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position paper of the AEBR:

## Europe thrives with a strong INTERREG programme

### Impact of Interreg has been significant

Border regions started cross-border cooperation in the 1960s, to create smooth cooperation at borders and solve problems that occur when crossing national frontiers on a daily basis. With the start of the Interreg programme in 1990, cross-border cooperation increased in impact and scope.

Borders are 'scars of history'<sup>1</sup>; the country on the other side of the border has in many cases been an opponent in war. Frontiers therefore possess a political as well as a cultural and psychological dimension. Cross-border cooperation and Interreg as its catalyst deal with these dimensions and create cohesion and mutual understanding in Europe, contributing to peace and European integration.

Interreg is one of the most tangible programmes for EU citizens. It has a significant impact on the entire EU, but especially on the daily lives of the 37.5% of the EU population that live in border regions. Interreg deals with major challenges facing border regions. For example, it has:

- unlocked economic potential through market integration and shared innovation;
- improved infrastructure and public services in the border regions, such as emergency services;
- stimulated free movement of people through labour mobility;
- addressed common challenges in energy transition and climate adaptation, such as water management.

### Interreg's future potential is obvious

In *March 2017*, the European Commission presented a White Paper with five scenarios on the future of the European Union. All scenarios underline the importance of the European Single Market, and consequently of cross-border cooperation. The Single Market can only function effectively if political, cultural and psychological frontiers are overcome. In other words: Effective cross-border cooperation and a successful European Union are two sides of the same coin.

Interreg encourages all kinds of actors to start cross-border cooperation. It stimulates communities to address common challenges and it empowers citizens to overcome border barriers. The European Parliament underlined this view in its resolution of 13 *June 2017*, stating that Interreg 'should remain an important instrument post 2020', and has called for an increased budget in the next programming period.

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Mozer, Secretary to the Commissioner for Agriculture in the first European Commission in 1958.

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

- **Base Interreg in the region**

Decisions on programming and funding via Interreg should be made at a regional level. By embedding Interreg in the region, regional and local politicians, policymakers and stakeholders are enabled to take effective measures for regional development that are in line with the specific challenges and opportunities of their region. Interreg has a function as a forum for actors on both sides of a border, and is able to directly address cross-border issues at national level.

- **Use Interreg close to the border**

In a new Interreg (A) programme, the available resources should be used primarily in regions that are close to - and affected the most by - borders. However, this is a recipe, not a blueprint: border regions in Europe vary considerably in size and structure. From densely to scarcely populated, from hardly recognizable borders to mountain ranges and rivers. To determine how funds are used most effectively, we need to look at the characteristics of border regions and find pragmatic ways to use to funds where they have the largest impact. This can for instance be done by direct funding of programmes rather than national envelopes.

- **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 hard. It is preferable to arrive at a programme size that is large enough for effective government and efficient EU monitoring, while still maintaining a structure that pays attention to regional specifics.

Programmes such as Germany/Netherlands and Spain/France are successful in combining regional grounding with a substantial size.

- **Notice the importance of people-to-people projects**

People-to-people and small-scale projects are the most tangible cross-border projects for EU citizens and contribute significantly to cross-border interaction. To prove and improve the impact of this kind of projects:

(1) Experience accrued in measuring the impact of people-to-people and small-scale projects should be shared and discussed.

(2) The allocation of funding for people-to-people and small-scale projects needs to be simplified. In the current programme, the administrative burden is out of proportion in comparison with the size of the projects.

- **Reduce the administrative burden**

The administrative burden imposed on Interreg projects reduces their effectiveness and the feasibility for Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises to take part in Interreg projects. Simplification can be achieved by standardisation and less legislation on the part of the EU, Member States and other governmental levels. Simplification needs goodwill on all sides. The government levels involved should not contribute to a stacking of rules. There must be a willingness to overcome differences between legal and accounting systems on both sides of a border.

- **Encourage Member States to solve border issues permanently**

Many Interreg programmes finance information desks and provide short-term programmes to cope with border barriers. Permanent solutions can only be achieved when cross-border differences, for instance regarding the labour market, are resolved by national governments. To be able to achieve fruitful cross-border cooperation, national governments need to work on permanent modification of regulations and legislation in support of cooperation across the border, 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)*