

Non-technical summary of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme 2021-27 (Approved by the Working Group CENTRAL EUROPE 2021+ - June 2021)

Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE envisions a united central Europe that cooperates - to become smarter, greener and better connected together. Based on shared needs and a common identity in an area long divided by the 'Iron Curtain', the programme aims for a trustful culture of cooperation beyond administrative borders.

The programme mission is to bring regions and cities together beyond borders to find fitting solutions for their citizens - in a fair and equal way everywhere. It encourages and supports transnational cooperation to make regions more resilient to common challenges that know no borders and which cannot be solved alone. These challenges include, among others, economic transition processes, climate change and the long-term socioeconomic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Based on inputs collected from numerous experts and a multi-level consultation process of stakeholders and relevant partners, in January 2021 representatives from all nine Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE (CE) programme countries agreed on a final draft version of the future programme.

The Interreg Programme (IP) document of Interreg CE defines the programme strategy and intervention logic for 2021-27. It includes a set of funding priorities and specific objectives that are deemed most relevant for the future of transnational cooperation in central Europe in these years. It also outlines potential transnational actions and beneficiaries as well as target audiences. Furthermore it contains information on budget and implementation settings.

More information on the programming process is available at www.interreg-central.eu/CE21-27.

Programme area

Central Europe is a core area of the European Union. Interreg CE covers regions and cities from nine EU Member States: Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. The current programme area will be enlarged in 2021-27 by the region of Braunschweig in Germany.

With an area of more than one million square km, the programme affects the lives of about 148 million people, which share a common history and cultural identity. At the same time, the territory is characterised by structural differences between regions with growing urban and industrialised areas (e.g. capital city agglomerations like Warsaw, Prague, Berlin, Vienna, or Budapest) and rural or peripheral areas often characterised by lower competitiveness and shrinking populations.

Central Europe covers different landscapes ranging from high and low mountain ranges to wide plains, large river basins and lake districts. It is home to remarkable heritage sites, including post-industrial sites and pristine nature. It also crosses climate zones. Wide open spaces in rural areas, fragile mountainous areas and natural landscapes such as the Green Belt are inhabited by a wide variety of valuable and protected plants and animals. This rich natural and cultural heritage represents an important location factor that needs to be better valorised and protected.

The programme territory runs along large parts of the former Iron Curtain covering regions with significant differences in their socioeconomic history. The area is an important cross-junction for European north-south and east-west connections beyond its own borders. As a historical consequence, many trade and transport routes cross the area on transnational rivers, streets and railroads. This makes central Europe a hub for socio-economically relevant corridors to which many regions are physically connected.

Programme strategy and intervention logic

The programme priorities and specific objectives below form the backbone of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE funding strategy in 2021-27. In line with the mentioned thematic fields, transnational cooperation actions are expected to address the development and implementation of strategies, action plans, tools, training, pilot actions and related solutions. All actions will have to respect the environmental sustainability by design principle and also the horizontal principles of equality and non-discrimination.

Priority 1: Cooperating for a smarter central Europe

SO 1.1 Strengthening innovation capacities in central Europe

Strong innovation capacities bear enormous relevance for central Europe considering its strong industrial base and the importance of sectors such as agriculture and food, or tourism. Innovation is also central for strengthening central Europe's economic resilience. Capacities for innovation need to be fostered especially in regions that are struggling with the transition to a more globalised, digitalised and green economy. Knowledge and technology transfer, especially for SMEs, is a critical need.

Potential fields to be addressed in transnational actions (non-exhaustive list):

- Green economy, bio-economy
- Industry 4.0, robotisation, mechatronics, digital technologies, key enabling technologies
- Cultural and creative industries and tourism
- Health (care) innovation
- Silver economy
- Social innovation
- Technology and innovation transfer
- Interregional partnerships along value chains
- Innovative schemes for financing innovation

SO 1.2 Strengthening skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship in central Europe

The strong industrial base of central Europe and its dependence on adequate skills underlines the strategic relevance of this specific objective. SMEs have been identified as the main providers of employment in central Europe and it is important to foster locally available human skills, especially for the transition to Industry 4.0, digitalisation and a green economy. Capacities for an efficient entrepreneurial discovery process need to be improved as well as for the preparation or updating of smart specialisation strategies. Place-based development of skills is also crucial for reducing urban-rural disparities. Overall, there is the need for a just transition process that is socially responsible.

Potential fields to be addressed in transnational actions (non-exhaustive list):

- Skills for sectors of relevance for smart specialisation, e.g. Industry 4.0, digitalisation, green economy, bio-economy, silver economy, health and life sciences, cultural and creative industries, sustainable tourism
- Capacity-building and institutional learning for smart specialisation
- Matching skills to labour market needs of regions in industrial and digital transition

- Competences for innovation management in SMEs and entrepreneurship, including social entrepreneurship
- Counteracting regional (urban-rural) disparities of human capital and brain drain

Priority 2: Cooperating for a greener central Europe

SO 2.1 Supporting the energy transition to a climate-neutral central Europe

Central Europe needs to speed up its performance related both to energy efficiency as well as the production and use of renewable energy to meet EU targets and climate objectives of the European Green Deal. Significant regional disparities between central European regions have to be tackled. Energy efficiency and renewable energy need to be promoted and exploited to reach a wider geographical coverage.

Potential fields to be addressed in transnational actions (non-exhaustive list):

- Smart integration of carbon-neutral solutions across sectors
- Renewable energy sources
- Energy efficiency of buildings and public infrastructures
- Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from industry and other sectors
- Energy planning at local and regional levels
- Energy demand management and behavioural change
- Financing schemes for energy efficiency and renewable energy investments
- Energy poverty

SO 2.2. Increasing the resilience to climate change risks in central Europe

Resilience to climate change risks represents an important need for central Europe, especially in view of its significant environmental and socio-economic impacts. A specific territorial aspect is the need for integrated and cross-sectoral approaches to best adapt to climate change. In order to build up climate resilience, general approaches need to be locally adapted towards workable, manageable and integrated solutions, which can be proliferated across the entire central Europe area.

Potential fields to be addressed in transnational actions (non-exhaustive list):

- Climate change resilience and adaptation measures
- Climate-proof landscape and urban planning
- Resilience to weather extremes and related hazards (rainfall events, floods, landslides, heat, droughts, water scarcity, wildfires etc.)
- Risk awareness, prevention and management
- Socio-economic and health-related impacts of climate change

SO 2.3. Taking circular economy forward in central Europe

A climate-neutral, resource-efficient and competitive economy requires up-scaled circular approaches. This economic transformation has to pay attention to the fact that a circular economy will often require a re-arrangement of value chains, changes of interdependencies and the creation of new profit options. It is important that this socio-economic transformation happens across the entire territory of central Europe and does not concentrate on only a few regions.

Potential fields to be addressed in transnational actions (non-exhaustive list):

- Waste prevention & management, recycling and recovery of resources & raw materials
- Repair and reuse
- Circular economy value chains
- Clean production processes and closed loop systems
- Sustainable product design (e.g. eco-design) and product development processes
- Behavioural changes of producers, consumers, public buyers etc.

SO 2.4. Safeguarding the environment in central Europe

The economic and environmental significance of natural assets and landscapes in central Europe calls for a co-ordinated valorisation and protection of biodiversity and ecosystems. There is a strong need to counteract negative effects of human action through integrated environmental management approaches.

Potential fields to be addressed in transnational actions (non-exhaustive list):

- Biodiversity conservation and recovery including urban green spaces
- Protection of natural heritage, ecosystems and valuable areas incl. Natura 2000 sites
- Reduction of environmental pollution (air, water, soil, noise, light etc.) and their human health impacts
- Integrated environmental management and sustainable use of natural resources
- Sustainable land management and landscape planning that optimize human activities with biodiversity protection and enhancement measures
- Ecosystem services (e.g. production of food and water, clean air, recreational benefits)
- Restoration of degraded ecosystems
- Sustainable tourism and the valorisation of natural heritage

SO 2.5. Greening urban mobility in central Europe

A reduction of transport emissions is one of the key targets of the European Green Deal. Smart and greener urban mobility will need an integrated response. Many functional urban areas in central Europe face similar challenges when greening their mobility. The specific territorial need lies in the vast diversity of topics (e.g. pollution and congestion) that need to be addressed in an integrated approach. Furthermore, the topic does not only include different ways of mobility, but also urban as well as urban-rural logistics.

Potential fields to be addressed in transnational actions (non-exhaustive list):

- Sustainable urban mobility planning
- Quality and efficiency of green, urban public transport services
- Smart traffic and mobility management, including commuting solutions
- Sustainable multimodal connections between urban and peri-urban areas
- Sustainable multimodal urban freight and logistic solutions (including the “last mile”)
- Reduction of greenhouse gases and other air pollutants from urban transport
- Accessibility of urban public transport for everyone, especially for elderly and frail people

Priority 3: Cooperating for a better connected central Europe

SO 3.1. Improving transport connections of rural and peripheral regions in central Europe

The programme area is a relevant junction in Europe. This can strategically facilitate the participation in trade and increase competitiveness. Accessibility to larger transport corridors is, however, comparatively weak. There is a need to link especially peripheral regions to the nodes of the TEN-T core network corridors (CNC), to remove bottlenecks and to bridge missing transport links in order to ensure good accessibility across central Europe. Furthermore, there is the need to reduce transport emissions by 90% by 2050, which calls for smart and sustainable approaches to cross-border mobility, intermodality and the introduction of IT-supported solutions for mobility management.

Potential fields to be addressed in transnational actions (non-exhaustive list):

- Demand-responsive and flexible regional passenger transport
- Accessibility of rural and remote areas and their connectivity to main EU transport corridors
- Removal of transport barriers and bottlenecks across borders and beyond
- Strategic regional transport and spatial planning
- Multi-modal freight transport and logistic chains in rural and peripheral areas and connections to transport nodes

Priority 4: Improving governance for cooperation in central Europe

SO 4.1 Strengthening governance for integrated territorial development in central Europe

Central Europe is highly heterogeneous both in territorial as well as in socio-economic terms. A multitude of challenges and barriers hinders the economic, social and territorial development in central Europe, which are not necessarily bound to specific administrative units. They rather relate to areas with functional ties that are characterised by economic, social and environmental linkages. Addressing these territorial development challenges calls for integrated multi-level and multi-sectoral governance processes that consider functional linkages at the territorial level. There is a need to improve capacities of public authorities on all territorial levels for setting up and implementing integrated territorial development strategies. Cooperation should be encouraged within and between territories that are sharing functional ties.

Potential fields to be addressed in transnational actions (non-exhaustive list):

- Reduction of administrative barriers, better policymaking & cooperation beyond borders
- Participatory decision-making processes (e.g. citizen involvement)
- Multi-level & multi-sector governance among areas with functional ties beyond borders
- Integrated territorial development strategies, e.g. addressing demographic change, public services of general interest (such as health, education, social services) and tourism and culture
- Digital governance

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¹ European regional Development Fund