

7 October 2021

Opening speech – Commissioner Elisa Ferreira

Interreg annual event

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Interreg Annual Event. I extend a warm welcome to everyone who was able to join us here in Brussels. And also a warm welcome to the many more who are joining us online.

My challenge to you: think Europe, not just your programme

Today we officially launch the 2021-27 programmes. However, as you know, there is still work to be done.

First, there is work to be done to prepare the programmes. You know this, and I am sure you are working hard to get your programmes ready and move to the first round of projects.

But secondly, and this is the big picture, to which I would draw your attention: there is much work to be done on the future of this continent that we love so much.

And this is my challenge to you today: to think not just in terms of programming, not just in terms of borders, and not just in terms of Interreg. Instead I challenge you to always think in

terms of the bigger picture: your contribution to Europe, and your contribution to our future.

The big picture is that Europe is at the crossroads. And the decisions we take today and the actions we set in motion will set Europe's future direction for many years to come.

First, we must set our sails firmly towards the green transition. The floods and fires of the summer proved once again, that we are indeed in a climate emergency, and that we must urgently change our ways of production and consumption, how we commute, the things we buy and eat, and how we heat our houses.

Second, we must set our sails firmly towards the digital revolution. As we saw in lockdown, the digital adventure has far more for us to explore in the coming years, from teleworking to digital business.

Third, we must make sure that all our ships sail together, that no region is left behind and no place feels forgotten. As you know, this is especially important in border regions which were particularly impacted in the Covid crisis.

In facing all these challenges: recovery from Covid, the climate emergency, the digital revolution, and the need to navigate all these challenges, in every region, I would say that cooperation is more important than ever.

And you do not have to take only my word for it. As our President von der Leyen said, in her State of the European Union speech, *“There are no issues where less cooperation is the answer”*.

And in fact, these last 2 years, we have seen many wonderful acts of solidarity, many of which have stemmed from Interreg projects or Interreg partnerships. Patients have been cared for in neighbouring regions. Information services to citizens have sprung up, cross-border structures have worked on special passes to allow cross-border life to continue. Some Interreg projects have even dedicated resources to manufacturing emergency protective equipment.

So there have been many beautiful stories. And today I encourage you in the next seven years: to create more beautiful stories of green cooperation, digital cooperation, and cooperation in leaving no region behind.

Some concrete examples

This is the challenge. Let me turn to concrete examples.

In all our actions, we must position the programmes, taking account of other programmes acting in the same territory.

Because we must ensure that Interreg programmes are adding value.

As you know, the budget at our disposal for Interreg programmes is not limitless. So we must make clear choices. And deliver visible benefits for citizens on the ground.

The first key area of added value is in promoting cooperation, ensuring the coherence of other programmes acting in a given territory. Interreg has a key role, in ensuring that other programmes act together in a way that is tailored to the territory. For example, in promoting synergies in health care provision across borders.

Second, we must step up our efforts to support the green deal. This has always been a very successful sector for cooperation. Through our programmes, we have already invested significantly in jointly managing natural assets and jointly putting in place strategies and responses to natural catastrophes. We must take this further, in the new generation of Interreg programmes.

The Pre-accession programmes for cross-border cooperation with the Western Balkans and Turkey will see their allocation

rise by more than 33%. You must continue playing your essential role as a bridge in the region, helping resolve bilateral issues and helping alleviate border obstacles. The accession last year of the Republic of North Macedonia to the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region was a clear signal of the value you bring. You are helping build institutional capacity and foster real partnership between the EU and IPA countries.

Turning to the ongoing Neighbourhood CBC programmes, since we welcomed you last year, you have already shown a great ability to adapt to new circumstances. This is not just the pandemic. We know that many of you operate in a very sensitive, sometimes unstable political environment. And despite this, most of you have reached cruising speed in implementing the programmes.

We are particularly aware of the difficulties facing those programmes involving Belarus. We are working with the managing authorities, to re-orient the programmes to support the Belarusian people and civil society, and to limit our engagement with the central authorities. In line with the Council conclusions, we will ensure that not a single euro is used to support the Belarussian regime, which is brutally oppressing the population and violating human rights. European money must support European values!

For the future Interreg NEXT programmes, I am happy to see how well you are advancing in the programming process. You are already fully part of the Interreg family. Your investments will support the process of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In making these investments, I urge you to do all you can to involve partners from various parts of society. This involvement must start with programming and preparation and continue throughout implementation. Partnership is a key principle, not just of Interreg, but of all of cohesion policy.

We also have a new strand of Interreg for the outermost regions.

Outermost regions cooperation programmes play a pivotal role in ensuring a European presence in four key areas: the Atlantic, the Caribbean, Amazonia and the Indian Ocean.

We need to support more cooperation of our Outermost regions with the regions where they are located. This is important for their development and is a key component of our open cooperative model of international relations.

In addition, Interreg in the Outermost Regions, is another sign of European solidarity and support for such regions.

And indeed, this is where I would like to finish. The ideal Interreg programme has their head in the stars and their feet on the ground.

By “head in the stars”, I mean with a big vision of the big European themes of solidarity, tackling the climate emergency, managing the digital revolution, and leaving no region behind. At the same time, you must have your feet firmly planted on the ground. Knowing the needs of the territory, with a special attention to less developed regions. Tackling specific bottlenecks. Building cooperation and synergies between other programmes. Building bridges between people. Building the capacity of partners. And most of all, showing European solidarity, where it matters most, on the ground.

During the pandemic, we heard so many beautiful stories of local cooperation linked to Interreg. I challenge you in the coming years: be the authors and co-authors of more beautiful stories!