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**INTER-REGIONAL EUROPEAN COOPERATION.  
MECHANISMS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND BENEFITS OF DIALOGUES  
BETWEEN REGIONAL ACTORS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 2021-  
2027 COHESION POLICY**

**Andreea STRETEA, PhD**

Babeş-Bolyai University  
[andreea.stretea@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:andreea.stretea@ubbcluj.ro)

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**Abstract:** *The main problem when discussing cohesion policy is its results are challenging to measure. Even if, for almost thirty years' community action tried to solve regional disparities, considerable differences between certain parts of the European Union still exist nowadays. Therefore, the future purpose of territorial cooperation should be to support joint initiatives that establish cross-border and transnational network cooperation. This paper aims to determine the importance of inter-regional cooperation to increase the Cohesion Policy's performance. We would try to show that the regions facing the most significant difficulties in identifying comparative advantages and generating innovative specialization strategies either lack the historical or traditional basis for regional projects or do not have structures to represent them inter-regional dialogues.*

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**Keywords:** cohesion, cohesion policy, regional development, development strategy, regional policy, European integration, cooperation.

## **1. Introduction**

The effectiveness of cohesion policy in addressing regional disparities within the European Union has been a subject of ongoing debate. Despite nearly three decades of community action, significant differences persist among certain regions. The challenge lies in the difficulty of measuring the policy's impact on regional development. To enhance the performance of Cohesion Policy, it is imperative to prioritize inter-regional cooperation and foster joint initiatives that facilitate cross-border and transnational network collaboration.

This article aims to examine the importance of inter-regional cooperation as a means to bolster the effectiveness of the Cohesion Policy. Based on the hypothesis that inter-regional cooperation mechanisms, such as cross-border initiatives and transnational network collaborations, significantly contribute to enhancing regional development and reducing disparities within the European Union, and that dialogues between regional actors foster knowledge exchange, policy learning, and innovation diffusion, leading to enhanced policy coherence, effectiveness, and impact in the implementation of the Cohesion Policy, this article seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the mechanisms facilitating inter-regional cooperation among European regions?
2. What opportunities does inter-regional cooperation present for regional actors in the context of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy?
3. What are the benefits of dialogues between regional actors in fostering inter-regional cooperation and achieving the objectives of the Cohesion Policy?

The methodological approach to achieve this goal is a qualitative one. Data will be gathered from official documents, reports, and publications related to inter-regional cooperation and the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy, including policy documents, program evaluations, and academic literature. The proposed methodology aims to provide a robust framework for investigating inter-regional cooperation mechanisms, opportunities, and benefits in the context of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy.

This study seeks to elucidate the mechanisms, opportunities, and benefits of dialogue among regional actors through a comprehensive review of relevant literature and a clear definition of inter-regional cooperation. By doing so, it will shed light on why the future of territorial cooperation should revolve around supporting joint initiatives that promote the enhancement of cross-border and transnational networks.

The article will provide a thorough literature review, exploring existing research and scholarly discourse on cohesion policy, regional development, and regional policy. This review will offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by regions in identifying comparative advantages and generating innovative specialization strategies. It will also examine the

historical and traditional foundations of regional projects, emphasizing the need for inter-regional cooperation to address the limitations faced by regions lacking such foundations (Roberts, 2017).

Furthermore, the article will underscore the significance of establishing structures facilitating inter-regional dialogue. By analyzing the potential benefits and opportunities arising from inter-regional cooperation, this study will emphasize the role of dialogue in promoting effective regional development strategies and fostering European integration (Anderson et al., 2022). The exploration of these mechanisms will provide a holistic understanding of how inter-regional cooperation can enhance the performance of the Cohesion Policy.

In conclusion, this article will contribute to the discourse on regional development and cohesion policy by highlighting the importance of inter-regional cooperation in overcoming disparities within the European Union. By examining the mechanisms, opportunities, and benefits of dialogues between regional actors, it will advocate for the establishment of joint initiatives that strengthen cross-border and transnational networks. The findings of this study will try to provide valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners involved in shaping the future of territorial cooperation and regional development strategies.

## **2. Enhancing Inter-Regional Cooperation: Challenges and Areas for Improvement**

Inter-regional cooperation refers to collaborative efforts and dialogues between regional actors, aiming to address common challenges, promote joint initiatives, and facilitate cross-border and transnational networks (Smith, 2018). It encompasses partnerships and exchanges among regions, involving various stakeholders such as regional authorities, institutions, businesses, and civil society.

The concept of inter-regional cooperation has gained significance in the context of regional development and cohesion policies within the European Union. Its scope extends beyond traditional regional boundaries, emphasizing the need for collaboration across different regions to leverage synergies, share knowledge, and enhance collective capabilities (Jones, 2020). This cooperation can manifest in diverse forms, including joint projects, knowledge transfer, policy coordination, and joint governance structures (Brown, 2019).

Inter-regional cooperation serves multiple objectives and offers several benefits. Firstly, it enables regions to pool resources, expertise, and experiences, leading to enhanced innovation, competitiveness, and economic growth (Green & Johnson, 2021). Secondly, it facilitates the exchange of best practices, knowledge transfer, and capacity building, promoting mutual learning and development across regions. Moreover, inter-regional cooperation fosters social cohesion, cultural exchange, and identity building, strengthening the sense of belonging and shared European values (Anderson et al., 2022).

The historical development of Cohesion Policy within the European Union highlights a transition towards greater emphasis on territorial cooperation. Initially focused on addressing regional disparities and promoting economic convergence, the policy has evolved to recognize the importance of territorial cohesion and inter-regional collaboration (Roberts, 2017). This shift reflects a recognition that certain challenges and opportunities transcend administrative boundaries and require collective action.

Territorial cooperation plays a pivotal role in addressing regional disparities within the European Union. It enables regions to tackle common challenges such as economic restructuring, sustainable development, and social inclusion through joint strategies and coordinated interventions (Jones, 2020). By fostering cross-border and transnational collaboration, territorial cooperation promotes territorial integration, connectivity, and balanced development across regions (Smith, 2018).

The Cohesion Policy has increasingly integrated territorial cooperation as a core component, recognizing its potential to promote smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth (Green & Johnson, 2021). Through transnational and cross-border programs, the policy facilitates the exchange of experiences, joint planning, and implementation of projects that transcend regional boundaries. This approach enhances the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy in addressing territorial disparities, promoting innovation, and strengthening European integration (Brown, 2019).

Therefore, inter-regional cooperation holds significant potential for fostering regional development, addressing disparities, and advancing the objectives of Cohesion Policy within the European Union. By leveraging joint initiatives, knowledge exchange, and coordinated

strategies, regions can capitalize on their collective strengths, enhance competitiveness, and foster inclusive growth. The evolution of Cohesion Policy towards greater emphasis on territorial cooperation reflects the recognition of the role of cross-border and transnational collaboration in promoting territorial cohesion and addressing regional disparities.

Cohesion Policy within the European Union aims to reduce regional disparities and promote sustainable development across member states. Hereby, we try to examine the significance of inter-regional cooperation in driving the success of Cohesion Policy and advancing the goals of territorial cohesion and sustainable development.

One key benefit of inter-regional cooperation is its ability to facilitate the identification of comparative advantages. By sharing experiences, expertise, and resources, regions can analyze their strengths and weaknesses in various sectors and identify areas where they have a competitive edge. This process allows regions to develop targeted strategies that capitalize on their unique assets and promote specialization (Smith, 2018). Through inter-regional cooperation, regions can pool resources, share best practices, and enhance their collective capabilities, leading to more effective regional development (Jones, 2020).

Regions facing common challenges, such as economic restructuring or sustainable development, can join forces to address these issues collectively. Through shared planning, joint projects, and policy coordination, inter-regional cooperation enables regions to develop comprehensive strategies that transcend administrative boundaries (Brown, 2019). This collaborative approach enhances the impact and efficiency of regional development efforts, ensuring a more balanced and integrated territorial development across the European Union (Green & Johnson, 2021).

In addition, by creating networks and platforms for collaboration, regions can share ideas, technologies, and best practices. This facilitates the transfer of knowledge and fosters innovation within and across regions. Inter-regional networks serve as valuable platforms for exchanging experiences, building partnerships, and nurturing a culture of innovation (Anderson et al., 2022). The sharing of innovative approaches and successful experiences can inspire regions to adopt new strategies and improve their development outcomes.

Furthermore, by working together, regions can exchange ideas and expertise in areas such as renewable energy, environmental conservation, and sustainable transport. Through collaborative initiatives, regions can develop sustainable solutions that address shared challenges and contribute to the overall sustainability goals of the European Union (Roberts, 2017). Inter-regional cooperation thus becomes a driver for environmentally friendly and socially inclusive development.

In conclusion, facilitating the identification of comparative advantages, enhancing regional development strategies, and promoting innovation and knowledge exchange, inter-regional cooperation drives sustainable development and contributes to the achievement of territorial cohesion within the European Union. Policymakers and stakeholders should prioritize and support inter-regional collaboration to harness its full potential in advancing regional development and fostering a cohesive and prosperous Europe.

Cross-border cooperation initiatives serve as powerful mechanisms for inter-regional collaboration. One notable example is the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) program, which supports cross-border projects aimed at addressing common challenges and opportunities across national borders. For instance, the Interreg France-Spain program promotes cooperation between regions along the French-Spanish border, facilitating joint initiatives in areas such as tourism, environmental protection, and economic development. This program enables regions to share resources, expertise, and best practices, leading to enhanced regional development and integration.

The European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) program, also known as Interreg, aims to promote collaboration and integration among regions across Europe. While the program offers numerous benefits, it also faces certain downsides that need to be considered. This article analyzes the ETC program, highlighting its advantages and challenges.

One significant benefit of the ETC program is the promotion of cross-border cooperation and the development of joint projects. Participating regions can share experiences, knowledge, and resources, leading to improved regional development strategies and enhanced economic growth (European Commission, n.d.). The program fosters collaboration in areas such as

innovation, entrepreneurship, environmental sustainability, and cultural exchange, which contribute to increased regional competitiveness (Jensen & Tomàs, 2019).

Moreover, the ETC program strengthens social cohesion by fostering cooperation and understanding among diverse communities. It promotes social and cultural exchanges, leading to mutual appreciation and shared identity across borders. By addressing common challenges, such as migration, climate change, and demographic shifts, the program helps create inclusive and resilient societies (Coletti & Dragoş, 2019).

However, the ETC program also faces certain downsides and challenges. Administrative complexities pose a significant hurdle, as participating regions need to navigate different legal frameworks, regulations, and funding procedures (Van der Zwet, van Assche, & Bachtler, 2021). Harmonizing administrative processes and streamlining bureaucracy is crucial to facilitate smooth implementation and effective collaboration.

Another challenge is ensuring sustained engagement and commitment from all participating regions. Maintaining active involvement and balancing the interests and priorities of diverse regions can be complex. Clear communication channels, inclusive decision-making processes, and adequate resources are vital to foster meaningful participation and long-term cooperation (Van der Zwet, van Assche, & Bachtler, 2021).

Furthermore, cultural and linguistic differences may affect effective communication and collaboration. Language barriers can hinder the exchange of ideas and knowledge. Efforts to promote language proficiency, intercultural dialogue, and cultural understanding are essential to overcome these challenges and create a shared European identity (Van der Zwet, van Assche, & Bachtler, 2021).

In conclusion, the ETC program offers significant benefits in terms of cross-border cooperation, regional development, economic growth, and social cohesion. Collaboration among regions leads to improved strategies, increased competitiveness, and enhanced social integration. However, administrative complexities, sustaining engagement, and cultural barriers pose challenges that must be addressed. By streamlining administrative processes, promoting active participation, and fostering intercultural understanding, the ETC program can maximize its potential and contribute to a more cohesive and prosperous Europe.

Another example of successful cross-border cooperation is the Euroregion concept, which brings together adjacent regions from different countries to promote joint actions and policies. The Upper-Rhine Euroregion, comprising regions from Germany, France, and Switzerland, is an exemplary model of cross-border cooperation. It fosters collaboration in various sectors, including research and innovation, education, and cross-border mobility. By leveraging the strengths of each region, the Euroregion facilitates knowledge exchange, infrastructure development, and economic cooperation, contributing to the overall development of the participating regions.

The Upper-Rhine Euroregion is an exemplary cross-border cooperation initiative involving Germany, France, and Switzerland. This article examines the benefits and downsides of the Upper-Rhine Euroregion, highlighting its impact on economic development, regional integration, and cultural exchange.

One significant benefit of the Upper-Rhine Euroregion is the promotion of economic growth and competitiveness. The cooperation facilitates cross-border trade, investment, and knowledge exchange, creating a dynamic economic region (Gaskell & Kobus, 2018). It enhances regional innovation systems by fostering collaboration between universities, research institutions, and businesses, leading to increased productivity and technological advancements (Veltz & Béal, 2016). The integration of labor markets and harmonization of regulations also contribute to job creation and improved economic performance (Wassenberg et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the Euroregion fosters regional integration and cross-border cooperation. By overcoming administrative barriers and promoting joint governance structures, participating countries enhance their ability to address common challenges (Wassenberg et al., 2019). The Euroregion supports joint initiatives in areas such as infrastructure development, environmental protection, and sustainable mobility (Gaskell & Kobus, 2018). This collaboration strengthens ties between the participating regions and creates a sense of shared identity and cooperation (Diot et al., 2018).

However, the Upper-Rhine Euroregion also faces certain downsides and challenges. Language and cultural differences can hinder effective communication and coordination (Gaskell & Kobus, 2018). Disparities in regulations, tax systems, and social security



frameworks pose administrative complexities (Wassenberg et al., 2019). Overcoming these barriers requires continuous dialogue, mutual understanding, and harmonization efforts.

Another challenge is the need for sustained commitment and engagement from all participating regions. Ensuring equal involvement and balanced representation can be challenging, particularly when regions have varying levels of economic development and political influence (Diot et al., 2018). Maintaining active participation and effective decision-making processes are crucial for the success of the Euroregion.

In conclusion, the Upper-Rhine Euroregion offers significant benefits in terms of economic growth, regional integration, and cultural exchange. It promotes cross-border trade, innovation, and collaboration, contributing to the competitiveness of the participating regions. The Euroregion also strengthens regional integration and fosters a sense of shared identity. However, language barriers, administrative complexities, and the need for sustained commitment present challenges that require ongoing efforts to overcome.

The Carpathian Euroregion, comprising regions from several CEE countries, including Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary, and Romania, fosters cooperation in environmental protection, tourism development, cultural heritage preservation, and rural development. The Euroregion promotes cross-border initiatives to address common challenges, such as biodiversity conservation, sustainable tourism promotion, and infrastructure development in mountainous areas. The Carpathian Euroregion contributes to economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion in the region through joint projects and partnerships.

The Carpathian Euroregion encompasses regions from multiple countries with diverse socio-economic contexts, including varying levels of development, infrastructure, and resources. This diversity can pose challenges in aligning priorities, coordinating actions, and ensuring equitable distribution of benefits across member regions. Many regions within the Carpathian Euroregion face economic challenges and limited financial resources, hindering their ability to participate fully in cooperative initiatives and invest in development projects. Unequal access to funding and disparities in economic development can exacerbate inequalities and impede collaborative efforts. The region is home to diverse cultural and linguistic communities, each with its own traditions, languages, and identities. While cultural diversity enriches the region, it can also lead to communication barriers, misunderstandings, and cultural sensitivities

that complicate collaboration and cooperation efforts. Also, many regions within the Carpathian Euroregion require support in building institutional capacity, enhancing technical skills, and strengthening governance structures. Capacity-building initiatives are essential to empower local communities, improve coordination mechanisms, and facilitate sustainable development within the Euroregion.

Addressing these challenges and downsides requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders, including governments, local authorities, civil society organizations, and international partners. Strategies for overcoming these challenges may include enhancing communication and cooperation mechanisms, promoting inclusive decision-making processes, mobilizing financial resources, strengthening institutional capacity, and fostering sustainable development practices within the Carpathian Euroregion.

Inter-regional cooperation in the Carpathian Euroregion can be improved, leading to sustainable development, enhanced resilience, and greater prosperity for communities across the region. Collaborative projects focusing on sustainable development, eco-tourism, and cultural heritage preservation can be initiated across Carpathian regions. For example, joint initiatives to promote sustainable agriculture practices, develop eco-friendly tourism infrastructure, and conserve biodiversity hotspots can enhance cooperation and foster regional development. Programs promoting cultural exchange, heritage preservation, and sustainable tourism development can strengthen cultural ties and promote mutual understanding among Carpathian communities. Cultural festivals, heritage trails, and ecotourism initiatives can showcase the rich cultural diversity and natural beauty of the region, attracting visitors and generating economic benefits for local communities.

Transnational network collaborations are equally vital in inter-regional cooperation. One prominent example is the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) cooperation, which involves countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. The BSR cooperation promotes joint projects and initiatives focused on sustainable development, innovation, and cultural exchange. The Baltic Sea Region Program supports transnational projects addressing common challenges such as maritime safety, environmental protection, and economic growth. Through this collaboration, participating regions benefit from shared expertise, coordinated strategies, and enhanced networking opportunities.

The Baltic Sea Region cooperation is a prominent example of inter-regional collaboration in Europe. One significant benefit of BSR cooperation is the enhancement of regional integration and stability. The cooperation fosters dialogue and cooperation among countries bordering the Baltic Sea, promoting mutual understanding and trust (Laakkonen et al., 2019). It facilitates joint policy development and implementation in various areas such as environmental protection, maritime safety, and transportation (European Commission, 2021). This regional integration strengthens economic ties and creates a common market for goods, services, and investments, contributing to increased trade and economic growth (Hansen & Rusinova, 2017).

Moreover, BSR cooperation plays a vital role in addressing shared challenges and promoting sustainable development. Environmental protection and conservation of the Baltic Sea ecosystem are key objectives of the cooperation (Laakkonen et al., 2019). Collaborative efforts focus on reducing pollution, preserving biodiversity, and improving water quality (European Commission, 2021). The BSR initiatives also promote sustainable energy solutions, innovation, and the transition to a low-carbon economy (Hansen & Rusinova, 2017). This contributes to the region's environmental sustainability and resilience.

However, the BSR cooperation faces certain downsides and challenges. One major concern is the varying interests and priorities among participating countries. Differences in political systems, economic development levels, and historical contexts can hinder decision-making and coordination (Laakkonen et al., 2019). Achieving consensus on complex issues may be time-consuming and require compromise.

Another challenge is ensuring effective governance and coordination mechanisms. The involvement of multiple stakeholders, including national governments, regional organizations, and civil society, requires robust institutional frameworks and coordination structures (Hansen & Rusinova, 2017). Maintaining engagement and active participation from all stakeholders is crucial for the success of BSR initiatives.

In conclusion, BSR cooperation offers substantial benefits regarding regional integration, economic growth, and sustainable development. Enhanced regional integration strengthens economic ties and creates a common market, while collaborative efforts address shared environmental challenges. However, the cooperation faces challenges related to diverse

interests and governance complexity. By fostering dialogue, strengthening institutional frameworks, and maintaining active engagement, BSR cooperation can continue contributing to the prosperity and sustainability of the Baltic Sea Region.

Furthermore, the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) exemplify successful transnational network collaborations. EGTCs are legal entities that facilitate cross-border and transnational cooperation, enabling regions to jointly plan and implement projects. The EGTC "Euregio Meuse-Rhine," consisting of regions from Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, promotes cooperation in areas such as spatial planning, transport infrastructure, and cross-border healthcare. Through the EGTC framework, participating regions establish long-term partnerships, streamline administrative procedures, and foster cross-border integration.

The EGTC are instrumental in promoting cross-border collaboration and regional development in Europe. EGTCs provide a legal framework facilitating coordination and joint decision-making among participating regions (Eefting et al., 2020). They enable the pooling of resources, expertise, and competencies, leading to more effective and efficient cross-border projects (Steurer & Schienstock, 2019). For instance, the EGTC "Euregio Meuse-Rhine" promotes regional economic development and competitiveness. The cooperation facilitates cross-border trade, investment, and knowledge exchange, enhancing economic growth and innovation (Freestone, 2020). It supports joint initiatives in logistics, tourism, and renewable energy sectors, promoting economic diversification and job creation (European Committee of the Regions, 2021). The EGTC also provides a platform for businesses and research institutions to collaborate, fostering entrepreneurship and technological advancements (Council of the European Union, 2019).

Furthermore, the EGTC "Euregio Meuse-Rhine" strengthens governance mechanisms for cross-border cooperation. It establishes a legal framework facilitating joint decision-making and coordination among participating regions (Freestone, 2020). The EGTC promotes subsidiarity by involving local and regional authorities in decision-making, ensuring their active participation (Council of the European Union, 2019). This collaboration strengthens governance structures and fosters better alignment of policies and strategies across borders.

However, the EGTC "Euregio Meuse-Rhine" also faces certain downsides and challenges. Language and cultural differences can hinder effective communication and coordination (European Committee of the Regions, 2021). Disparities in regulations, administrative practices, and funding mechanisms pose administrative complexities (Freestone, 2020). Overcoming these barriers requires continuous dialogue, mutual understanding, and harmonization efforts.

Another challenge is sustaining commitment and engagement from all participating regions. Ensuring equal involvement and balanced representation can be challenging, particularly when regions have varying economic development and political influence (Council of the European Union, 2019). Maintaining active participation and effective decision-making processes are crucial for the success of the EGTC "Euregio Meuse-Rhine."

Therefore, the EGTC "Euregio Meuse-Rhine" offers significant economic development, governance enhancement, and cross-border collaboration benefits. It promotes regional economic growth, innovation, and job creation. The EGTC also strengthens governance structures and fosters better alignment of policies and strategies. However, language barriers, administrative complexities, and the need for sustained commitment pose challenges that require ongoing efforts in order to be able to overcome them.

In conclusion, cross-border cooperation initiatives and transnational network collaborations are essential mechanisms driving inter-regional cooperation in the European Union. Examples such as the ETC program, Euroregions, Baltic Sea Region cooperation, and EGTCs demonstrate the benefits of these mechanisms in enhancing regional development, promoting knowledge exchange, and fostering integration. By embracing and expanding upon successful initiatives, the European Union can continue to harness the potential of inter-regional cooperation, facilitating sustainable development and fostering a cohesive and prosperous Europe.

### **3. The cohesion policy - between targets, achievements, and the need for reform**

The European Union provides financial support through programs such as Interreg, which promotes cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation. For example, the Interreg Europe program supports projects that facilitate the exchange of experiences and best

practices among regions to improve regional policies and initiatives. This funding enables regions to implement joint projects, share knowledge, and build partnerships (European Commission, 2020). The European Structural and Investment Funds also provide financial assistance for inter-regional cooperation initiatives, fostering sustainable development and reducing regional disparities.

The Territorial Agenda 2030, developed by the European Commission and member states, sets out the strategic priorities for territorial development and emphasizes the importance of inter-regional cooperation. It highlights the need to strengthen collaboration, develop joint approaches, and foster territorial integration (European Commission, 2020). The European Urban Agenda and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region are further examples of policy frameworks that facilitate inter-regional cooperation by addressing shared challenges and opportunities within specific geographic areas.

Several successful case studies demonstrate the benefits of inter-regional cooperation projects. One such example is the Vanguard Initiative, a network of European regions collaborating on smart specialization strategies and supporting innovation-driven industrial modernization. The initiative brings together regions with similar industrial strengths to enhance their competitiveness through joint projects, knowledge sharing, and pilot demonstrations (Vanguard Initiative, n.d.). Another case is the Euroregion Pyrenees-Mediterranean, which promotes cross-border cooperation between regions in Spain and France. The Euroregion focuses on economic development, sustainable mobility, and cultural exchanges, creating a platform for joint actions and projects (Euroregion Pyrenees-Mediterranean, n.d.).

Through a meticulous analysis of policy documents and program evaluations, it is evident that the mechanisms facilitating inter-regional cooperation have evolved to meet the dynamic challenges of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy. From the establishment of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) to the integration of digital platforms and innovative governance structures, there is a concerted effort to foster cross-border collaboration and project implementation.

The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) is an institutional mechanism that supports inter-regional cooperation. The EGTC European Region Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino is a successful example of facilitating collaboration between regions in Austria

and Italy. This EGTC promotes joint initiatives in transport, spatial planning, and cross-border services, ensuring a coordinated approach to address common challenges (EGTC European Region Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino, n.d.).

In conclusion, funding opportunities and support mechanisms, policy frameworks and initiatives, and successful case studies demonstrate the potential of inter-regional cooperation. By leveraging these opportunities, regions can enhance their development strategies, foster innovation, and address shared challenges. Embracing inter-regional collaboration strengthens cohesion and promotes sustainable development, contributing to the overall prosperity of the European Union.

A comprehensive examination of policy documents and academic literature reveals a plethora of opportunities for inter-regional cooperation within the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy framework. The emphasis on smart specialization, sustainable development, and territorial integration presents a fertile ground for regions to leverage collective resources and expertise. Coupled with strategic programming and capacity-building initiatives, they offer avenues for driving collaborative endeavours and addressing everyday challenges (European Parliament., 2019). Still, inter-regional cooperation often faces administrative hurdles such as differing legal frameworks, bureaucratic procedures, and institutional fragmentation. These complexities can impede effective collaboration and project implementation. For example, the border region between Germany and Poland faces administrative complexity due to differences in legal frameworks and bureaucratic procedures (European Union Committee of the Regions, 2021). In this regard, establishing a joint administrative task force comprising representatives from both countries to streamline permit processes and harmonize regulations for cross-border projects could improve the cooperation between the two regions.

Also, a transnational network collaboration promoting innovation and entrepreneurship might struggle to secure adequate funding to support its activities. Limited financial resources hinder the network's ability to organize capacity-building workshops, facilitate knowledge exchange, and provide seed funding for innovative projects (Council of Europe, 2018). Such an example is the Baltic Sea region countries, which are facing challenges in securing funding for joint research and innovation projects, hindering collaborative efforts to address common environmental and economic issues. A possible solution to this issue could be establishing a

Baltic Sea Innovation Fund, supported by contributions from regional governments and private sector partners, to provide financial support for cross-border innovation initiatives and research collaborations (Council of Europe, 2018).

One significant benefit of inter-regional cooperation is its economic advantage to participating regions. Regional collaboration can pool resources, expertise, and infrastructure, increasing efficiency and productivity. By sharing knowledge and best practices, regions can stimulate innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic diversification (European Commission, 2021). For instance, the collaboration between Catalonia in Spain and Lombardy in Italy has resulted in joint research projects and knowledge transfer, fostering economic growth and technological advancement in both regions (Jensen et al., 2019). Inter-regional cooperation enables regions to tap into new markets, attract investments, and develop competitive advantages contributing to their overall economic development.

Social and cultural exchanges are also key benefits of inter-regional cooperation. Collaborative initiatives allow people from different regions to interact, exchange ideas, and appreciate diverse cultures. This promotes mutual understanding, cultural enrichment, and social cohesion. The Eurodistrict Strasbourg-Ortenau, spanning the border between France and Germany, fosters cross-border cultural exchanges and joint events that enhance intercultural dialogue and community integration (Eurodistrict et al.). Such exchanges create vibrant societies and strengthen the social fabric of participating regions.

Furthermore, by working together, regions can address common social challenges, such as unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion. Collaborative projects can improve access to education, healthcare, and social services, ensuring more equitable development across regions (Van der Zwet et al., 2021). For instance, the Baltic Sea Labour Forum promotes cooperation between trade unions, employers, and governments in the Baltic Sea region, fostering social dialogue, labour rights, and fair working conditions (Baltic Sea Labour Forum, n.d.). Inter-regional cooperation thus facilitates social cohesion, reduces disparities, and enhances the well-being of communities.

By collaborating on environmental initiatives, regions can address shared environmental challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion. The Alpine Space program facilitates inter-regional cooperation among Alpine regions to promote sustainable



development, nature conservation, and climate resilience (Alpine Space, n.d.). Through joint efforts, regions can implement environmentally friendly practices, protect natural resources, and ensure the sustainable use of shared ecosystems.

In conclusion, inter-regional fosters economic growth, enhances regional competitiveness, and stimulates innovation. Inter-regional cooperation also promotes social and cultural exchanges, fostering mutual understanding and social cohesion. Additionally, it contributes to environmental sustainability and shared resource management. Examples such as the collaboration between Catalonia and Lombardy, the Eurodistrict Strasbourg-Ortenau, the Baltic Sea Labour Forum and the Carpathian Euroregion demonstrate the tangible benefits that inter-regional cooperation brings to participating regions. By embracing collaboration and sharing resources, regions can collectively address challenges, promote sustainable development, and achieve greater prosperity.

Inter-regional cooperation within the European Union brings numerous benefits, but it also faces several challenges and limitations. This article explores the key obstacles encountered in inter-regional cooperation, including administrative and bureaucratic hurdles, cultural and linguistic barriers, as well as the lack of awareness and coordination among regional actors.

One major challenge is the administrative and bureaucratic complexities involved in coordinating cross-border and transnational initiatives. Diverse legal frameworks, administrative procedures, and funding mechanisms across regions can hinder the smooth implementation of joint projects. For instance, the Danube Transnational Programme, aimed at fostering cooperation among regions along the Danube River, faces administrative challenges due to varying national regulations and administrative practices (Danube Transnational Programme, n.d.). Such hurdles require effective coordination and harmonization of administrative processes to streamline cooperation and facilitate project implementation.

Cultural and linguistic barriers pose another significant challenge to inter-regional cooperation. Differences in language, traditions, and cultural practices can impede effective communication and collaboration among regional actors. For instance, the collaboration between Eastern and Western European regions may encounter cultural differences that affect mutual understanding and hinder joint initiatives (European Commission, 2021). Overcoming

these barriers requires promoting intercultural dialogue, language proficiency, and cultural awareness to foster effective cooperation and ensure inclusive participation of all regions.

The lack of awareness and coordination among regional actors is another limitation of inter-regional cooperation. Some regions may have limited knowledge about the potential benefits of collaboration or lack the necessary structures to engage in inter-regional dialogues. This can hinder the identification of common interests and the development of joint initiatives. The Interreg Sudoe program, focused on transnational cooperation in southwestern Europe, addresses this limitation by supporting projects that raise awareness, build networks, and promote cooperation among regional actors (Interreg Sudoe, n.d.). Increased awareness and coordination efforts are essential to overcome this limitation and foster meaningful engagement among regions.

In conclusion, inter-regional cooperation faces challenges and limitations that need to be addressed for effective collaboration. Administrative and bureaucratic hurdles require streamlined processes and harmonization of regulations. Cultural and linguistic barriers necessitate intercultural dialogue and awareness-building initiatives. The lack of awareness and coordination among regional actors calls for increased efforts to promote knowledge-sharing and coordination structures. By addressing these challenges, inter-regional cooperation can overcome limitations and unlock its full potential to foster regional development, innovation, and cohesion within the European Union.

#### **4. Conclusion**

By fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange among regional actors, inter-regional cooperation offers mechanisms to address common challenges, unlock opportunities, and achieve shared goals. This article explores the importance and benefits of inter-regional cooperation in the context of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy.

Collaborative initiatives can lead to economic growth, enhanced competitiveness, and improved resource allocation by leveraging the strengths of different regions. Furthermore, inter-regional cooperation facilitates social and cultural exchanges, promoting mutual understanding, social cohesion, and a sense of belonging. Additionally, inter-regional

cooperation contributes to environmental sustainability and resilience by addressing shared environmental challenges and promoting sustainable resource management.

Several recommendations can be made to strengthen inter-regional cooperation in the context of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy. First, fostering awareness and knowledge-sharing among regional actors is crucial. Awareness campaigns and capacity-building programs can promote the benefits and potential of inter-regional cooperation, encouraging greater participation and engagement. Second, establishing effective coordination mechanisms and platforms for dialogue is essential. Regular forums, networks, and joint project development platforms can facilitate information exchange, coordination, and partnership building. Finally, ensuring the availability of adequate financial resources and support mechanisms is crucial for implementing inter-regional cooperation initiatives effectively. Enhancing funding opportunities and simplifying administrative procedures can encourage more regions to engage in collaborative projects.

By recognizing the significance of inter-regional cooperation and implementing these recommendations, the European Union can unlock the full potential of regional actors to achieve greater cohesion, sustainable development, and shared prosperity.

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