



Federal Institute for  
Research on Building,  
Urban Affairs and  
Spatial Development

within the Federal Office for  
Building and Regional Planning



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## European cooperation of rural and economically weaker regions

Climate adaptation, sustainable redevelopment, mobility in rural areas: When German municipalities and regions cooperate with European partners, an inspiring exchange of knowledge often takes place. Rural and economically weaker regions in particular benefit from this exchange but face difficulties, as their capacities for project work are limited.

Interreg B, a European funding programme, enables transnational cooperation, for example in the Alpine Space Programme or Baltic Sea Region. This paper investigates for the period 2000-2020 how Interreg B programmes integrate rural and economically weaker regions into European cooperation. It analyses whether transnational programmes, due to their geographical focus, offer better opportunities for participation in these regions, compared to the Europe-wide programmes “Interreg Europe”, “Horizon 2020” and “Interregional Innovation Investments” (I3).

The analysis indicates that rural and economically weaker regions are more involved in Interreg programmes than in excellence-focused programmes such as “Horizon” and I3. Differences between transnational and interregional Interreg programmes show that transnational programmes can respond better to policy priorities. However, some Interreg B programmes do not fully utilise the potential to increase the involvement of rural regions. In future, these programmes should increasingly focus on spatially inclusive cooperation.

## Analysis of participation in Interreg B and other EU programmes

by

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# Foreword



Photo: Picturemakers / Düsseldorf

Dear readers,

In many European regions, social dissatisfaction is growing - often in particular where challenges such as demographic change and economic transformation come together. One key to better cohesion lies in increasing support for precisely these regions and improving their access to subsidies and cooperation opportunities.

As a member of the Monitoring Committees, the BBSR is involved in the six Interreg B programmes with German participation. The goal of Interreg is to tackle common challenges and strengthen spatial cohesion in Europe by means of transnational cooperation, for example in the Alpine Space Programme or North Sea Region.

Our analyses indicate that Interreg, with its focus on regional development, integrates rural and economically weaker regions more effectively than other EU-wide programmes. Spatially limited cooperation opportunities can help structurally weak regions to increase their participation. Nevertheless, there is still room for improvement: Actors from urbanised areas still have better chances of obtaining subsidies.

In 2025, the European Commission will present proposals for the cohesion policy for the 2028-2034 funding period. The BBSR is committed to further strengthening transnational cooperation and to ensuring that regions that have participated less so far are granted better opportunities.

I wish you a stimulating reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Peter Jakubowski".

Dr. Peter Jakubowski

Head of the Spatial and Urban Development Department at the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR)

# Introduction

**One starting point for the reduction of disparities is the intensification of support for structurally weak regions. What contribution does transnational cooperation make?**

Rural regions and economically weaker regions with a GDP below 75% of the EU average often have poorer conditions for the successful acquisition of subsidies in comparison with urban areas. This may be due to lower personnel capacities and economic resources. However, it is precisely these regions that can benefit most from the funds: firstly with regard to investments, and secondly with regard to knowledge gain and the qualification of local solutions.

The cohesion policy of the European Union seeks to balance economic and social differences between the European regions. The aim is to strengthen cohesion within the EU and to achieve an equivalent level of prosperity in all parts of Europe.

## The spatial cooperation opportunities of the analysed programmes

The EU programmes Interreg Europe, Horizon 2020 and the instrument for interregional innovation investments (I 3) promote a Europe-wide exchange of experience. Interreg B, however, enables cooperation in defined transnational programme areas, where project consortia can team up and jointly apply for funding. A mu-

nicipality from North Rhine-Westphalia, for instance, can cooperate in a Horizon 2020 or Interreg Europe project with institutions from all over Europe, but it is bound within the Interreg B programme (with exceptions) to partner institutions from the North-West Europe programme area. The transnational Interreg B programmes thus operate on a medium spatial level: They enable geographically more comprehensive cooperation than regional, national and cross-border programmes, but are provided on a smaller scale than EU-wide programmes (see Figure 2).

The target groups in the Europe-wide and transnational programmes are similar. The difference lies in the thematic priorities: in the transnational programmes, they are defined according to the needs of the respective participating member states, as part of the provisions of the EU cohesion policy, and therefore occasionally differ considerably from one another.

This analysis examines whether the determination of certain funding priorities, and the associated spatially limited cooperation opportunities, are related to the increased participation of rural and economically weaker regions. The question arises whether transnational programme

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## Overview of the programmes under consideration EU programmes

**Interreg:** stands for European Territorial Cooperation. The programme has existed since 1997 and is part of the EU's cohesion policy. Interreg is implemented in the four strands A, B, C and D (see Figure 1). The following are considered here:

- Interreg B: Transnational cooperation
- Interreg Europe: A programme of interregional cooperation (Interreg C).

**Instrument for interregional innovation investments (I3):** The programme supports consortia to further develop innovation into marketable products, services and solutions and to strengthen the regional and EU-wide value chains. The programme has existed since 2021 and is part of the EU's cohesion policy.

**Horizon:** the framework programme of the European Union for research and innovation. The programme has existed since 1984. In the funding period 2014–2020, it ran under the name Horizon 2020. In the current funding period 2021–2027, it is called Horizon Europe. It is not part of the EU's cohesion policy.

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Figure 1

Overview of Interreg programmes



## Formation of Interreg B

**The funding priorities of the transnational Interreg B programmes followed changing policy priorities in the area of tension between spatial development and sectoral policies.**

Since 1997, the European Union has promoted transnational cooperation as part of Interreg B in major European regions, meaning in geographically or functionally interwoven areas such as the Alpine Space Programme and North Sea Region. Solutions are to be sought for common spatial challenges beyond national borders, thus promoting spatial cohesion in Europe. For this purpose, transnational cooperation projects between regions, cities and academic and private sector actors are supported, for instance in the fields of energy and climate change, environmental and resource protection, the labour market, social affairs and transport.

The transnational Interreg B programmes were introduced as a Community Initiative. They bundled different European programmes for transnational regional development and flood protection and especially supported the application of the “European Spatial Development Perspective” (ESDP), which was adopted in 1999. This origin from spatial planning is also visible in the subsequent European funding periods. With the adoption of the “Lisbon Strategy” in 2000 and later the “Europe 2020 Strategy”, the promotion of employment opportunities and growth increasingly came into

focus, followed by actions to support the adaptation to climate change. Sectoral policies therefore came to the fore of the programmes, which were spatially “blind” and could not or only insufficiently take the particular spatial requirements of the cooperation areas into consideration (see Dühr 2018; Louwers 2018).

In 2009, the situation changed and spatially related issues became more pronounced again. In the new Article 174 TFEU (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union), the Treaty of Lisbon added a territorial component for the first time to the objectives of EU policy. In the same year, the heads of state and government of the EU member states also adopted the first “macro-regional strategy” for a large-scale European area, to deal with tasks for which the EU as a whole is too large, but for which individual member states are in turn too small.

Today, Interreg is implemented in four strands (see Figure 1). The BBSR is a member of the Monitoring Committees of the six Interreg B programmes with German participation. There it decides on the funding priorities and the approval of project applications in consensus with the other participating states.



# Development of the programme geographies

**The layout of the programme areas is based on geographical and socio-economic linkages; the majority of programme areas under consideration remained unchanged between 2000 and 2020.**

## How were the programme areas defined?

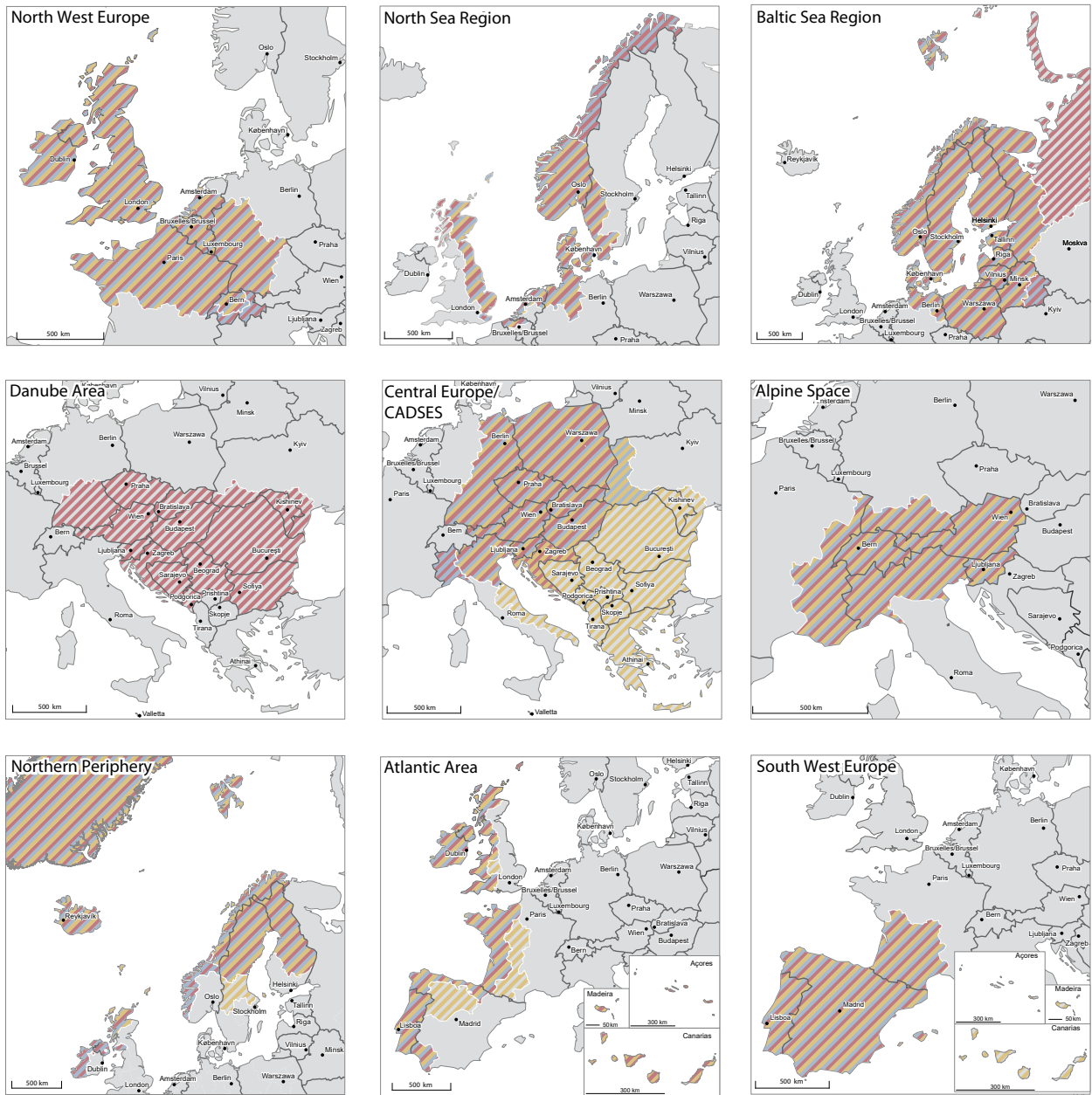
The first proposal for transnational cooperation in large-scale European regions came from the European Commission in 1994 in its report “Europe 2000+: European cooperation in spatial development” (European Commission 1994). The layout of these programmes was based on geographical and socio-economic linkages and also included cross-border flood protection and measures to deal with periods of drought in addition to spatial development. These measures covered functional areas for which no formal structures existed. The report was an essential component for the ESDP that was adopted by the EU member states in 1999. It showed the influence of various policy areas on spatial development in Europe and underlined a more effective coordination of specialised policies and the various governance levels.

The emerging significance of transnational cooperation regions with regard to the implementation of the ESDP targets caused the member states to request support from EU institutions with regard to installing suitable instruments. The INTERREG Community Initiative was therefore in 1997 extended from its original focus on cross-border cooperation to include a strand for “transnational cooperation in spatial planning” (cf. Dühr 2018).

## How did the programme areas develop?

The number of transnational programmes on the European continent has risen from nine at the start to the twelve there are now. The maps (see Figure 2) depict the six programmes in which Germany is participating as well as three other programme areas that are suitable for the following analysis due to their spatial stability. The presentation shows the change in the programme areas over three funding periods between 2000 and 2020. Some of the programme areas, such as the Alpine Space Programme and South-West Europe, have remained unchanged during this entire period. Other programme areas were adapted regionally, for example the North Sea Region and North-West Europe, in which Norway and Switzerland initially only participated regionally, later extending to the entire territory. The central and south-eastern European region is a special case. Before the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007, there was only one large programme (CADSES), which stretched from the Baltic Sea right down to Greece. This programme was divided into the programmes for Central Europe and for Southeast Europe after the enlargements, initially for the period 2007 to 2013. Upon reaching an agreement on the macro-regional strategies for the Danube Region and for the Adriatic-Ionian countries, the latter developed into two separate programmes from 2014.

Figure 2 Overview of the nine Interreg B programme areas considered in this analysis



- IIIB programming period (2000–2006)
- IVB programming period (2007–2013)
- VB programming period (2014–2020)

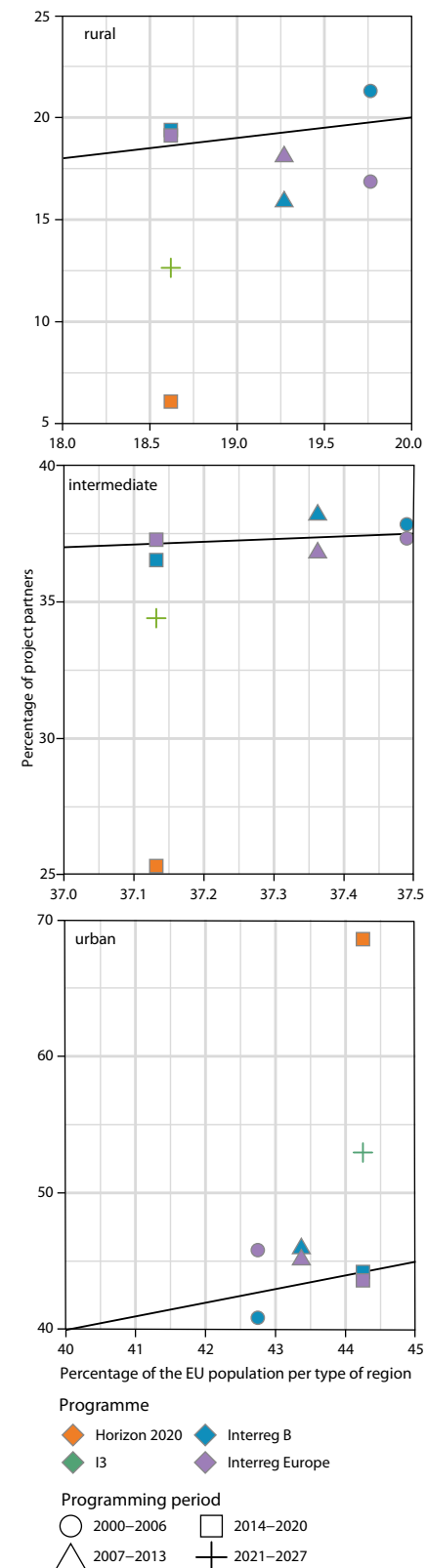
## Participation by type of region – Where do the EU programmes take effect?

There are vast differences in the participation of rural regions: They participate more frequently in the Interreg programmes for regional development, but are less represented in research and innovation programmes such as Horizon 2020 and I3.

Figure 3 shows the spatial distribution of project partners in four different EU programmes or programme families in which the cooperation of partners from several member states is a prerequisite for funding. These are Horizon 2020 (funding period 2014–2020), Interreg B and Interreg Europe (three funding periods since 2000) as well as the newly introduced “Interregional innovation investments” (since 2021). In three charts on the region types rural, intermediate and urban, the proportions of the population in the respective type of region are compared with those of the project partners (grant recipients). The black lines mark a proportional share of population and partners respectively. Values below the line indicate a relatively lower participation of partners from the respective type of region, whereas values above indicate a disproportionately high participation.

The proportion of the population changed only insignificantly between 2000 and 2020, with a slight decrease in rural regions (from 19.75% to 18.25%) and a corresponding increase in urban regions (from 42.7% to 44.2%). The highly unequal proportion of urban regions in the Horizon 2020 programme is particularly noticeable: Although only 44% of the population live in urban regions, they accounted for 70% of partners. Conversely, only 6% of partners came from rural regions. This is generally known and follows from the programme logic: „Over the past decades empirical research has shown an increase in the process of concentration of innovation in large urban areas, favoured by agglomeration economies, global capital flows, and supply-side public policies“ (Filipetti/Zinilli 2023; cf. also Archibugi et al. 2022).

Figure 3 EU programmes: project partners according to type of region



Source: own depiction based on keep (2023)



What is noticeable and not directly expected is the participation in I3, where partners from rural and intermediate regions are also represented far less frequently than would be expected based on the population figures. The programme, which, like Interreg, is part of the EU cohesion policy and therefore committed to reducing disparities, is evidently particularly attractive for urban partners due to its focus on marketable products and services.

Data is available for the Interreg programmes from three funding periods from 2000 to 2020. The development over time is particularly interesting here: Interreg B programmes had a slightly overproportionate participation from rural areas from 2000 to 2006, a disproportionately low

participation from 2007 to 2013 and an almost proportional participation from 2014 to 2020. In Interreg Europe, the participation of partners from rural regions has continued to increase and was almost identical to that of Interreg B from 2014 to 2020. The proportion of partners from

urban regions was symmetrical. One possible interpretation of this is that Interreg B programmes are more strongly oriented towards (cohesion) policy priorities, which focused on „Jobs & Growth“, particularly in urban areas in the period 2007–2013, than those of Interreg Europe.

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#### Key statements „Participation by region type – Where do the EU programmes take effect?“

- Participation from rural areas in Horizon 2020 marginal
  - Since 2000, Interreg Europe has evolved into an almost population-proportional participation of all regions
  - For Interreg B, the participation of rural areas varies slightly from overproportionately in 2000–2006 to more urban from 2007–2013 to proportional from 2014–2020.
  - Substantially overproportionate participation from cities in new interregional innovation investments (I3)
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## Participation by type of region – Where do Interreg B programmes take effect?

**A well-balanced integration of rural regions is recognisable in individual Interreg B programme areas, but the potential is not fully utilised.**

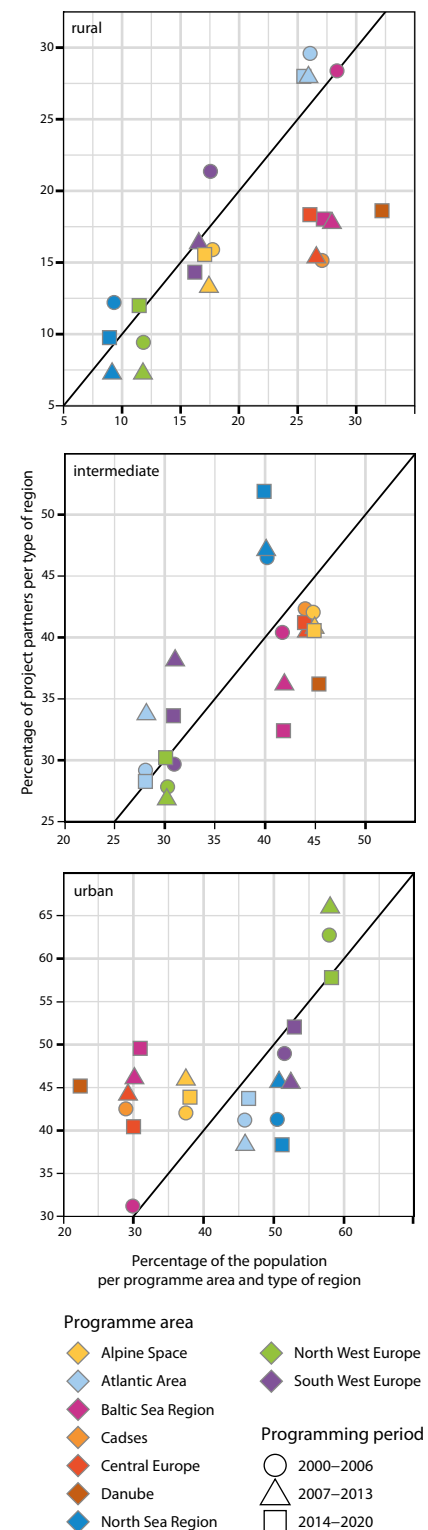
Figure 4 depicts the developments in various transnational Interreg programmes. The assessment includes those programmes that have not experienced any major geographical changes over the three programme periods. One exception is the CADSES programme, which only existed until 2006. The follow-up programmes Central Europe (from 2007) and Danube Region (from 2014) were also added in order to cover all programmes with German participation.

Here too, three charts compare the proportions of the population with the proportions of the project partners (grant recipients) in the rural, intermediate and urban region types. Values below the black line indicate a relatively lower participation of partners from the respective type of region, whereas values above indicate a disproportionately high participation.

It is clearly recognisable that the programmes have succeeded in setting different priorities and have therefore become interesting to partners from different types of region to different extents. This applies both when comparing the programmes with each other and also within the programmes in the different funding periods. The Baltic Sea Region as well as the CADSES region, Central Europe, the Danube Region and the Alpine Space Programme were considerably more attractive for partners from urban regions across all periods. The Atlantic Region, however, has always had a slightly overproportionate share of partners from rural regions. A well-balanced integration of rural regions is recognisable in individual Interreg B programme areas, but the potential is not fully utilised.

Figure 4

**Interreg B: project partners according to type of region**



Source: own depiction based on keep (2023)

Over time, the differences are less pronounced. It is noticeable that the proportion of rural partners decreased in the majority of programmes between the periods 2000 to 2006 and 2007 to 2013. This is particularly pronounced in the Baltic Sea Region, where the distinct decline was accompanied by a fundamental change in the programme philosophy as of 2007. There is also a similar trend in the participation of urban partners in North-West Europe and the North Sea Region, which had the relatively highest proportion from 2007 to 2013 and the relatively lowest proportion from 2014 to 2020. In contrast, the Baltic Sea Region, South-West Europe and the Atlantic Region have

the highest relative urban proportion between 2014 and 2020.

The differentiation between the three types of regions rural, intermediate and urban, can only describe part of

the different territorial conditions for participation in European cooperation programmes. Therefore, the following section analyses the data according to economic power.

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#### Key statements „Participation by type of region – Where do Interreg B programmes take effect?“

- Programmes can set different priorities and thus be of varying interest to partners from different types of regions
  - Rural participation higher before 2007 and after 2014, 2007 to 2013 characterised by urban focus
  - Higher participation of rural areas in the programmes examined without German participation
  - Strongest decline in rural areas in the Baltic Sea Region
  - Potential for the integration of rural regions not fully utilised
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## Participation according to economic strength – Where do the EU programmes take effect?

**The H2020 and I3 programmes clearly indicate that they strongly target economically strong regions in keeping with their main goals, while Interreg Europe is attractive for partners from economically weak regions.**

Interreg programmes are part of the European Structural and Investment Funds. They focus on economic, social and (since 2009) territorial cohesion in the EU and differ in this sense from other European funding programmes that pursue other basic objectives. For H2020, for example, these are the promotion of excellence and for LIFE environmental aspects and climate protection.

As an approach to the question of the potential contribution of the transnational Interreg programmes to the goal of reducing disparities, the proportion of Interreg partners in the regions with different economic strengths is examined. For this purpose, the regions participating were selected as per the EU definition: Regions with less than 75% of the average GDP, transition regions (75-100%) and more developed regions (more than 100%).

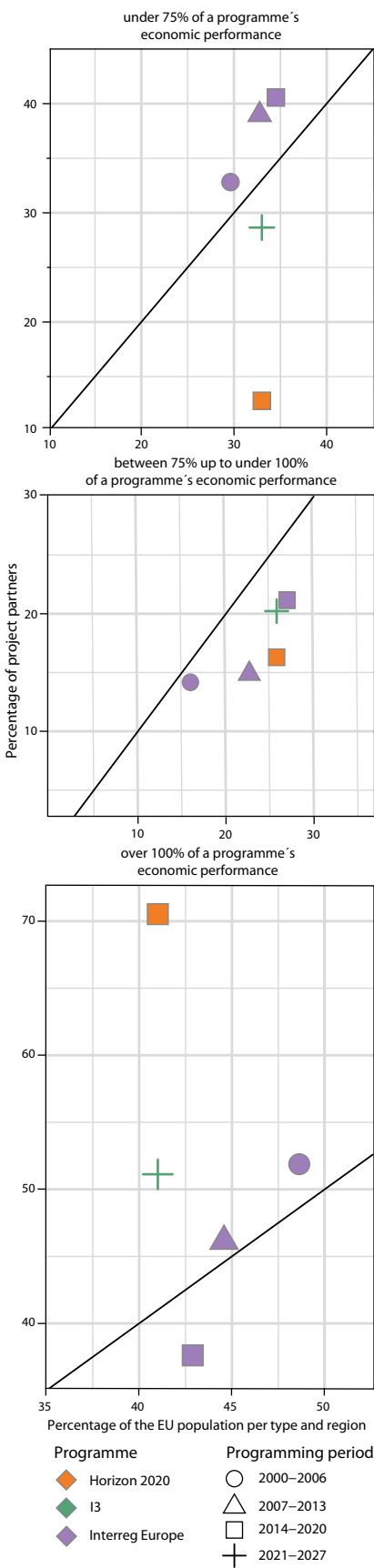
Figure 5 first examines the three European programmes H2020, Interreg Europe and Interregional Innovation Investments (I3), which are open to partnerships Europe-wide. The Interreg B programmes are not considered together, as cooperation only takes place within the transnational programme areas and the areas differ significantly in their economic output.

The focus of the H2020 programme on economically stronger regions is

clearly obvious. More than 70% of the partners are located there, compared to only approximately 12% in economically weaker regions. As with the analysis by type of region, this is a consequence of the programme logic and can therefore be expected. The I3 programme is more capable of integrating partners from different regions. This is also in keeping with the programme objective, which explicitly provides for capacity building and value chains in economically weaker regions for one of the two strands of the programme. Despite this however, partners from economically stronger regions are currently overrepresented in the programme.

Interreg Europe is the only one of the three programmes considered in this section, in which economically weaker regions are overrepresented across all funding periods since 2000. Stronger economic regions were slightly overrepresented between 2000 and 2014, but were significantly underrepresented between 2014 and 2020, falling from about 52% to 38%. The refocusing of the programme could be one possible explanation for this. While thematic cooperation projects were funded until 2013, the exchange between regional ERDF programmes and the improvement of regional policy measures have been supported since 2014.

Figure 5 EU-programmes: project partners according to economic performance



Source: own depiction based on keep (2023)

Key statements „Participation according to economic strength – Where do the EU programmes take effect?“

- H2020: Focus on economically stronger regions is clearly shown
- I3: Partners from economically stronger regions overrepresented
- Interreg Europe: economically weaker regions slightly overrepresented



## Participation according to economic strength – Where do Interreg B programmes take effect?

**A well-balanced integration of economically weak regions is recognisable in individual Interreg B programme areas, but the potential is not fully utilised.**

The Interreg B programmes focus on large functional regions and attempt to achieve the European cohesion targets in these regions. Accordingly, the assessments in this section refer to the average economic output in the respective programme area, not in the EU as a whole.

It is clearly recognisable from Figure 6 that in most programmes, the proportion of project partners in economically stronger regions is higher than the corresponding proportion of the population. One exception is the Northern Periphery, where the economically strong regions were slightly underrepresented and the weaker regions increasingly overrepresented during the period under consideration. For the last funding period analysed (2014 to 2020), this also applies to the Atlantic Region in a similar way. In contrast, the participation of economically weaker regions was disproportionately low in most programmes, particularly in the Baltic Sea and North Sea Regions and in North-West Europe over the entire period from 2000 to 2020. In the latter two programmes, a significant increase in the proportion of the population living in economically weaker regions can be observed. Central Europe had a disproportionately high share from economically strong regions from 2007 to 2013, which declined again from 2014 to 2020.

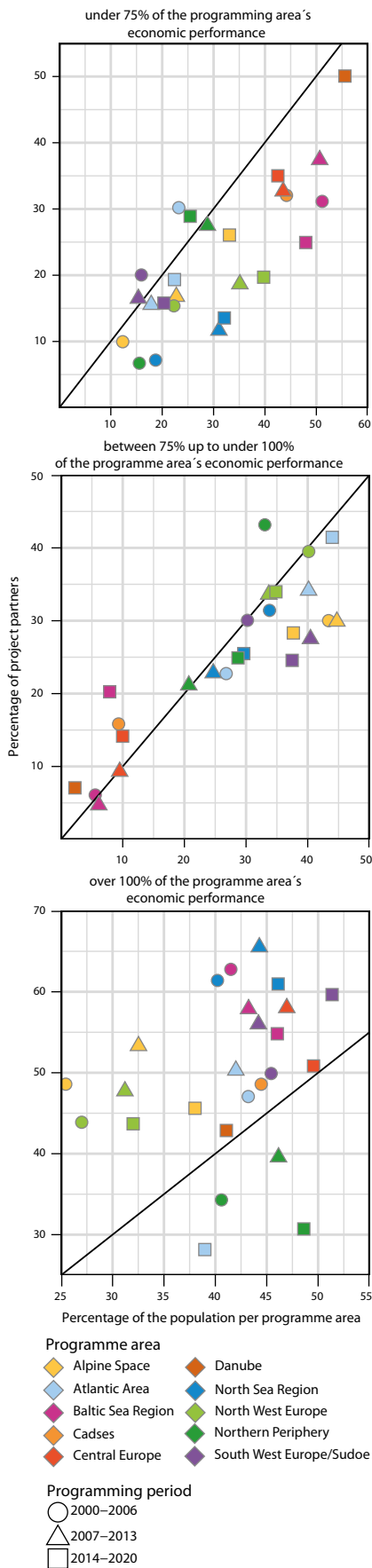
In the three economically more polarised programmes Central Europe, Danube Region and Baltic Sea Region, the Danube Region and Central Europe 2014 to 2020 succeeded in integrating all three types of regions almost proportionally. The Baltic Sea Region is an exception among the three programmes; although

approximately 48% of the population lived in economically weaker regions between 2014 and 2020, only 25% of the partners were located there. Over time, however, it can also be seen that the proportion of partners from transition regions with an economic strength between 75% and 100% increased strongly between 2014 and 2020, while the proportion of partners in stronger regions has steadily declined.

Over time, the differences between and within some of the Interreg B programmes are notable. This point differentiates the Interreg B programmes from Interreg Europe, which showed an almost even distribution across the three regional categories over the three programme periods. Participation from economically strong regions was at its highest in six of the Interreg B programmes in the period 2007 to 2013. Economically weaker regions have the relatively highest proportion in five programmes in the period 2014 to 2020. Particularly noticeable in the Atlantic region, the Baltic Sea region and Central Europe is the significant decline in the proportion of partners from economically strong regions – with almost the same proportion of the population – in the period from 2014 to 2020.

When interpreting the data, it should be noted that the same partner locations may appear in different regional categories during time. This is particularly the case with a strong concentration of partners in individual regions, for example the capitals of small member states that are growing more strongly economically than the other regions.

Figure 6 Interreg B: project partners according to economic performance



Source: own depiction based on keep (2023)

Key statements „Participation according to economic strength – Where do Interreg B programmes take effect?“

- In most programmes, participation from economically stronger regions is disproportionately high. This applies in particular to the 2007–2013 funding period.
- Danube Region and Central Europe succeeded in integrating all three types of region almost proportionally between 2014 and 2020.
- A well-balanced integration of economically weak regions is recognisable in individual Interreg B programme areas, but the potential is not fully utilised.

# Development of participation

The top 10 most intensively participating regions in Interreg B are also urban and higher-income regions. Hamburg is the nationwide leader in terms of participation.

## Top 10 participating regions

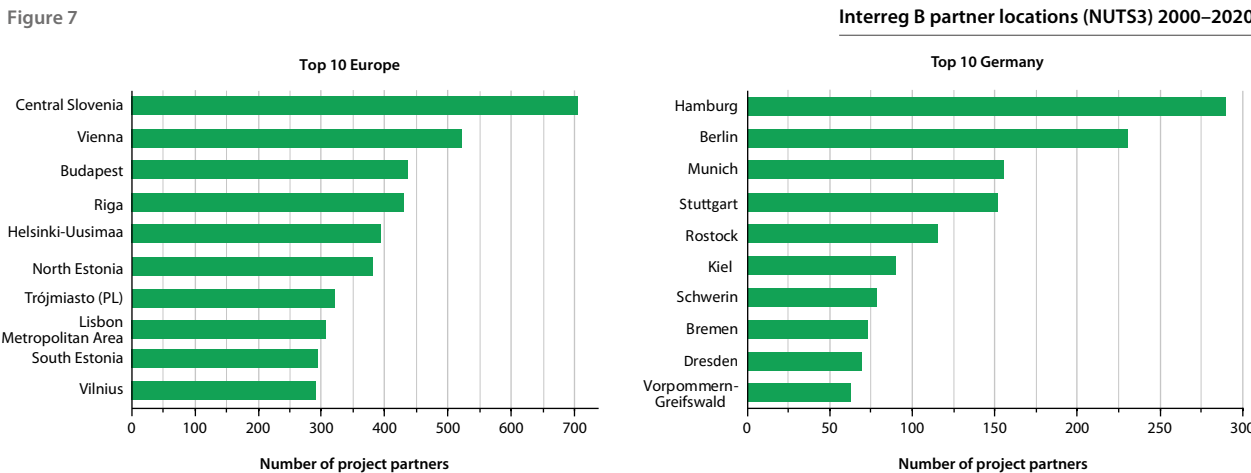
The data analysed in this article shows that Interreg B, with its focus on regional development, can involve rural or economically weaker regions in cooperation to a greater extent than other instruments. Nevertheless, there is still room for improvement in terms of participation from these regions.

Considering the top 10 regions that are most strongly involved through project partners in the respective Interreg B programme area, it is also obvious for Interreg B that cities and higher-income regions in the programme area benefit in particular. Over the entire period, organisations from the NUTS 3 region of Central Slovenia with the capital Ljubljana were by far the most involved: Between 2000 and 2020, over 700 partners participated in projects (see Figure 7, left). Vienna followed with

slightly over 500, followed by Budapest and Riga with approximately 420 partners. What is also noticeable is the high level of participation of cities and regions in the Baltic Sea Region, which is only partly due to the programme philosophy 2000 to 2006 (see next section).

German regions are not listed in the top 10 of all programmes. Even when considering participation in the individual programme areas (not shown here), only Hamburg in the North Sea and Baltic Sea Regions, Bremen in the North Sea Region and Munich in the Alpine Space Programme are represented in the top 10 regions. Hamburg is also the nationwide leader with almost 250 partners, followed by Berlin with a good 225 and Munich and Stuttgart with slightly over 200 partners (see Figure 7, right). The next rankings in the top 10 are once again characterised by strong participation from Baltic Sea cities and regions.

Figure 7



Source: own depiction based on keep.eu

## Example Baltic Sea Region

The programmatic development of Interreg B began with the ESDP and was directly related to spatial development. The priorities changed with the Lisbon Strategy and later with the Europe 2020 Strategy. The promotion of employment opportunities and growth came into focus, followed by climate change mitigation measures. This is reflected in the participation of partners from different types of regions.

Sectoral policies came to the fore of the programmes, along with thematic specialisation and professionalisation on the part of the programmes and projects. As a result, partners with less capacity and experience in transnational cooperation were no longer able to sufficiently meet the increased administrative and professional requirements of the programme. Partners in urban regions were more

likely to fulfil these requirements than those in rural areas.

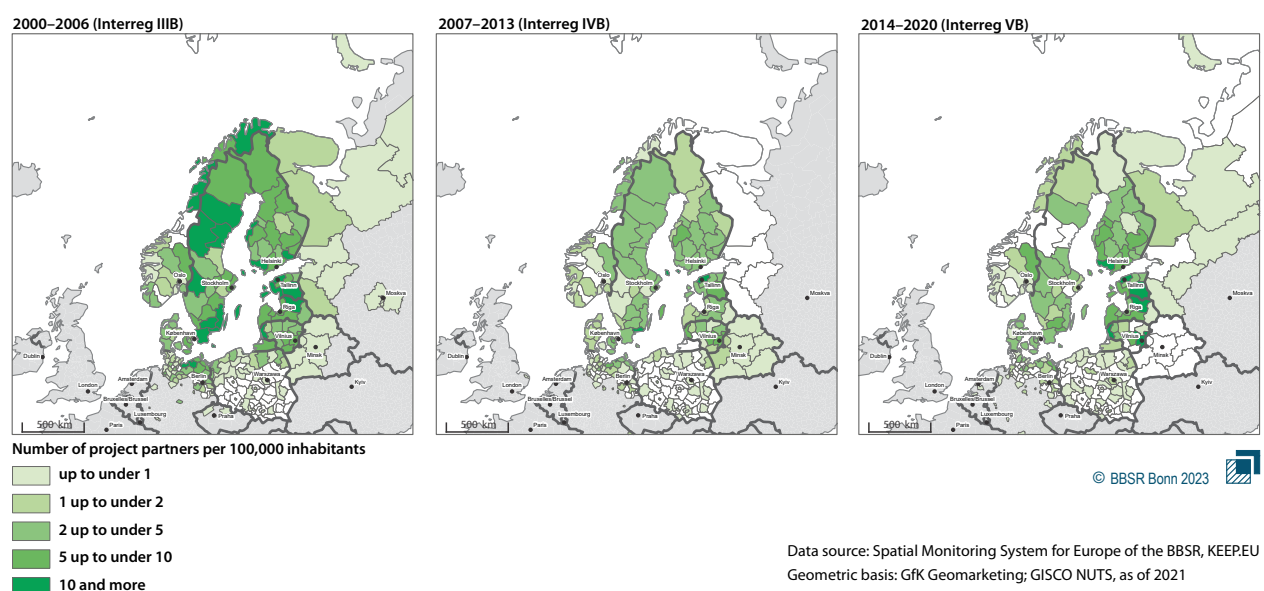
This development is particularly obvious in the Baltic Sea Region. The process was also accompanied by a fundamental change in the programme philosophy from 2007. Overall, participation fell by half from 3,124 partners in the period 2000 to 2006 to 1,414 partners between 2007 and 2013. The decline was even more pronounced for partners from rural regions (from 821 to 216). In the period 2014 to 2020, the figures then rose again slightly to a total of 2,025 partners (350 rural partners).

The example shows that the Europe-wide leading strategies can have an influence on spatial participation in Interreg. In addition, the Monitoring Committees made up of member states also have a major influence on the possibility for regions to participate in projects with comparatively lower capacities. In 2021, for

example, new formats for so-called small-scale projects were introduced in most transnational programmes, which focus on municipal and rural participation, for example. The increased use of flat-rate costs instead of individual invoices can also contribute to spatial expansion. In this regard, the Interreg B programmes show a high degree of governance sensitivity.

Figure 8

Number of project partners in the Baltic Sea Region programme area in the three funding periods



Data source: Spatial Monitoring System for Europe of the BBSR, KEEP.EU  
Geometric basis: GfK Geomarketing; GISCO NUTS, as of 2021  
Author: R. Binot

# Summary and outlook

**The Interreg B programmes have the prerequisites and the potential to actively involve rural and economically weaker regions thanks to their region-specific programmes, their large-scale focused cooperation opportunities and their governance sensitivity.**

Interreg B areas and their priority themes are larger in scale and therefore more comprehensive than the national level, but smaller in scale and therefore more specific than the EU level. Interreg B makes it possible to include rural and economically weaker regions in the development of the entire region, especially through spatially limited co-operation. This is a unique selling point of transnational cooperation that needs to be utilised more than before.

In 2025, the European Commission will present proposals for cohesion policy from 2028, which will form the basis for coordination with the European Parliament and European Council. The BBSR is committed to strengthening transnational cooperation throughout Europe and taking greater account of regions that have so far been less involved in cooperation. European transnational cooperation after 2027 should be organised in such a way that all regions can use it as an effective tool to tackle current challenges and promote a good quality of life for citizens. Resolutions to this effect have been passed by the German Conference of Spatial Development Ministers (RMK) and the Conference of European Ministers (EMK) and formed the basis for the Federal Council's resolution 297/23, which calls for Interreg to be strengthened in order to ensure cohesion within the EU in the long term. A joint position of the federal government and the federal states on

the future of cohesion policy is to be developed by the end of 2024.

Cohesion policy was not the focus of Ursula von der Leyen's speech on 18 July 2024 (von der Leyen 2024), on the basis of which she was re-elected as Commission President. However, the confirmation that the regions will remain at the centre of the EU's work indicates that disparities will continue to be addressed and cohesion across the EU will continue to be promoted. By investing in innovation, technology, environmental and climate protection, von der Leyen wants to create positive prospects for the future for all regions and citizens. The success of the vision depends on effective implementation and cooperation at all levels of administration and society.

The present evaluation shows that the Interreg B programmes have the prerequisites and the potential to actively involve rural and economically weaker regions due to their region-specific programmes, their large-scale focused cooperation possibilities and their governance sensitivity. Whether this happens effectively is primarily in the hands of the member states that control the programmes. In the view of the BBSR, the Interreg B programmes should make a greater contribution to cohesion in future by focusing on reducing disparities in the programme area and promoting spatially inclusive growth.



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# Methodological notes

To analyse and calculate the cooperation intensities in the individual regions, various steps were taken to prepare and simplify the data:

Initially, all geocoded project partners from the individual programmes were used for the overall comparisons between Interreg B, Interreg C, Horizon 2020 and I3. Partners from countries or regions for which no region types classified by Eurostat (rural, intermediate and urban) are available were excluded. This applies to partners from overseas who were active in Horizon 2020, as well as from European countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Ukraine. The number of partners is in the low single-digit percentage range, which is why it can be considered negligible for this analysis.

In order to present and compare the analysis, all programme areas with German participation as well as the programme areas Atlantic Region,

Northern Periphery and South-West Europe, most of which have remained unchanged over all funding periods, were initially selected. However, the Northern Periphery programme area was not included in the analyses by region type, as it contains a disproportionately high number of rural regions and the results were therefore only comparable with the other eight programme areas to a limited extent.

To calculate the average population figures in the NUTS 3 regions in the individual funding periods, the average dates of the funding periods were used, i.e. 2003, 2010 and 2017. The same was done with the data on gross domestic product (GDP). In terms of population and GDP, the former EU-28 countries were used as a reference for the Horizon 2020, I3 and Interreg C programmes, as the United Kingdom was still able to participate fully in the 2014 to 2020 funding period. In the individual

Interreg B programme areas, data from participating non-EU countries such as Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania were also included. Thus, although it was possible to calculate the population-proportional distribution by region type for the individual programme areas for all funding periods, it was not possible to calculate the economic classification for all funding periods. For example, data on Switzerland's GDP is missing for the first funding period, which explains the lack of 10% of the values in Figure 6 (Project partners by economic performance Alpine Space Programme 2000-2006). In addition, the 2017 figures for population and GDP serve as a reference for the I3 programme, as data for the middle of the funding period was not yet available at the time of this study. The data for the I3 programme was last updated in May 2024.

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