



Operational evaluation of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme

Executive summary

19 December 2025



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MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES AND CAPACITY



The **programme management structures are highly effective and efficient in supporting achievement of the set programme objectives and results**. Structures have been carefully designed. Programme management is articulated in a reasoned and accessible manner based on extensive formal documentation and detailed procedures. The well-advanced progress of the 2021–2027 Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme is in interviews to MA, MC, NC and NCP largely attributed to factors such as stable management structures, early preparation, clear objectives, strong involvement from the MA and MC as well as effective collaboration between JS and MA.

According to the stakeholders and as expressed in interviews, the efficient distribution of roles and responsibilities and the effective programme management capacity are among the main reasons for the successful programme implementation in terms of high number of applications, high level of funds committed and balanced territorial coverage of approved projects. The programme is managed effectively and according to the planned activities and established targets in the Interreg programme document. This was confirmed by the interviews to stakeholders from all programme bodies.

Stability of programme bodies and management structures is seen as a major asset of the programme in the interviews. Compared to the 2014-2020 programming period, only minor adjustments have been introduced, which address inefficiencies detected in the 2014-2020 evaluations. The stakeholders perceive the changes as positive.

The programme receives robust political and strategic support at both national and regional level. The vast majority of interviewed MC and NCP representatives underlines the strong political support to the programme by the institution that hosts the programme, i.e. the City of Vienna. The resources and capacities provided for the programme are seen as crucial for the effective management. Representatives of all programme bodies stress the programme's strong foundation of political commitment and collaboration.

The review of documents shows that there is a clear and efficient assignment of functions, responsibilities and tasks among the different programme bodies. Documents such as the DMCS and its annexes, e.g. internal manual, describe exact steps and help to understand the system. This is confirmed by all interviewed programme bodies. All MC members confirm the clear and efficient distribution of roles and responsibilities with a clear assignment of functions. The experience from various programming periods and the stability of staff are key factors that contribute to the understanding of roles.

The **assignment of functions within the MA/JS is generally clear**, with responsibilities and tasks well-defined to facilitate goal achievement and effective cooperation between units. The accumulated experience of working together across three programming periods has enhanced procedural clarity. The analysis shows that there is a culture of quality management in the CE programme, particularly in the MA and JS. Ambition to continuously improve quality of the work and to innovate in management and programme implementation is high. This creates additional workload for JS staff and programme bodies and sometimes reduces time-

efficiency of processes. However, this is generally seen by all interviewees as a positive and unique feature of the CE Programme.

DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES AND INTERNAL COMMUNICATION



Decision-making processes and interactions at programme level are very well-established, clear and transparent. Desk research shows that the MA/JS support to the MC decision-making processes through the implementation of MC meetings and written procedures is supported by different project management tools such as manuals, monitoring systems and internal workflow applications. According to the perception of the programme bodies captured in interviews, decisions at the programme level are generally made efficiently, supported by practices and structures that enhance the decision-making process. Thorough preparation of topics and early initiation of discussions, particularly for complex decisions, contribute to smoother and more effective outcomes. All MC and NCP representatives confirm that the decision-making at the programme level is clear and transparent.

Communication between programme bodies is facilitated by various formats, including MC meetings, workshops, online meetings, programme events (including national info days or committee meetings at national level). This allows for a regular contact and a continuous exchange of information. Interviews confirm that communication between and within programme bodies is effective and efficient. All MC, NCP, NC representatives, as well as MA and JS confirm a good communication between programme bodies. Some interviewees highlight the role of new formats and digital tools, such as online meetings and webinars. While several delegations confirm that there is a good and smooth discussion culture at MC meetings, one delegation would like to have a better communication within the MC and more open MC discussions on aspects that have not been already pre-analysed by the JS. Room for improvement is mostly seen by NCP and NC in the area of communication with and between NCPs and in the communication between NCs and AA. It is also recommended to not rely only on online meetings and digital formats.

PROJECT APPLICATION AND SELECTION PROCESSES



The **application, selection, and contracting processes** of the Interreg CE Programme are **well-designed** and function effectively, combining clear procedures, strong support systems, and a **willingness by the programme to adapt and innovate.**

The programme has established project application and selection processes which are to be considered **efficient, effective and transparent.** The calls' structure, assessment methodologies, and support measures provided to applicants are well-developed since Call 1 and have been adapted and refined over the subsequent calls. Interviews with programme bodies and the results of applicant surveys confirm that calls for proposals are clearly structured, with transparent procedures and documentation. The inclusion of features such as an improved relevance filter have enabled the programme to better manage a high volume of applications while maintaining a strong quality threshold.

Across the first three calls, **the programme has demonstrated strong and consistent performance in attracting proposals and managing the overall application process efficiently**. Altogether, the programme received 630 applications, confirming sustained interest across the programme area and a competitive environment, with an aggregate selection rate of around 20%. The programme has progressively refined its procedures, such as improving the relevance filter, adjusting scoring thresholds and weights, and introducing applicant hearings, to ensure that high-quality proposals are identified while keeping the process transparent and predictable. These adaptations have strengthened both the quality and the robustness of the assessment framework, allowing the programme to maintain a strong quality threshold despite high demand. These elements underline the programme's capacity to mobilise stakeholders across the programme area and confirm the effectiveness of its application and selection processes.

Calls 1 and 2 demonstrated a high level of interest, with 490 proposals submitted, and an overall selection rate of 20%. In Call 3, targeting peripheral and lagging areas and only four SOs (1.2, 2.5, 3.1, 4.1), 140 project proposals were received. Overall, 25 small-scale projects were selected, corresponding to a selection rate of around 18%, confirming the continued competitiveness of the programme.

Assessment criteria are well-aligned with programme priorities and are perceived as **clear** by both applicants and national representatives (MC members). JS staff and external assessors apply criteria consistently. Improvements introduced between calls, such as raising the quality thresholds, adjusting relevance filter criteria and scoring weights, have all contributed to enhanced quality of project proposals. In Call 3, the introduction of applicant hearings strengthened the link between project proposal design and applicant competence, offering applicants the possibility to explain the proposal in their own words, in view of increasing chances also for less experienced (small) applicants, and in part as a response to increasing reliance on AI tools in the drafting of proposals. The hearings enabled a more direct appraisal of applicants' understanding of their project concepts, while maintaining fairness and transparency. The approach was positively received by programme bodies, although it was more resource-intensive. External assessors also welcomed the hearings as a useful innovation to test applicants' ownership of their proposals.

In terms of efficiency, the **selection process takes approximately 8-10 months**, which is considered **reasonable** given the volume of proposals, the thorough assessment, and the decision-making process of the MC. Compared to other transnational programmes, Interreg CE generally has a shorter selection phase. Following project selection, projects usually start after around 4–5 months.

From a territorial perspective, the highest participation (parametrised by population, i.e. applicants per million inhabitants) in calls can be observed for Slovenian applicants, followed by Croatia, Hungary and north-eastern Italian regions. In absolute terms and also by parametrising the data by population at NUTS 2 level, some Polish and German regions show a lower participation in the programme. This can be due to several concurring factors (participation in other programmes, national co-financing conditions, type of territory etc.)

The programme provides a comprehensive suite of tools, guidance materials, and digital resources to support applicants. The application packages, including the ToR, templates, and guidance documents, are detailed and appreciated by applicants, who particularly value the clarity of offline templates and the programme manual. Online support measures, including webinars, video tutorials, individual consultations, and the Applicant Community, have proven highly appreciated. **Applicant survey results show particularly high satisfaction with individual consultations with the JS**. While national-level support to applicants by

NCPs is valued overall, some differences can be observed across countries, suggesting room for improvement in some national support structures.

Digital tools have significantly contributed to the success of applicant support measures. **The programme website is rated as the most helpful information channel**, with tools such as the project self-assessment tool, project summary generator, and self-assessment eligibility test supporting applicants in aligning proposals with programme expectations and requirements. These tools, together with online consultations and the Applicant (matchmaking) community, have strengthened partner search and project development.

The shift to a more widespread **use of SCOs has also simplified the application process**. Around 91% of applicants reported that the use of SCOs was clear, and 80% agreed that it has simplified budget preparation. Option 3, which involves real staff costs and a 40% flat rate for all other costs, is the most frequently selected. While most users find SCOs beneficial, a minority expressed concerns about coverage adequacy or conflicts with internal accounting requirements, especially in organisations with more rigid financial procedures.

**PROJECT
IMPLEMENTATION AND
MONITORING
PROCESSES**



The **new reporting and monitoring system approach** and features introduced in the 2021-2027 Interreg CE programme represents a significant evolution from the previous programming period, particularly in terms of efficiency, flexibility, and risk management. The core innovations, i.e. **continuous reporting and monitoring, milestone tracking, and the separation of financial and activity reporting**, are widely acknowledged by both programme bodies and beneficiaries as significant improvements.

The current system combines 'real-time' monitoring of selected milestones and outputs, while keeping periodic disentangled financial and activity reporting, offering a **dual layer of oversight allowing for both close tracking of implementation and strategic assessment of progress**, ensuring early detection of delays or implementation issues and the timely achievement of results.

The **disentanglement of Joint Finance Report (JFR) and Joint Activity Report (JAR) has further improved the efficiency** and responsiveness of project reporting, including the speed of reimbursement. This structure allows for clearer insights into implementation performance and reduces administrative bottlenecks. Beneficiary survey data confirms the positive perception of these changes.

Financial verification processes have also been improved thanks to a much more extended use of SCOs and the improved functionality of the monitoring system. The **uptake of SCOs in project implementation is playing a key role in the simplification of financial reporting and verification**, reducing administrative cost and burden. Reporting is considered much simpler, reimbursement is significantly faster (with an overall average of 23 days compared to 89 days in 2014-2020 from financial report submission to MA payment to the LP), and the likelihood of financial corrections is lower. SCOs are particularly appreciated for travel and accommodation costs, where the burden of collecting documentation for audit trail has traditionally been high.

The case study confirms that the programme has adopted a pragmatic and well-balanced approach to the use of SCOs, combining real-cost reimbursement with off-the-shelf flat rates in a way that maximises simplification while ensuring audit reliability. The approach has produced tangible results, including a clearer and more predictable verification process, and a shift among NCs from exhaustive transaction-level checks toward more qualitative and risk-based control. The use of SCOs is viewed as one of the key factors enabling more transparent financial management at programme level. At the same time, an administrative burden to report staff costs still exists, as this cost category is still predominantly being reported and reimbursed as real cost (i.e. Option 2 which includes the off-the-shelf SCO to cover staff costs as 20% of direct costs is very rarely chosen by beneficiaries).

While all programme bodies praise the impact of SCOs for simplification, few NCs have highlighted that auditors at national level may still raise concerns regarding risks posed by SCOs in financial verification with expectations for documentary evidence sometimes persisting, indicating difficulties in transitioning away from real cost verifications.

From a forward-looking perspective, the programme follows with interest the ongoing discussion on the possible introduction of more performance-based approaches (PBA) in the 2028-2034 framework, though with a cautious position. The programme is open to testing such mechanisms at the upper (programme-EC) level, while maintaining the current SCO framework for beneficiaries. This approach might have to be revisited by all Interreg programmes in light of the recent EC legislative proposal for 2028-2034, which introduces a stronger emphasis on PBA.

Beneficiaries report receiving adequate and timely support for reporting. The JS provides detailed guidance on all aspects of the reporting process, including partner reports, JFRs, JARs, and continuous monitoring. Tools such as webinars, templates, FAQs, and the online helpdesk complement this support, while NCs and NCPs provide assistance at national level. Variability in the effectiveness of national support remains, with some countries receiving mixed feedback from beneficiaries, particularly in areas like Jems support and SCO reporting.

Taken together, these findings point to a **well-structured and performance-oriented monitoring and reporting system** which balances control, flexibility while reducing administrative burden for beneficiaries. Compared to 2014-2020, the current system can be considered more efficient, allowing for earlier risk detection, and supporting faster payments, all while reducing administrative costs and burdens for both programme bodies and beneficiaries. While minor challenges persist, the system clearly supports effective project implementation and risk mitigation.

Digitalisation, in particular through the introduction of **Jems has become an essential component ensuring more efficient project reporting and monitoring**. The system allows to support the entire project lifecycle from application and contracting to monitoring, reporting, and financial management, providing a centralised and user-friendly digital environment for both programme bodies and beneficiaries.

Jems enables the submission and assessment of applications, reporting of activities and finances, communication between programme bodies and project partners, and structured data validation. **Compared to the eMS system used in 2014-2020, Jems is widely regarded as more stable, intuitive, and comprehensive**. Beneficiaries appreciate features such as pre-submission checks and real-time feedback from programme bodies.

From the perspective of programme bodies, **Jems has significantly improved the quality and speed of document handling, reporting workflows, and financial verification.** Its integration with internal tools such as the Interreg CE Workflow Tool 2.0 further enhances internal coordination and oversight.

For financial verifications at national (NC) and programme level, automated checks, real-time data validation, and centralised storage of financial documentation contribute to a more efficient and error-reducing system.

Room for improvement remains, including the automation of risk-based sampling for checks at NC level, and compatibility with national control systems, which in some cases still require manual data transfers. Despite these limitations, the digitalisation of processes via Jems has led to a notable reduction in administrative costs and has increased the efficiency of project reporting and programme monitoring. The high level of satisfaction among both programme bodies and beneficiaries reflects the system's effectiveness in supporting integrated, fast and transparent operations.

PROGRESS IN TERMS OF
ACHIEVEMENT OF
PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES
AND EXPECTED RESULTS



The progress towards the overall programme goal, specific objectives, and expected results can be considered adequate and well aligned with the stage of implementation and the resources mobilised. The **programme is on a clear trajectory toward achieving its expected results** and final targets by 2029.

Progress in financial implementation is sound and continues to advance steadily. When including the projects selected under Call 3, all priorities have committed a substantial share of their allocated budgets, and commitments now exceed 90% of the total programme ERDF allocation. Priority 2 is slightly overcommitted (102% of initial allocation), followed by Priority 4 with 97%, Priority 1 with 81%, and Priority 3 with 66%. Certified expenditure has accelerated compared to early 2025, with certification rates ranging between 36% and 43.1%. Priority 2 shows the highest rate (43.1%), confirming particularly dynamic implementation, while Priority 3 remains lowest (36%) due to longer project cycles and a higher share of infrastructure or mobility-related actions. The JS confirms that all financial targets are on course and that the N+3 obligation is being met.

Interreg CE continues to rank **among the best-performing Interreg VI-B programmes** in terms of financial implementation: its current spending rate of 31% places it well ahead of the overall Interreg VI-B average (20%), confirming efficient programme management and an early consolidation of results.

In terms of indicator progress taking into account Call 1 and 2 projects, the programme's monitoring system, based on common Interreg output and result indicators, shows satisfactory advancement. RCO 87 (organisations cooperating across borders) has reached 78% of its programme target, representing one of the strongest performers. RCO 83 (joint strategies and action plans) also advances well, with 27% of the final target achieved. RCO 120 (projects supporting urban-rural linkages) has achieved 40% of its target. More implementation-oriented indicators such as RCO 84 (pilot actions) and RCO 116 (jointly developed solutions) remain lower, at 8% and 4% of the final targets, respectively, which reflects the longer delivery timeline and later reporting of tangible outputs. Looking at SO level targets, cooperation-oriented indicators (RCO87) generally perform strongly across almost all SOs - in line with the programme-level picture.

Implementation-oriented indicators RCO84 and RCO116, also display slower progress in most SOs, mirroring the longer time needed to develop, test and validate applied outputs. Strategies and action plans (RCO83) show more variable performance depending on the thematic area.

The first results are also emerging for result indicators, with RCR 79 (strategies and action plans taken up by organisations) at 15% of its target, while RCR 104 (solutions taken up or upscaled by organisations) is in its early stages (1%) and RCR 84 (organisations cooperating after project completion) is still at zero. These values remain consistent with the expected rhythm of implementation, given that most projects are still mid-term or just approaching the final phase. Based on current trajectories, the JS expects that final output targets will be met, particularly under SOs 2.2 and 2.3, while Calls 3 and 4 will ensure remaining gaps are partly closed.

Beneficiaries generally have a solid grasp of the indicator system, supported by the clarity of programme guidance, although there are nuances in how outputs and results are conceived. **Pilot actions** (RCO 84) emerged as the **most tangible and well-integrated cooperation element**, with project partners viewing them as the core of joint implementation. Conversely, jointly developed solutions (RCO 116) are sometimes understood as summaries of pilot results rather than as distinct, refined outputs with added value. This indicates that the conceptual distinction between pilots and solutions is not always fully internalised. Similarly, for result indicator solutions taken up or upscaled by organisations (RCR 104), projects often **struggle to differentiate between uptake and upscaling**, with many treating the terms as interchangeable. Distinctions between “strategies,” “action plans,” and “solutions” are sometimes blurred, suggesting the need for clearer operational guidance beyond the existing EC definitions. Continuous capacity-building for beneficiaries to improve the evaluability of project results is therefore key. Despite these conceptual challenges, the monitoring system provides a meaningful and functional structure for assessing programme performance.

The **thematic coverage of the programme is broadly aligned with its strategic objectives** and has been further strengthened following the selection of Call 3 projects. The targeted approach of Call 3 has successfully addressed the previously identified gaps in SOs 1.2, 2.5, 3.1 and 4.1, bringing them closer to their indicative budget levels and improving both thematic and territorial balance. Conversely, several SOs, in particular 2.3, 2.1 and 2.2, have exceeded their indicative allocations due to high-quality project demand.

PROGRAMME
COMMUNICATION AND
OUTREACH



Programme communication is embedded as a cross-cutting function that strategically supports applicants, beneficiaries, and stakeholders throughout the programme lifecycle. Rather than operating as a standalone component, communication is integrated into key programme processes, from application and implementation to capitalisation and stakeholder engagement, contributing directly to overarching programme objectives. In this sense, communication in Interreg CE is designed **not only as a mere tool for visibility but also a mechanism which aims to contribute to programme effectiveness by increasing stakeholder involvement and supporting knowledge transfer.**

The programme has moved from a fixed communication strategy model in 2014-2020 to an adaptive system based on annual communication work plans, which are updated regularly to reflect shifting communication needs, trends, user behaviours and stakeholder expectations. This flexibility allows the programme to respond dynamically to new challenges, ensuring relevance and impact. Communication objectives, key activities, timelines, and KPIs are outlined each year, with implementation progress monitored mainly through user feedback (e.g. event satisfaction, web traffic) rather than rigid output targets.

Communication tools are diverse and well-aligned with user needs. The programme website serves as the central digital access point for guidance, tutorials, FAQs, and interactive tools such as the Applicant Community. It effectively combines communication and service functions, offering clear user journeys for applicants and beneficiaries and hosting project websites to ensure long-term visibility and sustainability. The site's structure and accessible design have made it a key instrument for both transparency and support, while its continuous updates and interactive features reflect the programme's forward-looking approach to digital communication.

Social media campaigns have evolved into increasingly targeted outreach tools. Campaigns from 2021 to 2024 were increasingly tailored to specific thematic or territorial audiences, achieving cost-efficient results. The 2024 Call 3 social media campaign, which extended to include LinkedIn, marked a shift toward institutional engagement, complementing broader public outreach.

Event-based communication, including webinars, training events, national info-days, and hybrid formats, is another pillar. **Feedback from events indicates consistently high satisfaction (over 95%),** with participants praising the clarity of content, interaction formats, and opportunities for networking and peer learning. Physical and hybrid events have been especially effective in fostering exchange and idea generation.

At national level, **NCPs play a more active role in the current programming period,** though their effectiveness varies. While many offer targeted support through national events, consultations, and tailored communication, others face **limitations** due to **limited staff and budget or insufficient digital expertise.** Coordination with the JS has improved thanks to the NCP network and the integration of NCP activities into the annual communication work plans, but further capacity building for NCPs, especially in digital communication, could strengthen outreach.

Communication also supports the **capitalisation of results,** with a growing focus on **thematic storytelling,** synergy roundtables, and the promotion of project results via the website, social media, and targeted campaigns. Events like the 2023, 2024 and 2025 synergy roundtables helped connect first and second call projects, fostering knowledge transfer and collaborative opportunities.

In terms of visibility, Interreg CE holds a strong position compared to other transnational programmes, leading in YouTube subscriptions and Instagram following. When adjusted for population size, it ranks competitively across all major platforms.

**PARTNER INVOLVEMENT,
PARTNERSHIP
STRUCTURES AND
PRESENCE OF NEWCOMERS**



The programme has achieved a **well-balanced involvement of project partners across multiple dimensions** - types of organisations, geographical location, and experience level (i.e. balance between

newcomers and returning beneficiaries). The distribution of participating organisation types reflects the programme's capacity to attract relevant target groups and ensure alignment with its thematic priorities and territorial objectives.

In Calls 1 and 2, public authorities (national, regional and local) were the most represented category among beneficiaries (27%), followed by higher education and research institutions (22%) and interest groups, including NGOs (11%). SMEs accounted for around 9–10% of total beneficiaries, demonstrating the programme's capacity to engage private actors, while business support organisations and sectoral agencies also showed strong participation. In Call 3, however, the composition shifted toward a greater share of sectoral agencies (18%) and interest groups including NGOs (15%). Public authorities again represented the largest group (30%), while the share of higher education and research organisations declined markedly to 11%, and SME participation fell to 4%. These changes suggest that the thematic and territorial focus of Call 3, combined with the small-scale project format, attracted a wider spectrum of civil society and governance actors. LPs from higher education and research drastically dropped in Call 3, with a share of 8% compared to 40% in Call 1 and 2.

The geographical distribution of beneficiaries shows balanced participation among countries, with Italy (16%), Slovenia and Poland (13% each), Hungary (12%) and Croatia (10%) as main contributors, followed by Austria, Czechia and Germany (9% each) and Slovakia (6%). At NUTS 2 level, Zahodna and Vzhodna Slovenija, Budapest in Hungary and Zagreb in Croatia stand out as leading regions in terms of beneficiaries and ERDF amounts. Call 3 shows increased involvement of peripheral and lagging areas, particularly in Eastern Slovakia, Southern and Eastern Hungary and Southern and Eastern Poland. Around half of Call 3 beneficiaries are located in less developed regions, confirming alignment with the call's territorial focus.

Partnership size in standard projects (Call 1 and 2) is stable compared to the previous programming period, with an average of around 10 partners per project. Under Call 3, small-scale projects are characterised by smaller partnerships, with an average of five partners per project. Beneficiaries highlight the importance of strong leadership, thematic expertise, and implementation capacity over geographical diversity in defining successful partnerships.

The programme has made significant progress in attracting newcomers. Overall, 58% of current beneficiaries did not participate in the 2014–2020 period, compared to only 23% reported in the previous operational evaluation. Newcomers are predominantly project partners, while returning beneficiaries have increasingly taken on leadership roles: in Calls 1 and 2, about 10% of lead partners were former project partners in 2014–2020, reflecting successful capacity-building and upward mobility within partnerships. In Call 3, newcomers represent 57% of all beneficiaries and 48% of lead partners (12 out of 25), confirming that the small-scale format and the call's focus have further enhanced accessibility to new organisations with no prior experience in the programme.

The presence of newcomers is shaped not only by thematic attractiveness but also by underlying territorial and network dynamics. Newcomers are concentrated in metropolitan regions such as Budapest, Ljubljana, Vienna, Bratislava, Zagreb and Prague, while many other NUTS 3 regions record no newcomers. This spatial pattern reflects the role of established institutional ecosystems and dense professional networks, which newcomers themselves identify as their primary entry point into the programme. At the same time, the Call 3 small-scale format appears to mitigate some of these disparities by enabling the participation of organisations from less represented and rural regions and by lowering barriers for newcomers to take on leadership roles. The analysis also shows that the programme supports gradual capacity-building: several organisations that entered as newcomers in Calls 1–2 subsequently assumed lead partner roles in Call 3.

While newcomers generally reported smooth use of Jems and SCOs, they experienced a steeper learning curve regarding output and result indicators.

Associated partners play a mixed but generally positive role in partnerships. While some are deeply involved in policy uptake, pilot actions, and dissemination, others are more passive, often included for strategic or administrative purposes at the time of project proposal. Their involvement depends heavily on clear role definition and motivation from the main partners.

The **intensity of cooperation** among Interreg CE beneficiaries shows several patterns indicating a well-functioning cooperation environment. The geographical analysis shows that the most frequent cooperation links, defined as joint participation of two beneficiaries in more than one Interreg CE project, are concentrated in Slovenia (both NUTS2 regions), Friuli Venezia Giulia and Veneto in Italy, and the Budapest region in Hungary. Cross-border cooperation is particularly active between Austria and Hungary, Slovenia and Italy, and parts of Slovakia and Poland. Academic institutions and business support organisations play a key role in maintaining these cross-regional links.

According to the beneficiary survey, **while long-standing collaborations persist, half of survey respondents report no prior cooperation with current partners, suggesting a good level of partnership innovation. Most cooperation beyond the programme remains within Interreg, particularly other transnational programmes such as Interreg Alpine Space, Interreg Baltic Sea Region and Interreg Danube, or other EU schemes**, notably Horizon Europe. A notable share of project partnerships is built on prior cooperation: about 49% of beneficiaries report having previously collaborated with at least one of their current project partners, mostly within the Interreg CE framework, but also in other Interreg and EU-funded programmes (e.g. Horizon, Erasmus+, LIFE). This suggests that Interreg CE acts as a platform for both continuity and innovation in partnerships.

However, the intensity of cooperation beyond current projects remains selective. While 38% of survey respondents report ongoing cooperation with current project partners in other frameworks, these tend to involve only one or two partners. This indicates that partnerships in Interreg CE are often project-specific, although in many cases they build on previous collaborations or open doors to future ones.

Several factors facilitate sustained cooperation: beneficiaries emphasise that the quality of human and institutional relationships-rather than geographical proximity is the key determinant of partnership intensity. Conversely, obstacles include limited funding continuity, insufficient alignment among EU funding programmes, and administrative burdens that discourage small organisations from maintaining cooperation with other partners.

Finally, the analysis of cooperation intensity shows that while most partnerships involve new groups of actors, several stable collaborations persist across calls and priorities. Looking at partners cooperation in other overlapping transnational programmes, recurring partnerships can be observed, mostly for Slovenian and Austrian beneficiaries.

COORDINATION AND
SYNERGIES WITH
OTHER PROGRAMMES



The programme has a proactive approach to **coordination with other transnational Interreg programmes**, which is highly effective and efficient. Due to its focus on innovative programme management,

Interreg CE has a key role in strengthening the strategic position of Interreg within the EU. During programme implementation, regular exchange of information is given through formal and informal meetings with other transnational programmes, such as in particular with Interreg Danube Region, Interreg Baltic Sea Region, Interreg Euro MED and Interreg North Sea Region. Interviews indicate that continuous communication with MAs and JSs ensures collaboration on joint programme management challenges, common positions on new challenges for Interreg, and an on-going dialogue with DG REGIO and the European community for cross-border and transnational cooperation. Furthermore, ongoing information exchanges regarding Calls for application allow the programme to strategically avoid duplication and instead focus on fostering synergies. The CE Programme actively collaborates with INTERACT. At national level, Interreg CE occasionally participates in country-specific coordination mechanisms in Member States, for example in national Interreg internal meetings or conferences. Interviews with MA, JS and MC representatives unanimously confirm that efforts for coordination and creating synergies are perceived as positive, effective, successful and sufficient.

While CE Programme is a unique bridge with four **macro-regional strategies** (MRS), coordination is diffculted by the fact that the four MRS have slightly different governance and operational systems. The four MRS deal also with other Interreg Programmes in their geographical areas, adding complexity to the coordination work.

The Interreg CE Programme establishes **synergies with several EU instruments** to enhance complementarities throughout the programme lifecycle. Interreg CE Programme is a reference in Europe for actively engaging other programmes in their funding activities, such as the 2014-2020 Capitalisation Call in coordination with Horizon 2020. In 2021-2027, coordination is actively promoted with the 'Clean Energy Transition Partnership' and with cross-border cooperation programmes in the Central Europe area.

Within the overall area of coordination and synergies, a minor, yet important, share of the work goes to the coordination and communication with other programmes to **avoid double-funding**. The Programme has several mechanisms in place that are used especially in the phase of the assessment of applications. At the same time, applications are checked against potential **synergies at project level**. These are then noted and later on communicated to the funded projects and used to plan further thematic or cross-project activities to strengthen synergies, such as the "Synergy roundtables" that were organised in March 2023, September 2023 and October 2024 or the CENTRAL EUROPE conference in May 2025. In this sense, detecting potential double-funding is also used to detect synergies, increasing the efficiency of the overall task. To this end, initiatives such as the Interreg CE and Interreg DRP synergy building exercise in 2024-2025 is worth highlighting. Interviews show the important role of digital platforms and tools in promoting synergies and facilitating opportunities for knowledge transfer and partnerships. The survey to beneficiaries confirms the effective synergy building in the Interreg CE Programme. 61.7% of the current CE projects see synergies of their projects with other projects (of these, 46% to other programmes such as Horizon, LIFE and national funding). 85% of respondents find such synergies useful.

Interreg CE Programme has a comprehensive approach towards **capitalisation** of existing outputs and results based on multiple tools and instruments, using three levels of action. First, it actively supports projects to ensure effective capitalisation of outputs and results. Second, it promotes events and activities to bring projects together and enhance the impact of project results in certain thematic fields. Third, it actively collaborates with other Interreg Programmes, other EU funding schemes as well as with INTERACT. Evidence for the effectiveness of the approach of the Programme to stimulate the use of project outputs and

results is the result of the survey, where 49.7% of project beneficiaries (n=167) confirm that their current Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE project use (e.g. builds upon) outputs and/or results from previous thematically related projects.

As in the previous programming period, the programme adopts a unique and proactive approach with its **Strategic call for capitalisation** (Call 4, launched in September 2025), where cross-border and transnational Interreg projects are invited to team up efforts to reduce the effects of borders on flows and functional linkages among central European regions. A high contribution to maximise the effects of Interreg projects in the programme area and to enhance the impact on the territory can be expected.

Regarding **joint dissemination**, the CE Programme employs a robust cross-channel communication strategy to ensure that project results reach diverse audiences. At national level, dissemination is echoed in national languages and strategically enhanced.