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During the Taskforce Interreg meeting in Bruges, on 23 March 2017, a number of topics were identified, that are essential for fruitful cross-border cooperation in Europe. The content of this discussion paper is based on that meeting.

## Discussion/ position paper AEBR: On the future of Interreg

### Europe needs Interreg

Over the past 25 years, Interreg has successfully contributed to cross-border cohesion in the EU. Interreg has dealt with the major challenges facing border regions; for example, it has unlocked innovation potential, improved public services in the border regions, stimulated labour mobility and reduced market barriers. Interreg as a cross-border programme has proved itself to be essential for successful cross-border cooperation in the EU. By their inherent nature, national programmes focus primarily on projects within national boundaries, thereby downsizing the potential of border regions and cross-border cooperation. On the other hand, Interreg encourages all kinds of actors to start cross-border cooperation. The European Parliament (EP) underlines this view in its resolution of 13 June 2017, stating that Interreg 'should remain an important instrument post 2020', and calling for an increased budget over the next programming period.

### - What are key elements for successful Interreg programmes post 2020?-

- **A well-functioning Interreg is based in the region**

Every region in Europe has its specific dynamics, and every border causes specific barriers. Decisions on funding via Interreg programmes should therefore be made on a regional level and not on a national or European level. By embedding Interreg in the regions, Interreg is also able to function as a forum for regional politicians and policymakers to directly address cross-border issues.

- **Use the resources where they best meet the needs**

In a new Interreg (A) programme, the available resources should be used primarily in those regions that are most affected by borders. In Interreg V, the programme areas are sometimes much wider than merely the border regions, a fact that leads to a distribution of means to regions that are not always directly affected by borders. One of the solutions to this problem could be direct funding for programmes rather than national envelopes.

Needless to say; every border is different, so we must take a pragmatic look at how a border region is defined. For instance, it may be crucial for the success of a programme to include a university or city which is further away from the border.

- **Look at the size and structure of the programmes**

The size of Interreg programmes varies considerably. The territory of some Interreg programmes is vast, making effective cooperation quite impossible. A preferable option is to arrive at a balance between a size that is large enough to make effective EU monitoring possible, and small enough to ensure awareness of the regional challenges. Programmes such as Germany/Netherlands and Spain/Portugal are successful in combining regional grounding with a substantial size.

- **People-to-people projects have an important effect on cross-border interaction**

The small funds of people-to-people projects are widely considered as contributing significantly to cross-border interaction. To prove and improve the impact of people-to-people projects:

(1) Experience accrued in measuring the impact of people-to-people projects must be shared, and discussed.

(2) The allocation of funding for people-to-people projects needs to be simplified. The administrative burden on these small-size projects in the current programme is completely out of proportion.

- **Simplification needs goodwill on all sides**

There is a need to simplify the administrative burden imposed by Interreg projects. Simplification can be achieved by standardisation and less legislation on the part of the EU. However, Simplification needs goodwill on all sides. For instance, a willingness to overcome differences between legal and accounting systems on both sides of a border.

- **Solving border issues needs permanent national government support**

Many Interreg programmes finance information desks and provide short-term solutions, for dealing with border barriers. The actual border issues themselves, however, are not addressed by the national authorities. To be able to achieve fruitful cross-border cooperation, there has to be a willingness on the part of national authorities to work on permanent improvement of cross-border cooperation, for example, by means of a border compact between the different levels of government.

*On 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> June 1971, ten European border and cross-border regions set up a Standing Conference of European Border Regions at the Anholt Castle (EUREGIO, Westphalia)*