

European Week of Regions and Cities 2017



Workshop 10 October 2017

Regional and intermediate policy makers, drivers for maritime cooperation



PASSAGE 
Interreg Europe



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On 10 October 2017, PASSAGE project partnership organised a workshop in Puglia Region offices in Brussels, in the framework of the European Week of Regions and Cities.

Mr Kaarel Kose, policy advisor within Harju County Government (Estonia) and moderator of the workshop, highlighted the background context behind the workshop with PASSAGE project and the European Straits Initiative, launched in 2010. He introduced the topic around the ***“specificities of areas that have a border and the sea separating two shores”***. *“Maritime border, from our experience, is not only an obstacle, it is also a connecting point”*, he said. Based on the experience of PASSAGE project, he explained that *“the maritime issues aren’t the main issues for the cross-border cooperation between areas separated by the sea”*. As an illustration, he mentioned the example of the Gulf of Finland: *“in Tallinn-Helsinki, we are talking about twin-cities (...) and to realise its full potential we want to combine our innovation spots, our labour markets to grow as an economic area together and draw the benefits from that.”*



Ms Carolyn McKenzie, Head of sustainable business and communities within Kent County Council (United Kingdom), explained that one of the main challenges when it comes to cross-border cooperation is *“to build policy-case for our politicians”*. ***“Why should we be working at cross-border level? What is it that we cannot do otherwise?”***, she asked.

After a short presentation of PASSAGE project, co-funded by Interreg Europe, the panellists were invited to join the debate.

Part 1 - Cross-border cooperation on maritime borders, what benefits for inhabitants?

Mr Jean-Marc Venineaux, team leader for Macro-regions, Transnational/interregional co-operation, IPA and Enlargement within the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy at the European Commission, explained that the EU programmes including Interreg programmes have to address the needs of territories. However, he highlighted that *“there are 500 million inhabitants in Europe (...). From the Commission perspective, we are trying to design a policy for 28 Member States (...). We are trying to find a common denominator for all trying to participate in a common project. Cooperation, and the programmes supporting cooperation, are the support to this policy”*. Thus, it seems clear that cooperation programmes cannot answer the needs of inhabitants as individuals; they need to understand that *“they are all part of a bigger region, where they share joint issues, (...) which is called Europe”*. *“We need to start with a change of mind-set”*, he explained, ***“what is important in cooperation is cooperation first”***.

“Inhabitants should be concerned by cooperation and for that you need to find a way to address their direct needs”

Mr Venineaux, DG Regio

Building on this statement, Mr Philipp Schwartz, representing Interact “Knowledge of the seas” network, explained that the objectives of the funding programmes supporting cooperation are set by Member States, not by inhabitants. He questioned the target: *“who is there for whom? Is EU funding here to satisfy the individual needs of beneficiaries? I would say no”*. As such, the thematic

concentration asked by Member States “does not go very well with horizontal issues such as maritime cooperation”. Mr Schwartz insisted on the difference between cooperation across maritime borders and maritime cooperation. He explained that in general cooperation across a border is already difficult, but that it is “even more challenging to bring people to cooperate across a maritime border”. “**There is lots of psychology**”, he said, referring to the mental barrier and cultural issues.

Ms Åsa Bjerling, executive secretary of the Baltic Sea Commission of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR), explained that to convince inhabitants “you have to convince yourself”. “We have to be very clear on why we are doing this”, she said, “what is the added value? What is the benefit? (...) What could be that we are willing for the European project as a whole? **You have to be tangible to put your wallet behind your heart.** (...) We are not only asking for EU funding, we ask for prioritisation”. She also appealed for a change of perspective within cooperation: “we have to come back to the long term relation, to bring the projects back to the regional policies. The European affair is not an international affair any longer, it is domestic to a large extent, it is regional and even more so in the cross-border regions”.

When talking about the role of local and regional authorities, Ms Alexandra Lafont, representing the Transfrontier Operational Mission (MOT), explained that “you need to have a certain level of services” for the population to be aware of the cross-border opportunities and called for “very concrete projects that benefit to inhabitants so that they feel they can do business together”. Taking the example of Corsica and Sardinia, she demonstrated that the missing ferry connection during the wintertime, because of the lack of tourists at that time of the year, has a big impact on the possibility for Corsica and Sardinia populations to do business together all year long.

“We are talking about how do we make inhabitants benefit from the cooperation and how do we make the inhabitants aware of the benefits of cross-border cooperation”

Ms Lafont, MOT



Ms McKenzie highlighted an important change of paradigm in the UK: “local government is changing, **residents are no longer residents, they are customers**”. “We are driven by customer needs, what they want, what their demands are, which has made our services change completely – how we deliver them, what we deliver to them”, she explained, “and it’s the same with cross-border issues, we need to see them in the context of the customer”. “We need to be very careful about why and how we involve residents and customers because we tend to consult them a lot”, which sometimes generate a step back in the will of residents to be involved. She explained that the focus needs to be on “what’s the outcome we want to achieve?”.

Several obstacles to the involvement of inhabitants and political representatives in cooperation were highlighted, in particular the language. Solutions stand in education, culture and language projects to support an easier access to cooperation for local people, but also for example in the increased use of translation. Ms Bjerling highlighted in particular the “need from regional stakeholders to lower the

thresholds to access cooperation on topics that matter to them". Ms Lafont called for more support to **"projects that are involving the citizens or directly touching the citizens"**. "How can we still fund these people-to-people projects even if they are not innovative?", she asked, highlighting the difficulty for such projects to arise in the context of thematic specialisation and strong focus on innovation in the current programming period 2014-2020. "School exchanges are often not innovative, but they are important to reach the youngest citizens, the citizens of tomorrow and to open their mind about the other side of the border, the European construction as a whole: this is a major issue for maritime borders that sometimes have no cultural proximity", also explained Ms Lafont.

"Demand-driven cooperation is very easy to say, very difficult to do"

Ms Bjering, CPMR

Part 2 - Interreg programmes, the Holy Grail of cross-border cooperation in maritime border regions?

"Does Interreg solve everything? Of course not! The tools need to be intertwined and combined."

Ms Lafont, MOT

Discussing more in details the role of Interreg in cross-border cooperation on maritime borders, 28 years after Interreg programmes were created, panellists highlighted the great need for coordination between the different tools and policies. "We are talking of 4% of the cohesion policy going to Interreg", explained Ms Bjering. **"We have to be clear about what Interreg can do and what Interreg cannot do"**, said Mr Schwartz, "the share of Interreg is trust-building in a bigger picture. (...) Interreg is exactly the soft thing that you cannot measure".

Several obstacles for access to Interreg funding were pointed out. Ms McKenzie insisted on the need for more **"understandability and flexibility"**, acknowledging that **"often trying to fit what we want to do into the language of the bid is quite tricky"**. **"The ability to link funding priorities would be very helpful"**, she said, explaining that many projects could fit within several priorities because they tackle very transversal issues such as economic development, environment or health. Ms McKenzie also questioned **"the time to produce an application, from concept note to full application"** appreciated as **"very lengthy and costly"**, and called for an agreement based on the general appreciation of the concept idea of the project and an accompaniment of the project development by the programme if it fits within the defined priorities.



"Interreg is not the Holy Grail; Interreg is maybe the peanut of the Holy Grail"

Mr Schwartz, Interact

Panellists also discussed the question of defining priorities for the programmes, with a key issue: what would be the impact of a very low budget divided in many priorities? Ms Bjerling called for a bottom-up approach, inviting regions to *“stop to ask the Commission and propose instead”*. *“We need to be architecting”* the programmes, she said.

Mr Venineaux concluded: *“When we are talking about growth and jobs, it’s also about competition worldwide”*. ***“Coopetition, cooperation and competition: this is exactly where we are”***, he said, *“the regions in Europe compete with each other but they are also invited to cooperate to get more benefits from their specific assets in the competing world. This is what we should have in mind, what we should explain again and again.”* *“Maybe there are too many different instruments and programmes”*, he also wondered, *“maybe the ideal world would be to have one single fund that regardless the objective, you just give money to people, that would be easier for sure!”*.

Part 3 - Post-2020: what future for cooperation in maritime border regions?

Mr Venineaux explained that the proposal for post-2020 budget would be displayed in May 2018. Tackling the issue of how should be designed the future cohesion policy, he explained that the ideal feature would probably be to ***“integrate Interreg in mainstream programmes”***, with a systematic approach to cooperation for all projects when it can be relevant, or to have only one large cooperation programme for all types of cooperation *“including bilateral cooperation”*. He also explained that the European Commission is now considering the possibility of *“not allocating all the money at the beginning of the programming period”*, in order to be able to face new issues arising during the programming period. One of the principles could also be that money should be allocated based on results of the projects, not on the invoice, which *“may be a very simple way”* although Mr Venineaux recognised it may be a *“big risk”*. The Commission remains open to *“everything going in the sense of simplification”*, he said.



Coming to the specificities of maritime borders, Mr Venineaux explained that there are *“still many maritime programmes developing ‘mirror projects’”* despite joint needs and joint issues. Mr Schwartz related the results of interviews carried out with 13 maritime Interreg programmes to *“ask them about their very honest opinion about maritime cooperation post-2020”*. Although not reflecting any official opinion of the programmes, the answers to the question *“how could maritime cooperation be more efficient and easier post-2020?”* provide a few interesting thoughts. Some operational representatives of the programmes highlighted that the ***“current framework is too narrow for maritime cooperation”*** and wondered if a maritime specific objective on cooperation would not be more efficient, although

the question remains “*what exactly in this maritime specific objective could be done, should be done?*”. Some of the interviewed persons highlighted that “*a good starting point is also strategic frameworks*” such as sea basin strategies. “*Overcoming the mind-set obstacle of distance: this would be crucial that maritime cooperation focuses on this*”, also related Mr Schwartz. The interviews carried out also call for “*less flexibility*” in the programming preparation, “*giving clear guidance of what is understood as maritime cooperation, saying that for maritime cooperation you may need a bit more top-down approach than for land border cooperation to overcome this feeling of distance*”. Finally, interrogations remain about the “*issue of private partners’ involvement*”, some considering that their involvement is missing and others considering that Interreg may have different objectives. The specific question of involvement of non-EU countries in the cooperation process was also highlighted, for example Russia when it comes to cooperation in the Gulf of Finland: “*we cannot solve the issues without them*”. Of course, the key issue of Brexit was also stressed as an important challenge for cooperation in the Channel and North Sea areas.

Ms Bjering insisted on the need for an approach based on local priorities. “*Being involved in the governance is extremely important (...) to ensure the stakeholders needs*”, she said. Mr Schwartz highlighted the “*great variety of topics in need of being tackled*” in maritime border regions, according to the different Interreg programmes. Ms Lafont also said that “*topics are very different depending on the regions*” but that in general “*legal and normative obstacles need to be tackled*”. She questioned: “***How do we use the tools (Interreg, EGTC...) at the service of the cooperation and the needs of the regions? (...) How do we combine the different instruments?***”.



“The main challenge remains for the regions to agree and coordinate their work to say: this is our priority”

Ms Bjering, CPMR

Finally, Mr Venineaux concluded with a series of questions to be raised by local authorities in maritime border regions: “*what makes you so specific? What is uniting you? Where can you find agreement and consensus to say this is what we need to work on on our border?*”.