly.

- enhance a structured dialogue and collaboration with various funding programmes in the area, with the assistance of the MRS support structures,
- establish and reinforce collaboration with projects from various funding programmes in the area and facilitate the creation of synergies among projects. Ultimately, it will support a stronger policy-level uptake of project results, durability, consolidation, maintenance, and ownership of project results by the relevant MRS stakeholders after project closure.
- acknowledge and highlight the contribution of transnational Interreg programmes to reaching MRS objectives in all MRS communication activities, e.g. by referring to the programme financing the project.