

## Report

### Interreg post 2027 stakeholders' consultation meeting

#### Subject of consultation

#### **Shape of the post 2027 Interreg programme on the Polish-Ukrainian and Polish-Belarusian borderlands**

#### Objectives of consultation

1. Identify and analyse the key spheres and problems in the region that need solutions and can be addressed by Interreg post 2027 programme;
2. Assess conditions and locate points for cooperation;
3. Collect opinions, propositions and define probable directions of Interreg post 2027 for the region.

Note: The required timing of the meeting is 2-3 hours

#### Administration

Region	Podlaskie Region
Conducted by (entity)	Podlaskie Voivodeship Marshal's Office in Bialystok
Place/venue/address	Wyszynskiego St. 1, 15-369 Bialystok
Date	October 2, 2024

#### **Part 1.**

#### Information about respondents

Number of participants	80 persons 58 entities represented
Categories of participants, structure and share of participation	<p>Note: Please register participants in the list that will be further attached to the report (List should obligatory contain name, surname, function, name of entity represented, type of entity, signature).</p> <p>The following groups of stakeholders shall be invited and represented in the meeting:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.) Regional, urban, local government authorities;</li> <li>2.) Healthcare institutions;</li> <li>3.) Education institutions (schools, universities, academies), training or research centres;</li> <li>4.) Cultural institutions (such as museums, galleries etc.);</li> <li>5.) Organizations responsible for nature/environment protection;</li> <li>6.) Bodies in charge of disaster and emergency risk management;</li> <li>7.) Economic/social partners, associations, SMEs;</li> <li>8.) NGOs (indicating a sphere of activity);</li> </ol>

	<p>9.) Other type (what exactly)</p> <p>Please provide the division of the audience into each of the type. Example:          Healthcare institutions – 30% (3 entities)          NGO`s – 20% (2 entities)          Education institutions – 50% (5 entities)          Etc.</p> <p>The meeting was attended by people representing the following areas:          Local or regional government – 42,50% (34 persons)          Healthcare institutions – 25% (20 persons)          Cultural institutions – 13,75% (11 persons)          Education institutions - 7,5% (6 persons)          Organizations responsible for nature/environment protection – 3,75% (3 persons)          NGO's – 2,5% (2 persons)          Organizations responsible for security – 2,5% (2 persons)          Organizations responsible for road infrastructure – 1,25% (1 person)          Other (Tax Administration Chamber in Bialystok) – 1,25% (1 person)</p> <p>Local or regional government – 46,55% (27 entities)          Healthcare institutions – 22,41% (13 entities)          Cultural institutions – 12,07% (7 entities)          Education institutions - 6,91% (4 entities)          Organizations responsible for nature/environment protection – 3,45% (2 entities)          NGO's – 3,45% (2 entities)          Organizations responsible for security – 1,72% (1 entity)          Organizations responsible for road infrastructure – 1,72% (1 entity)          Other (Tax Administration Chamber in Bialystok) – 1,72% (1 entity)</p>
<p>The level of awareness of the audience about the Poland-(Belarus)-Ukraine / Interreg and EU/Donor funded projects</p>	<p>Please assess the audience according to the level of awareness/involvement of the organisation in the EU funded projects in the region and specify what is the quantity and % share of each group in the total quantity of participants (it is best to cover that in the registration):</p> <p><b>Low</b> – heard of EU-funded projects without knowing details on the financing conditions, priorities, objectives etc.;</p> <p><b>Medium</b> – aware of the EU-funded projects with basic knowledge on conditions, examples of projects in the region or indirectly involved in the implementation;</p> <p><b>High</b> – directly involved in the Programme/projects implementation as a Monitoring Committee member or</p>

	<p>beneficiary of current or previous Poland-(Belarus)-Ukraine programme edition.</p> <p><b>10 participants indicated that they had a low level of awareness - Low</b> – heard of EU-funded projects without knowing details on the financing conditions, priorities, objectives etc.;</p> <p><b>54 participants indicated that they had a medium level of awareness - Medium</b> – aware of the EU-funded projects with basic knowledge on conditions, examples of projects in the region or indirectly involved in the implementation;</p> <p><b>16 participants indicated that they had a high level of awareness - High</b> – directly involved in the Programme/projects implementation as a Monitoring Committee member or beneficiary of current or previous Poland-(Belarus)-Ukraine programme edition</p>
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## Part 2.

### What is Interreg

The audience should be informed about the basic data on the Programme (PL-UA/PBU) - financing structure, area, cross-border cooperation frame, successful projects in the region. The information should be adapted to the participants' awareness on the issue – if it is medium-high – please communicate rather the analysis of the previous programmes (challenges, resolutions, lessons learnt etc.). Highly informed participants may assist in sharing the basic information for enriching the discussion.

*The Consultation Meeting of Stakeholders from the Podlaskie Voivodeship Interreg Post2027* began on October 2, 2024 at 10 a.m. At the beginning, Ms. Izabela Lopic, Deputy Director of the Department of Funds and Programs Management of the Podlaskie Voivodeship Marshal's Office, welcomed all participants and speakers and discussed the purpose of the meeting, pointing out the importance of the part of the meeting intended for discussion of key areas and problems requiring support in the Interreg Post 2027 program. Ms. Director also briefly told the participants how the program has changed over 20 years including the change of the program area after the suspension of cooperation with Belarus, which, due to the close neighborhood and established long-term cooperation, was of great importance for beneficiaries from Podlaskie Voivodeship.

Then, Ms. Lopic gave the floor to Mr. Stanisław Bielanski, Head of the Joint Secretariat of Interreg NEXT Poland – Ukraine 2021-2027, who began the part of the meeting devoted to the presentation of information about the Interreg NEXT Poland – Ukraine Program. Due to the fact that most of the gathered participants have already implemented or are implementing projects from the Program and have medium or high level of knowledge about the program, basic information about the program was presented in terms of the next part of the meeting, i.e. discussion on the future of the Interreg Program. First of all, information was presented about the program area, budget, priorities and specific objectives, types of projects, partnership in projects, principles of project implementation, possibilities of support for applicants from the Joint Secretariat, as well as information about the calls planned in this perspective under the Small Projects Fund.

### Experience of the region

Please indicate which PBU/PL-UA projects (or other CBC projects) implemented in the region proved most successful in the stakeholders' opinion, brought strongest results, had highest impact etc.

Urszula Kaplinska, who is the project coordinator at the Jędrzej Sniadecki Voivodeship Hospital in Białystok, was invited to share her experience in implementing projects from the Interreg PBU/PL-UA Program. This hospital has been successfully implementing projects in cross-border programs for 12 years and has already implemented 8 projects in cooperation with beneficiaries from Belarus, Lithuania and the Kaliningrad Oblast, and in the current financial perspective it is implementing 3 projects with partners from Ukraine in the PL-UA Program, including 1 Large Infrastructure Project. Ms. Kaplinska presented to the participants the results of 2 projects in which the hospital was the lead partner, implemented from the PBU Program in the previous financial perspective in partnership with hospitals in Belarus: the Minsk Regional Clinical Hospital and the Grodno University Clinic. Ms. Kaplinska shared with the participants her opinion that she regrets the suspension of cooperation with Belarus, "simply cooperation with people who, just like us, learned to implement these projects together with us."

Ms. Kaplinska admitted that the role of lead partner entails greater responsibility for project implementation, which also has its advantages because it allows for maintaining control over the entire project. Ms. Kaplinska talked about the achieved effects of the projects, as well as the experience of implementing the projects during the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to extend the duration of the projects because of this, as well as changes in the organization of meetings to online meetings.

Then, Ms. Kaplinska mentioned the positive aspects of project implementation, such as: the possibility of purchasing modern equipment, gaining experience in cooperation with partners in project implementation, exchanging good practices with partners, establishing fruitful cooperation and establishing interpersonal contacts.

Among the difficulties, she mentioned: a large amount of documentation to read, which is additionally available in English, complicated procedures and checklists for verifying expenditure and public procurement, a long project implementation cycle from initiating cooperation to final settlement, the need to engage own funds and provide own contribution, as well as a language barrier (although in the case of projects with Belarus it was simpler) and cultural barrier.

Another unexpected experience in the implementation of the project was political issues and the deterioration of relations with Belarus, which had a direct impact on the atmosphere in projects and during online meetings, and which was not the fault of any of the partners. In the current perspective, the hospital is implementing projects with partners from Ukraine, which is a new experience and challenge.

In the end, Ms. Kaplinska admitted that the implementation of cross-border projects is time-consuming and labor-intensive, while it brings great satisfaction.

**Part 3.**

Analysis of feedback and input on key questions

Note: After introductory input and familiarization with the audience please initiate further joint discussion and exchange of opinions of the stakeholders on each of below key questions.

<p>1. Is location next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?</p>	<p>As a summary of opinions of stakeholders please put the jointly outlined general answer whether the location next to a border is more opportunity or disadvantage and explain what key arguments state for the chosen answer.</p>
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	<p>The participants of the meeting believe that the location near the border carries both opportunities and threats, and considering the current geopolitical situation, living near the border is a challenge, because it is a threat that we will not eliminate, but efforts are being made to face this challenge and the projects implemented could function in the new reality. In addition, for the health care institutions located here, their role in terms of conflicts or other threats will be crucial.</p> <p>Among the opportunities, the participants mentioned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the possibility of participating in cross-border programs and the possibility of obtaining additional funds for the development of the institution and for improving the quality of services provided based on the exchange of good practices with partners from abroad.</li> <li>- For the cultural center, being located close to the border is or was a very big opportunity due to the fantastic contacts with the Belarusian side. Cooperation with the Ukrainian side was smaller because the cooperation took place in the perspective of 2004-2006, and not in the subsequent ones. Due to the current situation, cooperation with Ukraine is being developed.</li> <li>- A chance to obtain financial support</li> </ul> <p>Threats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the location is a threat in terms of the desire to implement international projects with partners from other countries, especially from Western or Southern Europe, because in their opinion "we are in the middle of a war". The perception of our border reality from outside is inadequate to our sense of threat and the implementation of the Erasmus program is difficult due to the outflow of students from other countries, because they do not want to come here - similarly to partners in research projects.</li> <li>- the exchange of good practices with partners from outside the European Union, e.g. from Belarus, can be problematic due to different quality standards (there are higher standards in the Union), the exchange of good practices does not fully match the standards of the European Union</li> <li>- in road construction projects, roads with an appropriate load-bearing capacity are built to the border - "this is a beautiful road for tanks, if Belarus does not change its policy, they will have a motorway to enter us"</li> </ul>
<p>2. Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area ?</p>	<p>Please work on the joint identification of the region's most actual fields to be addressed in frames of Interreg orientation.</p>

	<p>Please list maximum 5 from below and arrange the list from the most to less actual. If other arise please add to the list.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Joint cultural heritage;</li> <li>- Health services and healthy lifestyle promotion;</li> <li>- Protection of environment;</li> <li>- Responding to natural and human related threats and hazards</li> <li>- Cooperation between research / science / academic centres</li> <li>- Promotion of entrepreneurship</li> <li>- Facilitations for SME cross-border operability</li> <li>- Easy employment in the neighbouring country</li> <li>- Tourism development</li> <li>- Networking research and enterprises to innovate</li> <li>- Joint sport events</li> <li>- Border security</li> <li>- Road infrastructure</li> <li>- Public transport crossing the border</li> <li>- Social integration</li> <li>- Strengthening local identity</li> <li>- New technologies / innovativeness development and promotion</li> <li>- Other – what exactly?</li> </ul>
	<p>List of support areas mentioned by participants in the future financial perspective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Health</li> <li>- Environment</li> <li>- Tourism and Culture</li> <li>- Education enriched with a research component (scientific cooperation) and commercialization of research</li> <li>- Accessibility</li> </ul>
<p>3. What currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced?</p>	<p>Please discuss the aspect of cooperation and summarise maximum 5 positive points agreed in the audience.</p> <p>Examples:          Creation of joint natural park areas;          Shared health services;          Jointly coordinated security/emergency services - fire-fighters operations across the border, etc.</p> <hr/> <p>Among the positive aspects of cooperation that should be maintained or strengthened, the following were mentioned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- support of the Regional Contact Point in Bialystok, which is particularly helpful in finding partners,</li> <li>- the possibility of transferring funds saved during the project implementation (e.g. post-tender savings) to other activities related to those already implemented in the project</li> </ul>

<p>4. What currently does not work well in this cooperation and should be improved?</p>	<p>Please discuss the aspect of cooperation and summarise maximum 5 negative issues agreed in the audience.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <p>Nature preservation practices in a shared river basin are not unified;</p> <p>Exchanges of practical experience between places facing the same issues are complicated.</p>
	<p>The most common negative aspects of cooperation that should be improved include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficulties in crossing the border, which is associated with problems in organizing meetings, trainings and any events that cannot be organized online</li> <li>- Concerns about implementing "people to people" projects due to the geopolitical situation</li> <li>- Too complicated and extensive application forms - it is necessary to strengthen the level of accessibility of application forms so that they are not so extensive - in comparison to national applications, which are adapted to be as user-friendly as possible for applicants and contain all the most necessary information. Considering that the application for funding is often completed in 3 languages, partners must understand each other very well. Therefore, the simpler the application form, the easier and faster the assessment process and then preparation for the agreement will be. It was also indicated as a good solution to present the project concept to assessors, e.g. at online meetings before the project assessment process begins, in order to better illustrate the applicants' intention to assessors.</li> <li>- lack of support for research and development - it was proposed to limit funds for roads and allocate these funds for research and development. The Podlaskie Voivodeship is a center where many students come, and the possibility of financing research and implementing their ideas will make the region even more attractive.</li> </ul>
<p>5. What are major obstacles for a good cross-border cooperation in your area?</p>	<p>On the issues summarized above please provide the major obstacles that interfere these issues to be duly solved.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <p>Low and uneven economic development;</p> <p>Little knowledge of programme and/or partner country language;</p> <p>Uneven competence and salary level of local authorities personnel, etc.</p>
	<p>The most important obstacles to cooperation include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the armed conflict in Ukraine, which makes it very difficult to implement projects in this financial</li> </ul>

	<p>perspective, e.g. the partner from Podlaskie has information that training participants from Ukraine (men) will have a problem crossing the border to participate in the planned technical training organized in Podlaskie. Due to the nature of the training, it cannot be conducted online, which is why the training has been postponed for now.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The war prevents active participants from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine from participating in cultural events. The war, which has been going on for 2 years now, has affected the dialogue and exchange in meetings organized in Poland.</li> <li>- during the implementation of the project with Belarus, there was concern about the safety of people and a reluctance to send employees of the institution abroad</li> <li>- the lack of opportunities to implement projects with Belarus</li> </ul>
<p>6. Are there things you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? Why?</p>	<p>Please collect probable measures/goals and reasons. Examples:</p> <p>Involvement of SME as partners to strengthen financial and operational capability cannot be done to regulative limitations of programme rules;</p> <p>Participants in the meeting listed the following examples of what is currently lacking and what they would like to be able to implement under Interreg:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- there is a lack of support for institutional care for the patient, i.e. support for nursing homes, as there is a general shift away from institutional care and this closes off further ways to raise funds for, for example, thermal modernization. Yet such facilities still exist and would also like to modernize, improve, be green and serve the patient. Despite the support for families and the move away from institutional care, in many situations these families cannot provide such care themselves for various reasons.</li> <li>- lack of possibility to implement infrastructure investment activities in the "design and build" formula. Often institutions plan investments, but do not prepare for these investments until they have the funds for them, which is why they often do not have technical documentation at the time of submitting applications for funding.</li> </ul>
<p>7. What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Interreg?</p>	<p>Please put the propositions that are new to the programme.</p> <p>Among the novelties in the future Interreg that participants would like to find are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Higher amounts of funding per project</li> <li>- Separation of the culture component from the tourism component</li> <li>- Increased funds for culture</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Possibility of implementing projects in the area of scientific research, because currently available funding for such partnership projects is directed exclusively to partners from European Union countries</li> <li>- Possibility of a longer period of project implementation</li> <li>- Return to the possibility of settling expenses with the euro exchange rate from the month in which the expense was incurred. This allowed for ongoing checking of the budget value left to be spent and faster planning of what changes in the project can be possibly applied for</li> <li>- More flexibility and ability to expand eligible costs</li> <li>- providing a more convenient tool for project settlement and application</li> <li>- establishing a single level of indirect costs without division into cost categories (a specific percentage of expenditure on infrastructure and equipment)</li> <li>- enabling construction activities in cultural projects as an element of the project. Culture has huge needs and resources that could be mobilized and this type of support, even in a smaller percentage, would be a good solution.</li> </ul>
<p>8. Is there a need for some infrastructure projects?</p>	<p>Please collect opinions/propositions of joint infrastructure projects may be established in the region in cooperation with adjacent region of the partner country.</p> <p>Participants expressed their opinion that infrastructure projects are very important and they are in favor of having as many infrastructure projects as possible, with little connection to soft actions. Infrastructure projects are also very much needed in the area of tourism.</p> <p>Opinions on infrastructure projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- (Zbujna commune, Łomża powiat) "From the commune's perspective, we are most interested in building something, in creating some infrastructure. (...) In this perspective, we will not build anything from these so-called hard projects, and we, as a local government, would be most interested in this type of hard projects.</li> <li>- One of the participants suggested that we should perhaps abandon infrastructure projects for the construction of roads, railways, etc., because the budget for this program is too small for this type of large investment. However, it may be worth dividing infrastructure projects into: 1. Infrastructure projects that would complement the potential of a given area, develop some idea 2. Infrastructure projects that will be complete - started from an idea to implementation through research and activities.</li> </ul>

<p>9. What should be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in another country (governance)?</p>	<p>Please list measures on governance that would be applicable for improvement of the cooperation between bordering countries/regions.</p>
	<p>Among the problems in cross-border cooperation, the event participants mentioned primarily the problems resulting from the war in Ukraine and the crisis situation with Belarus and Russia, which go beyond the capabilities of the Interreg program management. In addition, the need for simpler and more accessible application forms and a project settlement system was mentioned. Project partners often use 3 languages, and when implementing a project they must understand each other very well, which is why a more user-friendly application and project settlement system is needed.</p>

**Part 4.**

Conclusions, other topics of discussion

<p>Please put here everything what was not covered above, but raised/expressed during discussion.</p>
<p>In addition, the participants of the meeting raised the following topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Due to the location in the eastern part at the border of the European Union, due to the changed geopolitical situation, the funds in the Program should be larger and support the cross-border area in many thematic areas.</li> <li>- It is worth repeating this type of consultation meeting halfway through the implementation of this financial perspective, because each perspective was different and it is difficult to say at the moment what is worth changing in the future perspective, because in the current perspective, the beneficiaries are still at the initial stage of project implementation - only some of the beneficiaries have signed the agreement, and some are in the negotiation phase before signing the agreement.</li> </ul>

Overall assessment of the meeting by the organizer

<p>Were the objectives of the consultation achieved? Please refer to each objective and describe the level of engagement of the stakeholders into discussion.</p>
<p>The Interreg Post2027 Consultation Meeting organized by the Podlaskie Voivodeship Marshal's Office in Bialystok in cooperation with the Joint Secretariat of the Interreg NEXT Poland - Ukraine Program was met with great interest from the program beneficiaries, but also from stakeholders who have not yet applied under the program, who came to the meeting in large numbers. During the event, the assumed goals of the meeting were achieved and opinions, problems and ideas regarding the future of the program were heard. Participants shared their opinions on the key areas that should be supported in the future perspective, where, in addition to those already supported, there was a proposal to support culture, tourism, research and development, as well as support for scientific cooperation. Participants also emphasized how important the support from the program for infrastructure investments is and how important it is for this type of support to be continued in the future perspective. Among the most frequently occurring problems and threats, the topic of the geopolitical situation appeared, i.e. the war in Ukraine and the crisis situation with Belarus. Due to the location of the Podlaskie Voivodeship, partners in most projects were from Belarus and over</p>

the years of cooperation, strong contacts were established, which suddenly and independently of the partners had to break off. The mentioned difficulties in crossing the border, especially for men from Ukraine, as well as the state of threat on the territory of Ukraine are a significant obstacle to the implementation of soft actions in projects. Despite the difficulties in implementing projects in the current situation, stakeholders see an opportunity for fruitful cooperation with Ukraine in the current and future financial perspective. Moreover, during the meeting, **it was heard among the participants that there is a great need for special financial support, directed to border areas located in the immediate vicinity of territories where war and a crisis situation with Belarus are taking place.** This support is necessary to help survive this difficult time and strengthen border regions facing the socio-economic effects of the geopolitical crisis. In addition, an important issue for stakeholders is also the creation of more user-friendly and simpler IT systems that facilitate the application and settlement of projects.

### Interesting quotes

Please collect interesting, important quotes from the participants on the matter of future post 27 programme.

Please put Name of participant, Quote in "".

Interesting statements by participants:

Renata Zakrzewska Augustow City Hall: "I think that this type of meeting would be worth repeating when we are at least halfway through the implementation of this financial perspective"

Mr. Marek Skrypko (culture area) "If we want to approach realistically the purpose of our meeting here (...) i.e. the financial resources that we need, we could leave the name of this program and divide the budgets into individual countries so that everyone could implement something in their own country and then it would be real. Then we will be able to do something and let's agree that we will do it in a partnership program, but not in partnership, because even going to Ukraine seems to me to be as dangerous as going to Belarus at the moment. (...) I don't think that if we had such a partnership project, if we had to send someone there, it would be simple, easy and obvious, I think quite the opposite." You can continue to implement projects in the same way they are, that each partner can implement activities in their own area, without adding aspects related to joint meetings, training, because it is not possible to do that now. "You can do this in culture too, you can also make certain investments with a specific purpose, in a specific period of time, in which we would present some art, culture of that side, not necessarily having to add these training aspects, human exchange, etc., because in my opinion it is not possible to do this now. And this can of course only apply to the initial calls for applications, if this situation changes during (...) and peace comes, which we all expect, then from each subsequent call we can return to this method of the project, in which partners will really cooperate with each other."

Wojciech Borzym, Mayor of Drohiczyn "Even though there is a border here, that there is a state of war on the other side of the border, there are such ordinary interpersonal contacts and they can be, and I hope that grassroots contacts will influence the political upper echelons."

### Questionnaires

As a final point of the consultation – 10-15 minutes – please ask participants to fill the questionnaire for stakeholders on-line e.g. on their smartphones/laptops using the link (QR-code) to questionnaire for stakeholders (3 language versions available).

Participants that had already filled the survey before the meeting may share the experience and discuss whether consultation allow to improve replies given earlier.

At the end of the discussion, participants were invited to complete an online survey using, among others, QR codes that were displayed during the presentation and on posters in the room.

Attachments:

1. Agenda.
2. List of Participants.