

**Interreg**



Co-funded by  
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**Italy – Croatia**

# **INTERREG ITALY-CROATIA PROGRAMME 2021 – 2027**

**HARVESTING REPORT**

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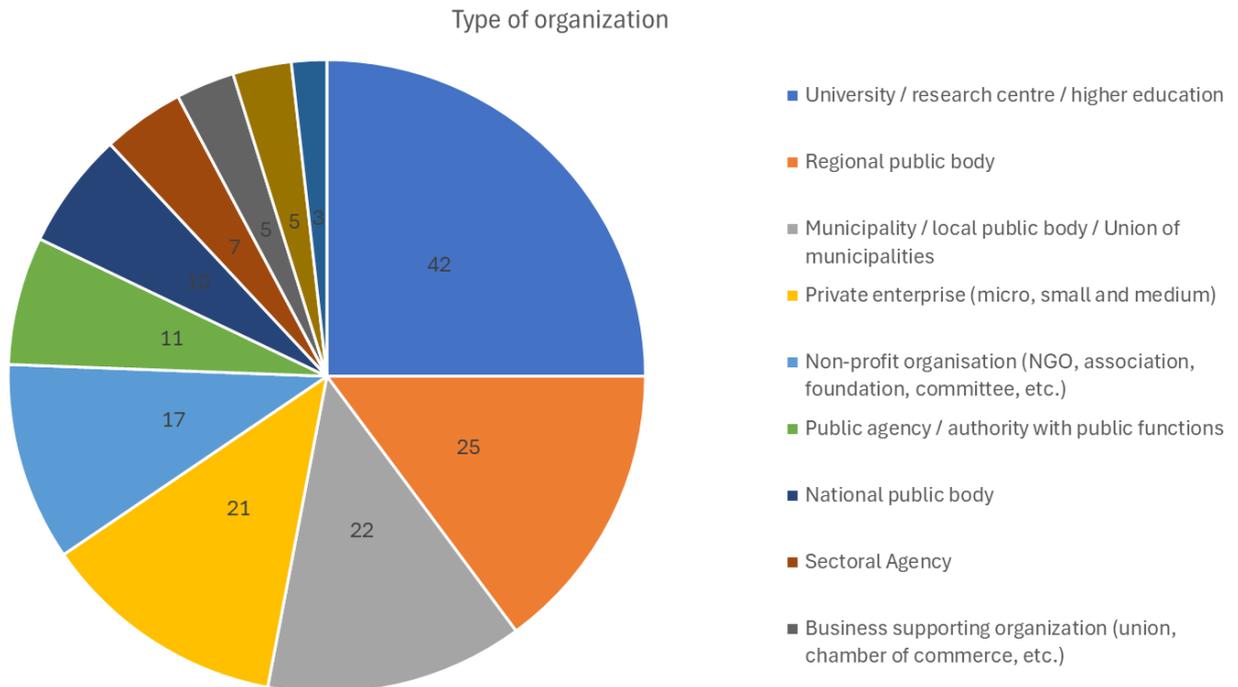


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1. Consultation of stakeholders

1.1 Main stakeholders consulted

The list of the stakeholders consulted is composed as follows (the numbers only refer to the online survey replies we received):



1.2 Methods of consultation

The Programme decided to use various methods of consultation of the stakeholders and to mix online and in person approaches to increase effectiveness and allow for more qualitative feedback to be collected:

- **Survey for Stakeholders via EUSurvey: 168 replies** to an online survey with 10 semi closed questions (with the option "other" included in each question to enable entering details and explanations in 500 characters). The survey was open from May till 30<sup>th</sup> September 2024.
- **Face-to-face interviews:** approximate **8 interviews** (4 during LP Seminar for Standard projects in March 2024 in Venice, 3 with Italian National Delegation, 1 with Croatian beneficiary).
- **World café** organized in collaboration with IPA Adrion Programme and Interact Programme during the EUSAIR Forum in Sibenik in May 2024: **60 people**



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participating, members of the Monitoring Committees of the Programmes, National Delegation representatives and members of TSGs/EUSAIR structures.

- **Event at Venice Film Festival** at the end of August 2024: **50 people** participating, members of the Monitoring Committee of the Programme, European Commission, National Delegation representatives, Policy makers, MA and JS members, IVY volunteers, project beneficiaries.

Overall, the Programme Stakeholders consultation received **286 replies**.

### 1.3 Summary of the input on the key questions

#### 1. Perception of the neighbouring country

Stakeholders largely perceive having Italy and Croatia as neighbouring countries as a positive factor. The geographical proximity is seen not only as an advantage for tourism but as an opportunity to develop deeper and more substantial cooperation on economic, environmental, and social issues. Italian stakeholders noted that before the involvement in the Interreg Programme, their understanding of Croatia was limited to tourism and leisure, but through joint projects, this perception has significantly expanded. **They now see Croatia as a partner with similar challenges and complementary strengths. This evolving perception has fostered a sense of community, encouraging collaboration beyond the tourism sector to include sustainable development and shared environmental challenges.** This shared vision includes both countries working hand in hand to address common issues such as marine pollution, maritime transport, and sustainable tourism. The willingness of stakeholders to engage in projects that reflect these shared interests demonstrates a **growing sense of trust and the potential for stronger partnerships**. Moreover, stakeholders emphasized that cooperation has allowed them to understand and appreciate the cultural richness and diversity of their neighbouring country.

#### 2. Biggest potential for cooperation

Stakeholders identified several key areas with the greatest potential for cooperation between Italy and Croatia. One of the most frequently mentioned areas was **environmental sustainability**. Specific topics included preventing and managing risks related to climate change, sustainable fisheries, mariculture, and promoting the conservation of natural habitats. Another area of significant potential is the protection and promotion of **cultural heritage**. Cultural tourism, film tourism, and shared cultural heritage were noted as topics



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with great value, providing both countries with opportunities to leverage their unique assets. Increasing people-to-people initiatives was also highlighted, particularly those based on shared cultural backgrounds that enhance **mutual understanding and respect**. Stakeholders suggested initiatives such as joint cultural festivals and the promotion of traditional crafts and art as effective ways to strengthen bonds between the two countries. **Economic development** was another key topic. Stakeholders saw potential in enhancing trade relations, supporting start-ups, and developing clusters that can bring together industries from both sides of the Adriatic. There was also an emphasis on investing in digital infrastructure and creating opportunities for cross-border employment. The stakeholders mentioned that, by focusing on capacity-building programmes, both countries could help create new professions, especially in the green and digital sectors, which are seen as crucial for the future. The potential for collaboration in **transport and mobility** was also raised. Stakeholders stressed the **need to improve cross-border transport**, including ferry lines and sustainable transportation networks, to enhance connectivity between the two countries. This aspect of cooperation is seen as crucial not only for facilitating physical transfers between Italy and Croatia but also for supporting joint economic activities and tourism.

### 3. What to preserve, reinforce or both

Stakeholders were asked what elements of the current cooperation framework should be preserved or reinforced. One of the key points that emerged was the need to maintain the **existing level of joint planning and coordination**. This includes preserving procedures that have proven effective in enabling both countries to work together smoothly. However, stakeholders also suggested that some procedures need to be standardized to further facilitate cross-border initiatives. They argued that harmonizing certain processes, such as project evaluation and administrative requirements, would make it easier for smaller organizations to participate. **Civil protection cooperation** was also identified as an area to be reinforced. Stakeholders emphasized that the **Adriatic Sea is a shared resource**, and as such, there should be greater efforts to coordinate actions between Italy and Croatia to protect it. **Education and training** also emerged as key themes. Stakeholders expressed the need to reinforce cooperation between educational institutions in both countries. By integrating universities and vocational training centers into cross-border initiatives, it would be possible to develop **new skills and foster innovation**.

### 4. What does not work well and should be improved

Despite the successes of the Interreg Programme, several areas were identified as needing



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improvement. The **lack of transport connections out of season** is seen as a problem. Another significant issue highlighted by stakeholders is the **lack of long-term sustainability** of project outcomes. Many projects, although successful during their implementation, fail to have a lasting impact because their results are not effectively integrated into local or regional development strategies. Stakeholders mentioned the need for better mechanisms to ensure that the communities continue to benefit from project results after funding ends. Linked to that, a need for improvement of the capitalization of project achievements was also mentioned. Stakeholders felt that many of the successful outcomes of projects are not adequately shared or used to inform future initiatives. This leads to a loss of valuable insights and opportunities for replication. **Administrative barriers** were also cited as a major challenge for coordination in planning and governance activities. The different legal systems and bureaucratic procedures in Italy and Croatia create delays and increase the complexity of project implementation. Stakeholders called for a **simplification of administrative procedures**, particularly those related to financial management and reporting. They also mentioned the importance of **pre-financing options** to help smaller organizations participate in projects without facing financial strain.

### 5. Major obstacles for cooperation

The major obstacles identified by the stakeholders include administrative differences, language barriers, and uneven levels of development between Italy and Croatia. **Administrative differences** often lead to significant delays, especially in the approval and implementation phases of projects. Stakeholders noted that the two countries' different regulatory frameworks make it challenging to streamline operations, which can deter potential partners from engaging in cross-border activities. **Language barriers** were also noted as a hinder for an effective cooperation. The use of English can be a limit for some stakeholders to fully participate in discussions and decision-making processes. To address this, stakeholders recommended providing more translation services and language training to improve communication. **Uneven development among regions in Italy and Croatia** poses another challenge. Stakeholders noted that less developed areas often struggle to meet the demands of complex projects, which can result in missed opportunities for meaningful collaboration. They suggested that tailored support should be provided to these regions to help them catch up and fully benefit from the Interreg Programme.

### 6. Limits to implementation in Interreg

Stakeholders identified several limitations that impact the effective implementation of



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Interreg projects. One significant limitation is the **difficulty to involve strategic economic actors and policy-makers**. Many stakeholders mentioned that these actors often have limited engagement in the project activities, which reduces the overall impact and sustainability of the initiatives. Engaging these actors more effectively could ensure that project outcomes are better integrated into broader policy frameworks. Another limitation is the **shortage of administrative personnel** within public entities, which hampers the progress of projects. Many smaller municipalities and local organizations lack the capacity to manage the administrative workload associated with Interreg projects. Stakeholders suggested increasing funding for administrative support and providing targeted training to help public entities build the necessary capacity to participate fully in the projects. **Local constraints**, such as varying rules and regulations, also pose barriers to implementation. Stakeholders noted that these constraints are often beyond the control of the project partners and require intervention at higher levels of government. They recommended establishing a dedicated task force to address these issues and work towards aligning local, national, and EU regulations to facilitate smoother project implementation.

### 7. Novelties “nice to have” for future Interreg

Looking forward, stakeholders suggested several innovations that could enhance the effectiveness of future Interreg Programmes. One of the main suggestions was a **stronger focus on the blue economy**, specifically sustainable practices in fishing, aquaculture, and coastal management. Stakeholders proposed these areas as they are crucial for both countries and could lead to significant economic and environmental benefits. Another suggestion was to foresee more investments in equipment, as having access to **better equipment** could significantly enhance the impact of projects, particularly those focused on environmental monitoring and sustainable tourism. In terms of governance, stakeholders recommended creating more opportunities for thematic cooperation through **targeted calls for proposals**. These calls could focus on specific issues such as island sustainability, plastics reduction.

### 8. Need for infrastructure projects

The need for infrastructure development was approached differently by stakeholders. Some respondents emphasized the importance of **enhancing physical connectivity between Italy and Croatia**. They highlighted the need for improved train and ferry services, which would not only facilitate tourism but also support economic exchanges and joint initiatives. Stakeholders proposed that investing in transport infrastructure could significantly boost



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the potential for cooperation by making it easier for people and goods to move across borders. Other stakeholders stressed the importance of investing in **digital infrastructure**. They argued that digital connectivity is just as important as physical infrastructure, particularly for fostering innovation and supporting start-ups. Research and development facilities, especially in universities, were also highlighted as essential for supporting sustainable long-term collaboration and innovation. Stakeholders suggested creating more opportunities for universities to collaborate on joint research projects, which could help address common challenges such as marine pollution and renewable energy. Generally, stakeholders think that infrastructures are not the core business of Interreg, that should preserve its character.

### 9. How to facilitate governance

To improve governance and facilitate cooperation, stakeholders proposed several measures. One key recommendation was to **strengthen stakeholder networks by establishing formal platforms for regular communication**. These platforms would bring together representatives from local, regional, and national levels to discuss progress, share challenges, and develop joint solutions. Stakeholders also emphasized the importance of intermediate-level governance, suggesting that regional authorities should play a more active role in coordinating cross-border initiatives. Another proposal was to **better align local strategies with regional and EU-level strategies**. Stakeholders noted that many of the challenges faced by Italy and Croatia are not unique to these countries but are shared across the EU. By aligning local initiatives with broader EU policies, stakeholders believe that it would be possible to leverage additional resources and expertise, making projects more effective and impactful.

### 10. Dream cooperation project

When asked about their dream cooperation projects, stakeholders shared several innovative ideas. One was the creation of an **interconnected Adriatic region based on civil rights and social inclusion**. This project would focus on ensuring equal access to services, promoting human rights, and fostering a sense of community across borders. This would not only strengthen ties between Italy and Croatia but also set an example for other regions facing similar challenges. Another dream project was the development of the **School of the Adriatic Sea**, a mobile educational unit that would travel along the Adriatic coast to provide training and education on Blue Skills & Jobs. This project would focus on promoting sustainable maritime practices, such as responsible fishing and marine conservation, while also providing



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vocational training for young people interested in pursuing careers in the blue economy. Stakeholders also proposed to focus on social inclusion, using **health and sport as instruments to foster communication and community engagement**. The goal would be to create a more inclusive society where everyone can participate and contribute.

### 1.4 Interesting quotes

- Mato Tomljanovic, Dubrovnik-Neretva County: *"The equipment (a boat) we purchased to fight fire has saved so many lives. The versatility of the boat has allowed us to respond effectively even in challenging weather conditions."*
- Stefania Leoni, Emilia Romagna Region: *"We need to go beyond borders and view the Italy-Croatia Programme as a bridge to create European alliances, integrating it with other funding programmes to maximise impact."*
- Antonio Verrico, Department for Cohesion Policies and South: *"Administrative differences are a significant obstacle, especially due to the lack of standardised governance structures between Italy and Croatia, which makes collaboration more difficult."*
- Battistina Cugusi, Department for Cohesion Policies and South: *"Cultural exchanges and the opportunity to learn from each other's civil servants are crucial advantages of working with Croatia as a neighbouring country."*
- Representative from the Municipality of Macerata: *"Now (after the CBC projects implemented together) you know what's beyond the sea, but it can still surprise you. The projects create a sense of closeness and mutual understanding."*
- T2i institution representative: *"The biggest potential for cooperation lies in tourism, cultural exchange, and start-up development. Enhancing connections at the grassroots level can drive significant progress."*
- Representative from the Pula Municipality: *"Our dream cooperation project would be about visiting each other every other week, with seamless connections."*
- Representative of the Ferrara Municipality: *"The enhancement of tourism routes needs to be strengthened. For example, if you travel from point A to point B, there should be better knowledge of the route and the points of interest along the way. We need to make*





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*the journey more beautiful."*

- Venice Stakeholder: *"Youth engagement should be a focus. Involving young people in consultation ensures that their perspectives are included in shaping the future of the region."*

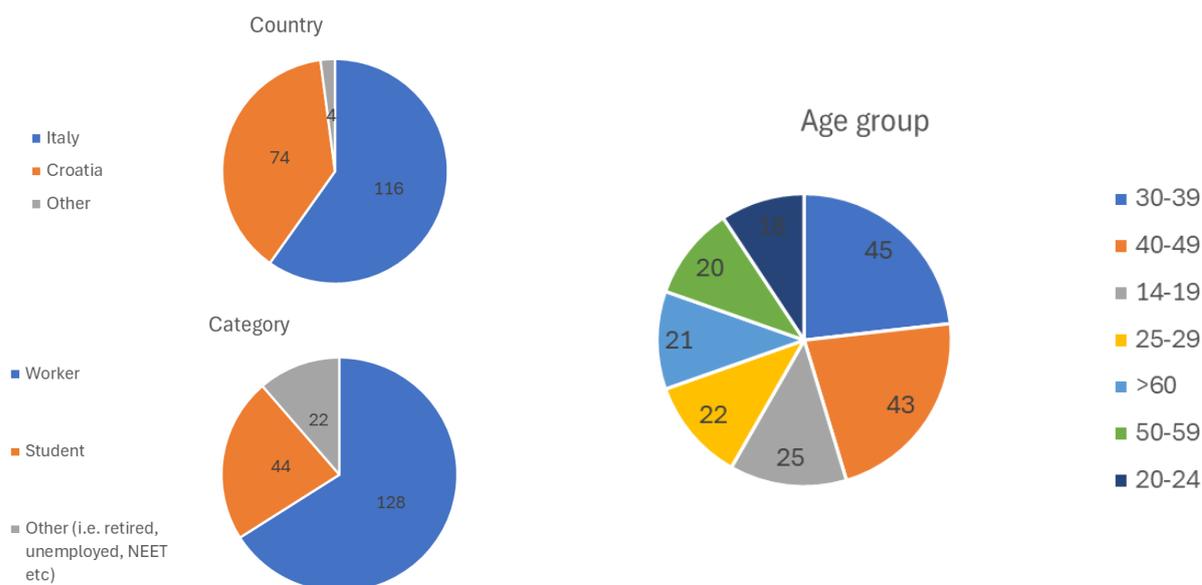


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### 2. Consultation of citizens

#### 2.1 Main citizens consulted

The types of citizens consulted is composed as follows (the numbers only refer to the online survey replies we received):



#### 2.2 Methods of consultation

The Programme decided to use various methods of consultation of the citizens, with a special attention to young people as a specific sub-group, and to mix online and in person approaches to increase effectiveness and allow for more qualitative feedback to be collected:

- **Survey for Citizens via EUSurvey:** with 5 semi closed questions (with the option "other" included in each question where additional details and explanations could be indicated in 500 characters). The survey online was open from May till 30<sup>th</sup> September 2024. The 5 separated questions were also published and promoted on the Programme Social Media channels every 10 days in simplified language and appealing graphics. In total: **194 replies**
- **Hybrid event for youth** in September 2024: in collaboration with our IVY volunteer, at the University Ca' Foscari, with the **engagement of 37 students** - 25 in presence and 12 online - who discussed on post-27 topics and questions related to the future of Interreg and of the Italy-Croatia Programme.
- **Face-to-face interviews: 5 interviews** (during Venice Boat Show in May 2024)



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In total the Programme Citizens' consultation received **236 inputs**.

### 2.3 Summary of the input on the key questions

#### 1. Perception of the neighbouring country

Citizens and youth generally view the relationship between Italy and Croatia as an opportunity for mutual benefit and cooperation, particularly given the **shared Adriatic Sea**. Many respondents highlighted the cultural similarities between the two countries, making collaboration easier and more effective. Several citizens pointed out the potential for developing sustainable practices in **maritime tourism, environmental conservation, and joint economic activities**. Some youth respondents emphasized that they had not been fully aware of the existing cooperation programme between Italy and Croatia, suggesting a need for **improved communication and visibility** of such initiatives. The Adriatic Sea was frequently mentioned as a crucial area for joint management to enhance regional prosperity, environmental protection, and job creation. Overall, the perception of the neighbouring country was positive, with a shared belief that cooperation could be deepened to bring greater benefits to both countries. Specifically, among youth, high school and university students viewed Italy as an attractive destination for cultural exchange and academic opportunities. Many students expressed a desire to participate in **study programs or internships** across the border, indicating that educational initiatives could play a significant role in shaping their perception of Italy. Moreover, youth respondents pointed out that strengthening these educational ties would not only improve their career prospects but also foster better cross-border relationships and mutual understanding. There was also a notable emphasis on the role of tourism in shaping perceptions. Many young people see travel as a gateway to better understand cultural and social dynamics, which makes them more supportive to cross-border initiatives. In particular, high school students mentioned school excursions and exchanges as their primary exposure to Croatia, leading to a desire for more structured educational and cultural opportunities between the two countries.

#### 2. Main topics where cooperation is needed

The main topics identified for cooperation were **environmental sustainability, digital transformation, cultural exchange, and economic development**. Respondents underlined the need for joint efforts in tackling climate change, promoting sustainable tourism, and preserving marine biodiversity. Cross-border initiatives focusing on renewable energy and



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waste management were also emphasized as key areas for collaboration. Cultural projects, such as joint festivals, academic exchanges, and art programs, were viewed as effective means to strengthen ties and promote shared heritage. Additionally, the need for enhancing digital infrastructure and developing smart city solutions was mentioned, which would contribute to economic growth and improve the quality of life for citizens on both sides of the Adriatic. Youth participants also highlighted **community-building projects**, particularly those that involve young people from both countries. Initiatives that support youth entrepreneurship and create digital transition opportunities, even in smaller or rural areas, were seen as crucial for the future development of the region. High school students expressed interest in environmental projects that involve hands-on activities, such as beach clean-ups or conservation workshops, to engage with cross-border issues in a practical and impactful manner. University students, on the other hand, focused more on **innovation and research** as key areas where cooperation is needed. They emphasized the importance of joint research projects related to marine biology, renewable energy, and climate change mitigation, suggesting that collaboration between universities could lead to significant advancements in these fields. Furthermore, students suggested creating **cross-border start-up incubators** that could foster entrepreneurial initiatives among young people, particularly in the areas of green technology and digital services.

### 3. Useful Interreg project

Several Interreg projects were recognized as being particularly beneficial for the region. Projects such as "ML-REPAIR," which focuses on **marine litter reduction**, and the "Posidonia Protection" initiative were cited as examples of impactful cross-border efforts. These projects not only contribute to environmental conservation but also promote awareness of the importance of **marine ecosystems**. Respondents also mentioned projects related to healthcare, which highlights the value of cooperation in improving public services. Young respondents, particularly those unfamiliar with Interreg, expressed interest in being more involved if such projects were better publicized and made accessible to the general public. Overall, citizens and youth recognized the practical benefits of Interreg projects in fostering cooperation, sharing knowledge, and addressing common challenges. They called for an increased focus **on promoting these projects through accessible channels** to encourage broader participation. Youth respondents specifically requested more **visibility through social media campaigns and school events**, as these platforms would make information accessible to a younger audience.



#### 4. Main obstacles to cooperation

The primary obstacles identified for cross-border cooperation were **bureaucratic complexity, limited awareness, and language barriers**. Respondents noted that the long and complicated procedures associated with EU funding deter smaller organizations and citizens from participating. The need for simpler and more transparent processes was a recurring theme, with suggestions to streamline application and reporting requirements. Many youth respondents cited a **lack of time and limited awareness** of existing EU programmes as significant barriers. There was also a concern about the **lack of effective communication channels** for disseminating information about available opportunities, with many suggesting better use of social media and localized promotional events. High school students mentioned that the information available about EU level is often too complex and not tailored to their needs, making it difficult for them to understand how they could get involved. Language barriers were also mentioned, particularly for older citizens or those with limited proficiency in English. This often restricts the involvement of certain groups, leading to unequal participation in cooperation initiatives. There was a call for **more translation services and simplified communication** to ensure inclusiveness. Youth respondents suggested the use of multilingual platforms and the involvement of schools and universities in promoting opportunities, as this would make it easier for young people to understand and engage with the programmes. Another obstacle highlighted by university students was the **lack of financial support for young entrepreneurs** interested in cross-border initiatives. They suggested that providing seed funding or micro-grants could help overcome financial barriers and encourage more young people to participate in collaborative projects. Students also mentioned the need for mentorship programs that connect experienced professionals with young entrepreneurs to guide them through the complexities of EU funding and project implementation. Moreover, students expressed concerns about the **lack of continuity between projects**. They noted that many successful initiatives are not sustained beyond their funding period, leading to a loss of momentum and missed opportunities for further development. They recommended establishing mechanisms to ensure the continuity and scalability of successful projects, such as follow-up funding or integration into regional development plans.

#### 5. Dream cooperation project



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The dream projects proposed by respondents reflected a strong desire for increased connectivity, cultural exchange, and environmental preservation. Many envisioned **improved transport links**, such as better air connections between southern Italy and Croatian cities like Zadar and Bari, or the establishment of a common public transport network that would facilitate easier movement across borders. **Cultural exchanges**, including collaborations between schools and universities, were frequently mentioned. Respondents imagined projects that would foster stronger relationships through joint educational programs, workshops, and shared cultural events. They also suggested **awareness campaigns** focusing on common issues like migration, which affects both Italy and Croatia. **Environmental projects** were also a significant theme, with many proposing initiatives aimed at preserving the Adriatic Sea and promoting sustainable maritime practices. Ideas such as **eco-friendly tourism**, joint conservation efforts for marine biodiversity, and **responsible fishing** practices were highlighted as potential areas of impactful collaboration. Youth participants expressed interest in projects that could address **climate change** while providing educational and employment opportunities for young people. High school students envisioned a cross-border **environmental education program** that would involve both Italian and Croatian schools in activities like **tree planting, beach clean-ups, and wildlife conservation**. Such a project would not only help protect the environment but also build connections between young people from both countries. University students, meanwhile, proposed a **"Blue Innovation Hub"**, a joint research and development centre focused on marine technology, renewable energy, and sustainable fisheries. This hub would bring together researchers, students, and industry professionals to work on innovative solutions to shared challenges, creating opportunities for both learning and economic development. Youth respondents also proposed creating a **"Cross-Border Digital Learning Platform"** that would allow students from Italy and Croatia to take joint online courses on topics like environmental science, digital skills, and cultural heritage. This platform would enable students to learn together, share perspectives, and collaborate on projects, thereby fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose across borders. Youth participants also proposed the development of a **"Cross-Border Youth Cultural Festival"**, which would rotate annually between Italy and Croatia. This festival could include art exhibitions, music performances, and workshops on traditional crafts, thereby fostering cultural appreciation and building long-lasting relationships between young people from both sides.



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### 2.4 Interesting quotes

Luka, 24, Croatia: *"The Adriatic Sea, shared by Italy and Croatia, offers untapped potential for cooperation in environmental protection, economic development, and cultural exchange. Joint efforts can enhance marine biodiversity and create economic opportunities for both countries"*.

Francesca, 22, Italy: *"I think Croatia has enormous unexplored potential, especially its coastline. Turning competitive tourism into a cooperative effort could benefit both countries, especially if we focus on conservation and eco-friendly tourism"*.

Maja, 19, Croatia: *"I never thought of Italy as an opportunity to cooperate until I heard about these projects. We need more visibility, especially for young people, to understand the benefits of cross-border cooperation"*.

Giovanni, 27, Italy: *"The bureaucratic hurdles are too much for small organizations. Simplifying the process would allow more people, especially young entrepreneurs, to get involved in these amazing opportunities"*.

Ana, 23, Croatia: *"My dream project is a seamless public transport network linking Italian and Croatian coastal cities. It would be great for tourism, but also for us to feel closer as neighbouring countries"*.



### 3. Recommendations for post-2027

#### a) Topics to be covered by Interreg

Both stakeholders and citizens underlined a few recurring topics that they feel as current challenges or potentials that the Programme should sustain for the future cooperation activities. Some are already addressed by the current Programme but a further step or a different approach is required to provide a more effective response to the territories.

#### **1. Environmental sustainability**

Interreg should continue and intensify its focus on environmental sustainability, especially regarding the Adriatic Sea. Recommendations include developing projects that target climate change mitigation, biodiversity preservation, and marine ecosystem conservation. Specifically, joint projects addressing marine litter reduction, responsible fishing, and sustainable coastal management are seen as highly impactful. However, it is essential that these initiatives are integrated into **broader regional policies to guarantee long-term results.**

#### **2. Transport and connectivity**

Improving physical and digital connectivity between Italy and Croatia is perceived as a core topic for the future Interreg projects. Initiatives could include the development of a cross-border public transport network, including ferry, rail, and bus services, with an emphasis on eco-friendly and sustainable solutions. Digital infrastructure projects, particularly those that enhance internet accessibility in rural or remote areas, should also be prioritized to support digital transition and economic growth across the region. However, to reach these goals and improve connectivity in the Programme area, it is necessary that **Interreg joins forces with other regional/ national/ EU Programmes or initiatives** as a significant effort is needed in terms of design, planning and realisation of new connections or improved digital infrastructures.

#### **3. Cultural heritage and sustainable tourism**

Building on the strong interest in cultural exchanges, it is recommended to maintain and expand the scope of Interreg projects in creative industries, cultural heritage preservation, and tourism. Joint cultural festivals, film production, and the establishment of an "Adriatic Creative Hub" could promote cultural cooperation and enhance the region's visibility, ultimately boosting tourism and economic development. This can also help preserve and



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celebrate the shared cultural history of Italy and Croatia. However, given the very high number of projects and initiatives in this domain, it would be necessary to ensure a more **effective organisation and dissemination of tourism products and services developed** to make results available to the broader possible public.

### 4. Youth and community engagement

To ensure future resilience, youth engagement should be prioritized, building on the enthusiasm and interest expressed during the consultations. New topics for youth involvement include creating opportunities for cross-border entrepreneurship and innovation, with a focus on the green and digital economies. By establishing an "Adriatic Youth Lab" programme, young people could be involved in research, innovation, and capacity-building projects that tackle climate change, digital transformation, and cultural preservation. Youth should be given more opportunities to actively participate in the planning and implementation stages of Interreg projects. However, to fully and effectively involve young people **a change in the approach is needed by Interreg Programmes** (and projects as well) and more awareness on the necessity to engage young generations should be promoted.

#### b) Geography of Programmes

##### 1. Continuity of the current geography

The maritime cooperation area between Italy and Croatia was formalised in an Interreg Programme only in the 2014-20 programming period. It is however already possible to see that Interreg has worked very well on improving the perception of the neighbouring country, creating mutual trust and a very promising ground for cooperation. Several partnerships that collaborated successfully in 2014-20 have decided to reinforce their cooperation and continue working together in new projects in 2021-27. Inter-projects exchanges and recognition in the same policy field is happening more and more in this programming period, creating fruitful occasions to maximise efforts by developing joint activities or sharing methods and contacts. These are all signs that it is important to continue in the cooperation effort and it is possible to do it only if the continuity of the geography of the Programme is ensured: it takes time to build relationships, trust and maybe even friendship which are at the heart of cooperation.

##### 2. Strengthening maritime cooperation

The Interreg Italy-Croatia Programme has embraced a strong maritime dimension that



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would need to be preserved and even reinforced in the future as it is one of the characteristics that also distinguish this instrument from others in the Adriatic area. Blue economy, the preservation of the marine environment and the sustainability of maritime transport are core themes that the Programme sustain and that are closely linked to maritime cooperation. The integration of blue policies along with green strategy is one of the key pillars for the future of cooperation in this area. However, more awareness and visibility for maritime cooperation at political and regulatory level would be needed to maximise the impact of Interreg and allow needed adaptation and flexibility.

### 3. Fostering synergies and complementarities

The maintenance of the current geography of Interreg Programmes shall not pose a limit but rather be a boost to explore new synergies potentials with other Interreg Programmes or other funds that can complement each other and ensure a stronger impact in the territories. Synergies must be sought already in the programming phase to make sure that each Programme can integrate related activities in their implementation strategy. In view of the future programmes, it might be useful to identify dedicated platform for dialogue and exchange among the Macro-regional strategies and Interreg programmes, as well as new ways to develop joint schemes to ensure sustainability and capitalisation of results.

#### c) Implementation of Programmes/Projects

##### 1. Simplification of administrative processes

One of the main obstacles identified by citizens and stakeholders was the complexity of administrative processes involved in Interreg projects. Post-2027, the recommendation is to streamline these processes, making funding applications and reporting simpler and more accessible, especially for smaller organizations and individual citizens. Introducing digital tools for easier submission, monitoring, and evaluation of projects could significantly improve engagement.

##### 2. Small-scale and community projects

To encourage community-driven initiatives, Interreg may introduce micro-funding schemes that cater to smaller, grassroots projects. These funds should be easier to access and come with lighter administrative requirements. The focus could be on projects that promote social inclusion, environmental awareness, and cultural exchange, with an emphasis on immediate community-level impact. This approach would be particularly appealing to youth groups, non-profits, and smaller municipalities, which often lack the



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capacity to engage with larger-scale projects. However, the development of such projects could only be foreseen in a highly simplified implementation framework as there is a significant lack of administrative capacity of the organisations that could potentially implement these projects.

### **3. Integrated Citizen and Youth Participation**

Citizens and youth expressed a desire for greater participation in decision-making processes. To address this, it is recommended to establish mechanisms that allow for more participatory governance. For instance, creating a "Citizens' Advisory Board" within the Interreg framework could provide a formal channel for input from local communities and youth representatives. This board could help shape Programme priorities, provide feedback on project implementation, and ensure that the funded initiatives reflect the real needs and aspirations of citizens across the Italy-Croatia region.

### **4. Enhanced visibility and promotion of projects**

Improving the visibility of Interreg projects is crucial to increase citizen engagement and demonstrate the tangible benefits of cross-border cooperation. It is recommended to launch an integrated communication strategy, leveraging social media, local media outlets, and public events to promote ongoing projects and success stories. Establishing a digital platform dedicated to showcasing project outcomes, best practices, and opportunities for involvement would also enhance transparency and encourage wider participation.

### **5. Mentorship and capacity building**

Providing mentorship and capacity-building opportunities is essential for fostering sustainable cross-border projects. Post-2027, Interreg could implement a mentorship program where experienced project leaders provide guidance to new participants, particularly young entrepreneurs and community groups. Capacity-building workshops on topics such as project management, fundraising, and digital literacy could also be offered to strengthen the capabilities of stakeholders, ensuring the success and sustainability of future initiatives.

