

Harvesting report

Consultation on the future Interreg Romania - Bulgaria Programme post 2027



-December 2024-

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List of acronyms

MA	Managing Authority for Interreg RO-BG Programme
IVY	Interreg Volunteer Youth Programme
EU	European Union
EC	European Commission
MDPWA	Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration
NA	National Authority
RO-BG	Interreg VI-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme

1. Context

Preparing for the future, the European Commission's Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) has launched in 2024 a wide consultation process, targeting the people living in the border regions, the local communities and the stakeholders, who know best what their needs are.

In response to this initiative, Interreg VI-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme structures (Managing Authority and National Authority, supported by Info Point Ruse) decided to invite stakeholders and citizens from the RO-BG cross border area to take part to this public consultation by expressing their views about the future.

The objectives of this consultation are to find out the opinions of stakeholders and citizens in the RO-BG cross-border region about the benefits that RO-BG cooperation has brought so far, the problems they are facing on a daily basis as well as ideas to overcome these problems and areas to be improved in the future post 2027. These views are being collected by the Managing Authority, processed and shared with the DG REGIO and will represent the basis for the preparation of the post 2027 Interreg programmes.

The public consultation consisted in asking two target groups, citizens and stakeholders, a series of specific questions by using two relevant questionnaires, which were filled in by the respondents. This public consultation was officially launched in April 2024 on the Programme website and social media pages and took place during April- November 2024.

The strategy used by the Programme bodies to prepare and conduct this public consultation involved the following steps:

- Defining the groups of citizens and stakeholders to be consulted and set up the contact database
- Preparing the questions to be included in each questionnaire
- Publishing the surveys on the Programme website and social media pages
- Identifying for each group the most efficient method to be used for consultation (eg. emails, in person events)
- Drafting an Action plan for the public consultation, including specific activities to be carried out with the purpose to support the process (including promotion and dissemination activities), timeframe and responsible persons
- Organising in person events for promotion and consultation
- Collecting the responses, data analysis and interpretation
- Drafting the harvesting report

2. Consultation of stakeholders

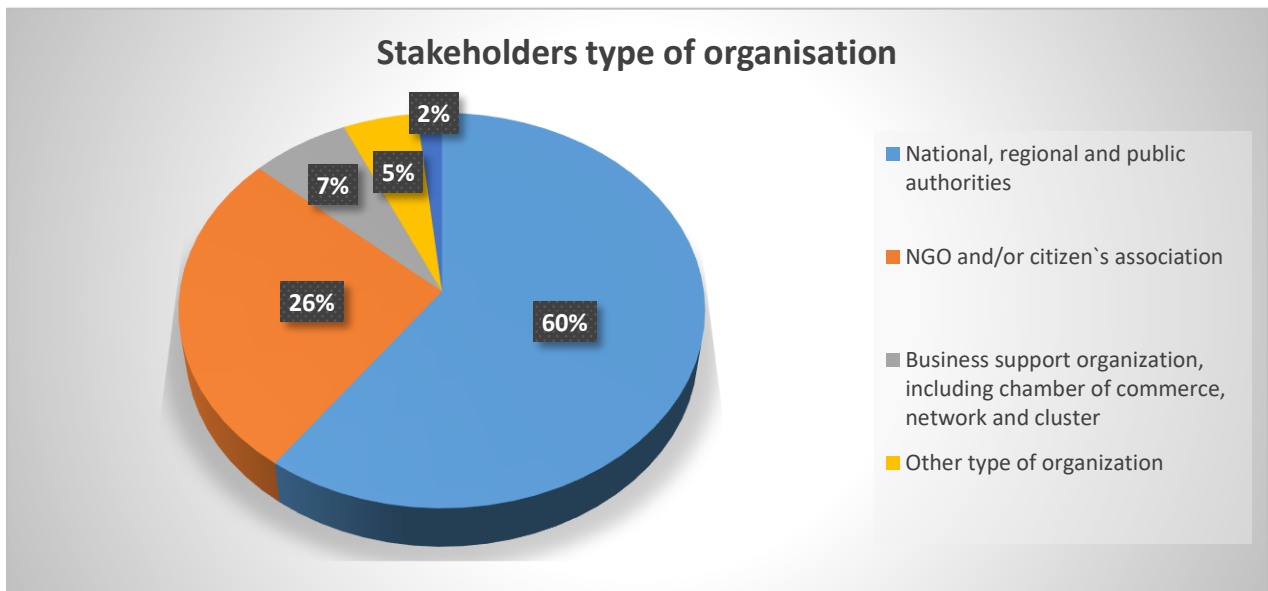
2.1. Main stakeholders consulted

The stakeholders that filed in the online survey are mainly represented by the organizations that have already at least one previous experience with the previous Interreg Romania-Bulgaria programmes or are interested in applying for funding within the current Interreg VI-

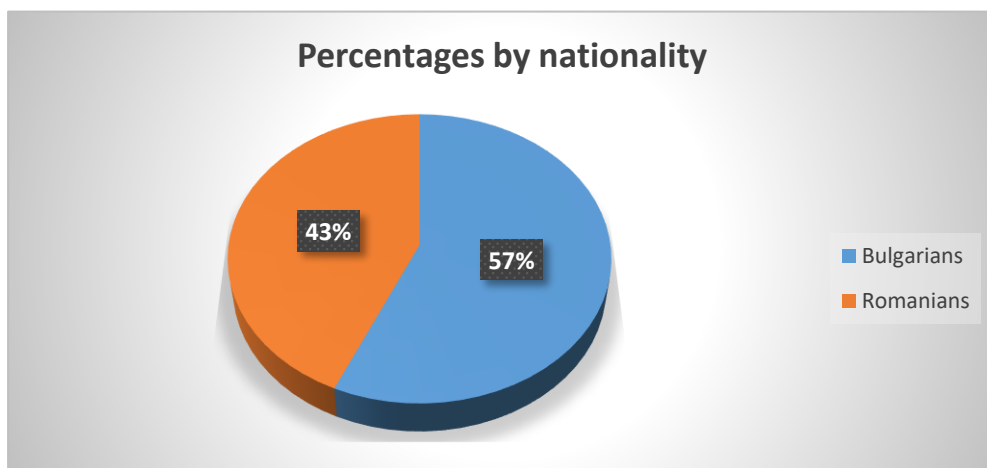
A Romania-Bulgaria Programme (e.g. beneficiaries of projects), as well as other stakeholders from the RO-BG region.

At the end of the consultation we received a total number of 60 responses and the most significant group of respondents is represented by national, regional and public authorities as follows:

- National, regional and public authorities (36 respondents)
- NGO and/or citizen`s association (16 respondents)
- Business support organization, including chamber of commerce, network and cluster (4 respondents)
- Other type of organization (3 respondents)
- Higher education and/or research institution (1 respondent)



The majority of the respondents are from Bulgaria (34), while 26 are from Romania.



2.2 Methods of consultation

The consultation took place during 25 April - 15 November 2024 and in order to get more results, we used an online tool as well as in person events.

The main method of consultation was the **online survey** that included a number of 16 questions out of which 10 questions were the ones presented in the EC document “*Toolkit - Guide for shaping together the future Interreg*”, adapted to a very small extent to the specificities of our RO-BG cross border region.

The online survey was published during April-November 2024 in all three languages (Romanian, Bulgarian and English) on the Programme website at: <https://www.interregviarobg.eu/en/share-your-voice-in-the-public-consultation-launched-for-preparing-the-next-ro-bg-interreg-programme-post-2027> and promoted via all social media channels of the Programme and during all events that took place in the reference period.

Another method for consultation was by addressing specific target groups of stakeholders during the other activities carried out by the programme bodies. For example, some activities of this type consisted in sending emails to the members of the Monitoring Committee and asking them to fill in the questionnaires and to disseminate it further to other stakeholders or in promoting the consultation exercise among different stakeholders within “one to one” meetings organised by the programme bodies.

Moreover, the survey was promoted within public events organised at the Programme level, for example, during the Annual Conference of Interreg VI-A RO-BG Programme that took place on 31st of October 2024 in Piatra Olt (Romania), other events attended by the representatives of the MA and Info Point - Ruse, or individual meetings with different organizations from the area. With this occasion, the participant stakeholders were asked to fill in the questionnaire.

2.3. Summary of the input on the key questions

2.3.1 Perception of the advantages/disadvantages of living in a cross border area

Most of the respondents perceive that **living next to a border is an advantage** due to the fact that there are more choices to get a job.

Only a limited number of respondents believe that living next to a border is a disadvantage as things can get complicated like public transport or setting up a business and only a few respondents select both of the options presented.

2.3.2 The biggest potential for territorial cooperation in the RO-BG cross border area

Cross border tourism is seen by the majority of respondents as the most significant area in which cross-border interventions may bring a significant impact. Cross border tourism is considered as a potentially growing sector in the area. By promoting sustainable tourism, the area may benefit from economic growth as well as promoting the natural and cultural heritage of the two countries.

Protecting and cleaning of the environment is considered also a priority for investments by a significant part of respondents. As RO-BG cross border is home for many natural protected area and ecosystems and the Danube represents a natural barrier between Romania and Bulgaria, there is need for protecting measures and also measure for keeping the area clean and green, reduce the pollution of air and water, better management of waste etc.

Another significant area selected by respondents to be improved is the **transport connectivity across borders**, as investments in this area are expected to improve

connectivity and mobility across Danube and therefore enhance cross border cooperation between the two countries.

2.3.3 Examples of areas that worked well in the context of RO BG cooperation

The majority of the respondents mentioned as examples of good practices in the RO- BG cooperation area cross-border business and tourism cooperation, followed by joint initiatives for protection of the environment. These areas were highlighted for their potential to drive sustainable growth, foster mutual benefits and address shared challenges that both countries face.

Part of the respondents referred to effective cooperation within the non-governmental sector. This indicates that such collaboration is not currently perceived as a priority in the RO-BG cooperation framework, compared with other fields. While NGOs play a supportive role in fostering cross-border connections, their impact appears to be secondary compared to the more prominent focus areas of environmental, business and tourism cooperation.

2.3.4 Examples of areas that did not worked well in the context of RO BG cooperation and should be improved

The perception of most respondents is that the main area of concern in cooperation is the existence of **complicated and time-consuming procedures**. These have led to delays in the implementation of projects, highlighting a clear need for simplification and increased flexibility in administrative and legal processes. Addressing these inefficiencies would improve the overall functionality of cross-border cooperation and ensure more timely and effective project outcomes.

A significant number of respondents also pointed out another critical issue: **differences in legislation and administrative practices** between the two countries. These discrepancies often create obstacles for a smooth cross-border collaboration, requiring additional efforts to align policies or establish frameworks for smoother interaction.

Furthermore, a limited number of respondents identified other pressing concerns, including a **lack of transport connectivity**, which restricts the ease of movement of people and goods across the border.

2.3.5 Major obstacles for a good cooperation in RO-BG area

Low and uneven levels of economic development emerged as the most significant obstacle to cooperation in the Romania-Bulgaria (RO-BG) area, as highlighted by a significant portion of respondents. This disparity creates imbalances in resource availability, infrastructure quality and the capacity to engage effectively in cross-border initiatives. Addressing this issue requires targeted investments to reduce regional inequalities and create a more level playing field for collaboration.

Little knowledge about the available programs for cross-border cooperation was cited as a barrier by a significant number of respondents. This suggests the need for better information, dissemination and awareness campaigns to educate local communities, businesses and public institutions about the opportunities and benefits of participating in such initiatives.

Another key challenge identified is **limited willingness to cooperate**, which may stem from historical, cultural, or institutional differences. Fostering trust and encouraging mutual

understanding between stakeholders on both sides of the border will be crucial to overcoming this barrier. This could involve organizing joint workshops, cultural exchange programs and other activities designed to build long-term relationships and promote a cooperation culture.

Language differences also present a significant obstacle, complicating communication and the implementation of joint projects. Additionally, little knowledge about the available programs for cross-border cooperation was cited as a barrier. This suggests the need for better information dissemination and awareness campaigns to educate local communities, businesses and public institutions about the opportunities and benefits of participating in such initiatives.

Finally, the **geographical distance from major cities** was mentioned as a factor hindering effective cooperation. Remote or rural areas may lack adequate transport links, infrastructure or access to resources necessary for active participation. Improved connectivity and targeted development strategies for these peripheral regions could enhance their integration into cross-border efforts and strengthen overall cooperation. In this respect, the cross border impact and character of these transport links approaching relevant means of transport (water, railways etc.) must be taken into consideration.

2.3.6 Expectations for projects to be financed by Interreg programme that have not been be addressed by an Interreg programme and novelties to be included in future Interreg programme

The majority of responses highlighted **investments in major infrastructure** as a primary area of focus for financing under an Interreg programme. These investments are seen as crucial for improving cross-border connectivity, such as transportation networks, bridges, and communication infrastructure, which would enhance the ease of movement for people, goods, and services. Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of **joint investments that benefit both sides of the border**, ensuring equitable development and fostering stronger regional integration.

A smaller but significant portion of responses pointed to the need for **financial support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)**. Such funding would empower local businesses to engage in cross-border trade, innovation, and partnership opportunities, thereby driving economic growth and increasing the competitiveness of the region.

Regarding areas for improvement in the next Interreg programme, most respondents called for **simplified procedures**. Reducing bureaucratic complexity would streamline project implementation and increase accessibility for a broader range of stakeholders. This was followed by a demand for **more innovative projects**, which could include the adoption of digital technologies, green solutions, and research collaborations to address modern challenges in the region.

Investments in connectivity **infrastructure projects** also remained a prominent area for improvement. Additionally, respondents suggested increasing **flexibility in the calls for proposals**, such as by broadening eligibility criteria, adapting to emerging needs, or allowing for more diverse project formats to foster inclusivity.

Lastly, participants proposed exploring **new thematic domains of intervention**. These could involve addressing contemporary issues such as, for example, climate change adaptation, renewable energy, digital transformation, or social inclusion, reflecting the evolving priorities and challenges faced by the cross-border region.

2.3.7 Preferred type of projects by potential applicants to be financed by future Interreg: “hard” projects (infrastructure) or “soft” projects (studies, cultural exchange etc.)

The responses to this question indicate that that majority of stakeholders believe both types of projects—**infrastructure projects** and **“soft” projects**—should be financed under an Interreg programme. This balanced approach reflects the need for tangible development through physical infrastructure while also addressing the importance of fostering relationships and shared knowledge through non-material initiatives.

A notable portion of respondents, however, emphasized the importance of focusing on **infrastructure projects**, mentioning their higher visibility and lasting impact. These projects include investments in railways and roads across borders, parks, schools, and other physical assets that provide immediate and measurable benefits to cross-border communities. Stakeholders view such projects as essential for improving connectivity, accessibility and quality of life in the region, as well as for demonstrating the concrete value of cross-border cooperation.

Conversely, only a smaller group of stakeholders highlighted the value of **“soft” projects**, such as joint studies, cultural exchanges, action plans, and festivals. These initiatives are seen as better suited for fostering interpersonal and institutional relationships, building trust and promoting shared cultural and social identities across borders.

The variety of perspectives suggests that an effective Interreg programme should strike a balance between these two project types. While prioritizing large-scale infrastructure to meet pressing developmental needs, the programme should also allocate sufficient resources to “soft” projects to enhance cross-border collaboration and community engagement.

2.3.8 Actions to facilitate the work with the counterparts in the partner country

The majority of stakeholders emphasized the importance of **enhanced communication** as a key action for improving cross-border cooperation. They highlighted the need for clearer, more transparent and frequent exchanges of information between all parties involved to ensure better understanding and alignment of objectives. Effective communication is seen as a cornerstone for building trust, preventing misunderstandings and facilitating smoother collaboration between partners.

In addition to communication, stakeholders strongly advocated for **quicker and better-coordinated decision-making processes**. Delays in decision-making can hinder project implementation, reduce efficiency and frustrate stakeholders.

Another priority area is the **increased coordination and support from national authorities**. Stakeholders expressed a need for greater involvement and support from central governments to align cross-border initiatives with national policies and ensure adequate resources are allocated. National authorities can play a pivotal role in addressing administrative bottlenecks, harmonizing regulations, and providing strategic guidance, thus enhancing the effectiveness of cross-border programmes.

Together, these actions—enhanced communication, improved decision-making, and stronger national support—are seen as critical to maximizing the impact of cross-border cooperation efforts and addressing the challenges currently faced in the region.

2.3.9 The dream cooperation project

Most respondents expressed a preference for developing a **joint project for nature protection** as a priority for cross-border cooperation. This reflects a shared concern for preserving the natural environment and biodiversity in the region, especially in areas like the Danube River and its surrounding ecosystems. Projects focused on environmental conservation, such as protecting natural habitats, addressing climate change adaptation, managing water resources or combating pollution, are seen as essential for ensuring long-term sustainability and fostering regional cooperation in environmental area.

The second most popular option among respondents is a **new bridge over the Danube River**. While such a physical infrastructure project could enhance connectivity between Romania and Bulgaria, this option is viewed as a second priority in comparison with the environmental domain top priority. It may suggest that respondents may prioritize environmental or urban development projects over large-scale infrastructure investments and understand that such a big project cannot be financed by an Interreg programme.

The third option expressed is the creation of a **network of communities/cities** that face similar challenges. This initiative would enable communities/cities on both sides of the border to collaborate and share best practices, resources and solutions to common urban issues, such as waste management, energy efficiency or public health. By working together, cities can address their shared problems more effectively and create a stronger sense of regional unity.

2.3.10. Interesting quotes

As one of the topic of great interest for stakeholders was cross-border tourism, we asked the participants during our meetings how Interreg projects can improve cross border tourism.

We received many points of view and we would like to share a few that we consider with an added value to this topic.

The main ideas were related to:

- EU funded projects often support the preservation of cultural and historical sites, which attracts tourists interested in heritage and culture. The creation of transnational routes draws people to explore multiple countries within one journey.
- Projects funded by EU can work towards simplifying cross border regulations and visa policies, making it easier for travellers to cross borders without excessive documentation or delays
- Cross border tourism projects often include joint promotional campaigns that highlight attractions across regions. By promoting a region as a single tourist destination, travellers get more diverse experiences within a single trip.
- Projects can finance educational activities for future generations, such as visits at natural parks and protected areas to promote the importance of nature protection and it's important role in sustainable tourism

3. Consultation of citizens

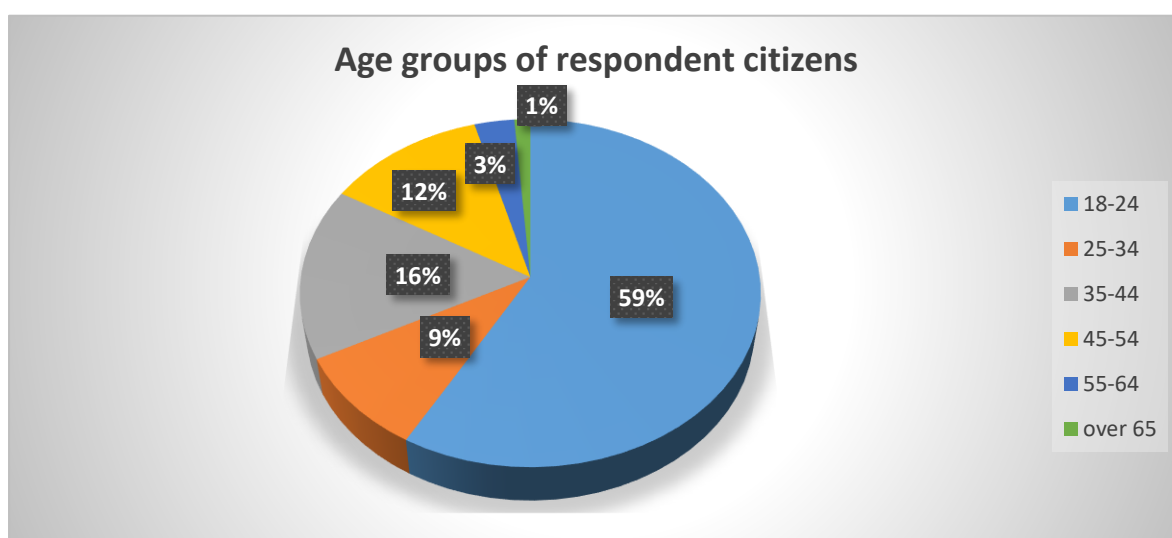
3.1 Main citizens consulted

We have received feedback to our online survey dedicated to citizens from a total number of 161 people.

The most significant category of respondents is represented by young people, between 18-24 years old, with the occupation of students. The other category of citizens that answered the questions included in the questionnaire is formed by employees, entrepreneurs and self-employed people, from different age groups.

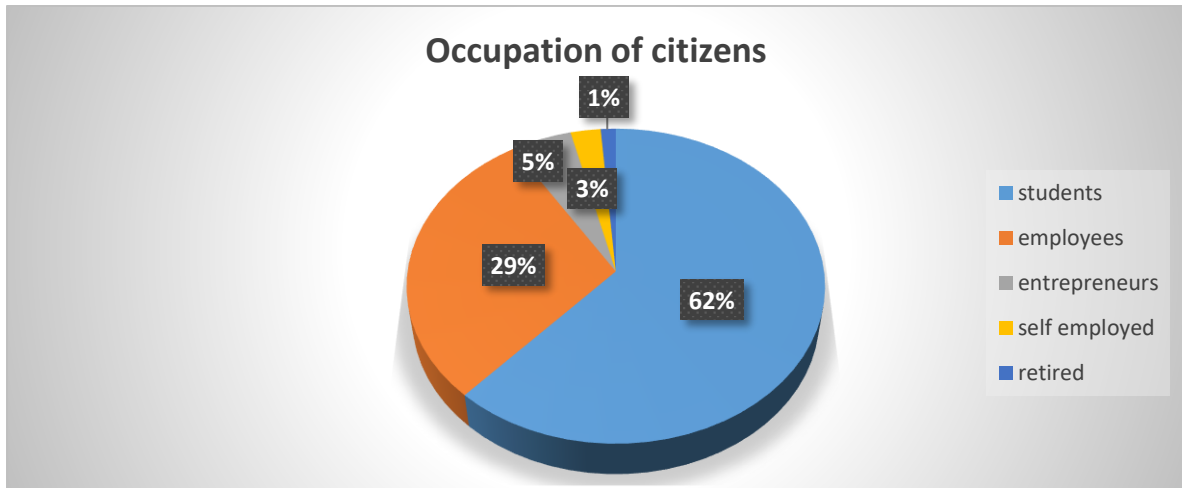
Regarding the age group, the respondent citizens are included in the following segments:

- 95 respondents in the age group 18-24
- 15 respondents in the age group 25-34
- 26 respondents in the age group 35-44
- 20 respondents in the age group of 45-54
- 5 respondents in the age group of 55-64
- 2 respondents in the age group over 65

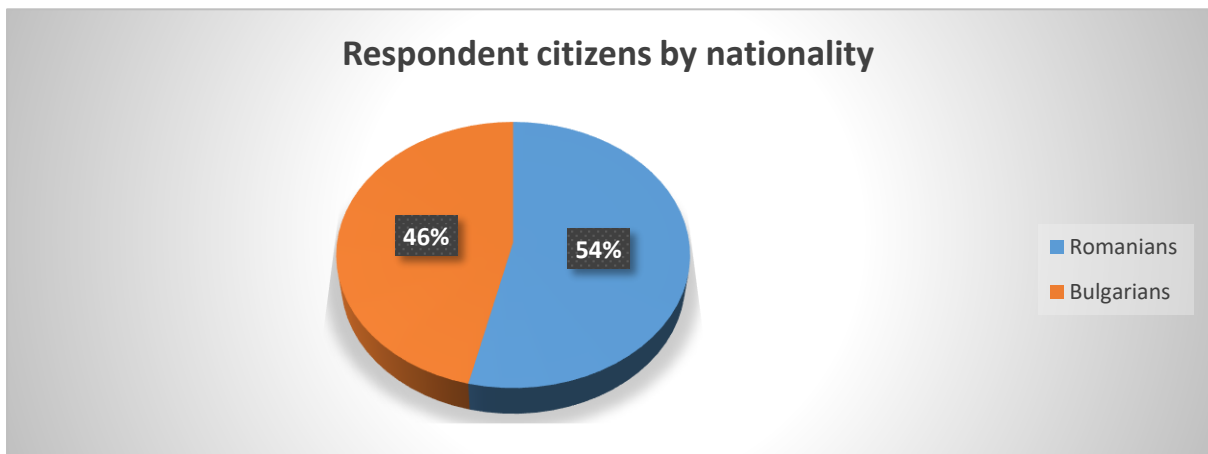


The respondents have different occupations, such as:

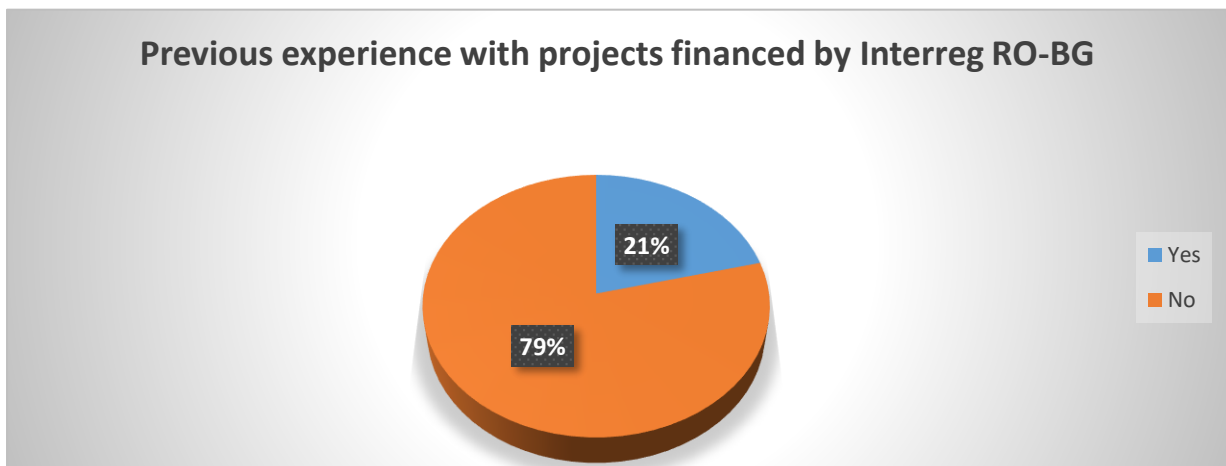
- 97 citizens are students
- 46 citizens are employees
- 8 citizens are entrepreneurs
- 4 citizens are self employed
- 2 citizens are retired



As for the nationality and residence place, the repartition between Romanian and Bulgarians consists in a number of 86 citizens from Romania and a number of 75 citizens from Bulgaria, as follows:



We also asked the participants to the online survey to mention if they had any previous experience with projects financed by Interreg RO-BG Programme, in order to assess their level of information about our programme. From a total of 161 respondents, 34 mentioned yes and the rest of 127 respondents no, as shown below:



3.2 Methods of consultation

Similar with the consultation process of stakeholders, the consultation of citizens was conducted between April 25 and November 15, 2024. To maximize responses, we used both an online tool and in-person events.

The primary method used was an online survey consisting of 12 questions, of which 5 were adapted slightly from those in the European Commission document, *Toolkit - Guide for Shaping Together the Future Interreg*, to better fit the specific needs of the RO-BG cross-border region.

The survey, available in Romanian, Bulgarian, and English, was published on the Programme website (<https://www.interregviarobg.eu/en/share-your-voice-in-the-public-consultation-launched-for-preparing-the-next-ro-bg-interreg-programme-post-2027>) from April to November 2024. It was promoted across all of the Programme's social media channels and at every event held during the consultation period.

Special attention was paid to young people, as they represent the future of our cross border region and should have an important voice in shaping future policies and programmes. We organised in person consultation events with students from 3 universities located in our cross border region: University of Craiova, University of Ruse and University of Constanța.

The first event took place at University of Craiova on 21st of May 2024 and consisted in presenting students useful information, in a plain language, about EU Cohesion policy, Interreg programmes in Europe and Interreg RO-BG Programme, followed by discussions and filling in the online questionnaire. A number of approx. 30 students took part to this event and filled in the survey.

The other two consultation events were organised at University in Ruse (22nd of October 2024) and University of Constanța (25th of October 2024) in partnership with the two young volunteers, part of Interreg Volunteer Youth (IVY) programme financed by European Commission. The two IVY's, hosted for a period of 6 months within the Managing Authority, were directly involved in the organization of these two consultation events together with the Managing Authority staff.

The two events were carried out in an interactive format, including presentations on EU Cohesion Policy, Interreg programmes in Europe and Interreg RO-BG Programme, a quiz session, a poster making activity dedicated to consulting students in a creative manner. The sessions included awarding of prizes as a result of participating to an online photo dedicated to students and concluded with the filling in of the online survey by the attendees. Both events gathered a number of approx. 130 students attending, out of which 82 filled in the online questionnaire. A very useful feedback exercise, used for consultation purposes, was the poster making activity, during which students had the opportunity to express their vision on the cross border region and its future by drawings, quotes and interesting ideas of projects.

3.3 Summary of the input on the key questions

3.3.1 Perception of the advantages/disadvantages of living in a cross border area

Most respondents believe that living next to a border represents an advantage, primarily because it offers **more job opportunities**. The proximity to another country can facilitate

cross-border employment, create access to a broader labour market and enhance the potential for economic growth. People living near borders may benefit from increased demand for workers in sectors like trade, tourism, logistics and services. This interconnectedness is seen as a positive aspect, providing greater choices for employment and improving the overall economic prospects of local residents.

However, a limited number of respondents consider living next to a border to be a **disadvantage**. They point to challenges such as **limitations for local businesses**, which may struggle to compete with businesses across the border due to regulatory differences, market conditions or logistical burdens. Additionally, some expressed concerns about **underdeveloped transport infrastructure**, which can impede efficient movement of goods and people, reducing the full potential of cross-border opportunities. Poor transportation links or bureaucratic delays may hinder both local economic growth and cross-border cooperation.

A small group of respondents expressed the view that living next to a border can be both an **advantage and a disadvantage**. They acknowledged the opportunities provided by cross-border connections, but also recognized the challenges related to infrastructure, regulations and market competition. This perspective suggests that while the border area offers potential benefits, there are also barriers that need to be addressed to fully capitalize on the advantages of cross-border living.

3.3.2 The areas in which cooperation between neighbouring countries is needed

The **creation of transport connectivity** across borders, along with **employment opportunities in neighbouring countries**, are considered top priorities by the majority of citizens consulted. Improved transportation infrastructure is seen as essential for facilitating the movement of people and goods, enhancing both local and regional economies. Additionally, access to employment across borders can open up new job markets, helping to address unemployment issues and promote economic integration between neighbouring countries.

Another important area of interest is the **protection and cleaning of the environment**, which many citizens view as a crucial priority for long-term sustainability. Initiatives aimed at improving environmental conditions, such as waste management, pollution reduction and conservation efforts, are seen as essential for ensuring a healthy and prosperous future for border communities.

Following closely is the importance of **cross-border tourism**. With the rich cultural and natural resources on both sides of the border, promoting sustainable tourism as a shared activity can foster economic growth, create jobs and strengthen cultural ties between countries.

These priorities highlight the need for integrated efforts in infrastructure, environmental protection and tourism to enhance the quality of life and economic prospects for citizens living in border regions.

3.3.3 Examples of successful projects from your RO-BG cross border area

The interviewed citizens highlighted several impactful projects that have been delivered in their area, contributing to both environmental sustainability and community development.

Most of the respondents mentioned projects that **develop a local park**, providing recreational space for the community and enhancing the quality of life for residents.

Notable examples include **projects aimed at cleaning a river**, which have helped improve local water quality and raise environmental awareness. Another significant initiative focused on the **protection of sturgeon in the Danube**, addressing the need to conserve endangered species and preserve the biodiversity of the river ecosystem.

Other impactful projects include those that **developed joint cultural centers**, which fostered cross-border cultural exchange, offering a platform for artistic and educational activities that bring together local communities from both sides of the border. Similarly, the creation of a **cycle path** has improved transportation options while promoting a healthy lifestyle and eco-friendly mobility.

Additionally, projects that created **job fairs** have been mentioned as successful projects, being able to connect local residents with employment opportunities, helping to address unemployment and stimulate economic growth in the region.

These projects illustrate the positive outcomes of cross-border cooperation, showcasing the tangible benefits of collaborative initiatives that address both environmental and socio-economic challenges.

3.3.4 Daily barriers in cross border cooperation

Most respondents identify **language differences** as a major obstacle to cooperation across the border. This language barrier may sometimes complicate joint initiatives, negotiations and project implementation, making it harder to build trust and coordinate actions.

Secondly, the **difficult terrain**, particularly the **Danube River**, is also seen as a major geographic obstacle. While the river is a significant natural resource, its presence complicates the development of transportation infrastructure, creating logistical difficulties for cross-border trade, travel and communication.

Cross-border procedures, such as customs and administrative regulations, are frequently cited as obstacles. The complexity and time-consuming nature of these procedures can delay the implementation of projects and create inefficiencies, hindering the smooth flow of goods, people and services across the border. Simplifying these procedures could significantly improve the efficiency of cross-border cooperation.

Negative stereotypes also emerge as a significant barrier. Deep-seated perceptions and biases between communities on both sides of the border can affect relationships, creating an environment of mistrust or reluctance to engage in cross-border cooperation. These stereotypes may stem from historical, cultural or political differences and overcoming them requires dedicated efforts to foster mutual understanding and respect.

Finally, another challenge mentioned is the **limited potential for cooperation due to demographic decline**. In many border regions, population decrease has led to fewer people available for collaborative projects, resulting in a diminished workforce and lower levels of economic activity. This demographic trend poses a long-term challenge to sustaining and expanding cross-border initiatives.

3.3.5 The dream cooperation project

A **joint project for nature protection** is considered a top priority by the majority of respondents. This reflects a strong commitment to environmental sustainability and the shared responsibility for preserving natural resources. Projects focused on protecting local ecosystems, conserving biodiversity and addressing environmental challenges like pollution or habitat degradation are seen as vital for ensuring the long-term health of the region.

The second important area mentioned by the respondents is the construction of a **bridge over the Danube**, which would enhance cross-border connectivity, improving transportation and trade links between the two countries. This infrastructure project would facilitate easier movement of people and goods, further integrating the region and boosting economic opportunities.

Other areas of interest mentioned by respondents include projects that focus on creating a **network of cities** that share common challenges. This initiative would foster collaboration among cities on both sides of the border, enabling them to tackle shared issues such as urban development, waste management and public health, while also learning from each other's experiences and solutions.

Additionally, there is significant interest in **joint medical services** to improve healthcare access for communities on both sides of the border. Collaborative health initiatives could address gaps in medical resources, ensure better care for border populations and create more effective responses to health crises.

Finally, respondents expressed support for the creation of a **common school**, which would promote educational exchanges and cooperation between countries. Such a school could provide bilingual education and foster cross-border cultural understanding, preparing future generations for collaboration and mutual respect across national boundaries.

These priorities highlight a broad range of initiatives aimed at fostering cross border integration, improving quality of life and addressing shared challenges.

3.3.6 Interesting quotes

During the poster making activity, students expressed their vision about cross border cooperation in RO-BG area and shared some interesting ideas.

We have selected some of them that highlight the specificities of our area, as follows:

- Environmental challenges should be taken into consideration. Coastal areas face specific challenges such as: beach erosion, pollution and impacts from tourism development. Without sustainable management, these beautiful natural areas could deteriorate, impacting bio diversity
- The limited infrastructure and accessibility generates overcrowding during the summer season in the seaside resorts along the Black Sea in both countries. Possible solutions may be to increase the number of trains and create other border crossing facilities
- RO-BG area is a rich area in culture and history, it has beautiful beaches and natural landscapes, historical places to visit such as historical monuments, museums, Roman remains etc. and is a place full of traditions
- Member states may take measures to protect the local economy and provide protection against unfavourable external competition, helping domestic markets to grow

4. Recommendations for post 2027

Following the analysis of the responses received from the consulted citizens and stakeholders living in our RO-BG cross-border area, we can reach some useful conclusions that can be formulated as future recommendations for post 2027 Interreg RO-BG Programme.

The feedback from responders reflects the specific needs of the territory and the conclusions should be read in conjunction with the specificity of the Interreg funds. It is evident that, in order to maximize the impact of the Interreg funds, these should be carefully planned in connection with the main national and EU programmes dedicated to big infrastructure investments. In this way, Interreg funds can be serve as trigger of bigger investments or as tools to build upon the results of the significant funding projects.

4.1. Topics to be covered by future Interreg RO-BG Programme

a. Environmental protection

Preserving **biodiversity** within the Romania-Bulgaria border region requires targeted and large-scale efforts to protect critical ecosystems, particularly those along the Danube and other sensitive habitats. Initiatives should include the establishment of conservation projects designed to safeguard natural areas and mitigate threats to wildlife. Additionally, monitoring systems focused on endangered species, particularly aquatic and riparian fauna, should be developed to provide early warning mechanisms and inform adaptive management strategies for their protection.

Addressing **pollution** is vital for ensuring the long-term health and sustainability of the cross-border environment. Coordinated initiatives should focus on cleaning riverbanks, reducing industrial emissions and implementing effective waste disposal systems. These efforts will help reduce environmental degradation and enhance water and air quality. Local businesses should be encouraged through incentives to adopt eco-friendly practices, with funding and technical assistance provided to support the transition to sustainable operations.

Given the increasing challenges posed by **climate change**, investments in climate resilience and coastal protection are critical. Erosion control systems are essential for safeguarding vulnerable coastal areas along the Black Sea, while sustainable tourism models should be developed to mitigate the environmental impact of tourism-related activities. Public awareness campaigns should be launched to promote responsible tourism practices, highlighting the importance of balancing economic growth with the preservation of natural and cultural resources.

b. Economic and social development

Promoting economic collaboration across the Romania-Bulgaria border is crucial for growth and integration. To **support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)**, the establishment of cross-border business incubators and trade fairs is essential. These initiatives would provide platforms for networking, knowledge sharing and joint ventures. Additionally, tailored financial support, such as grants available to start-ups operating with cross-border models, would be of great help for SMEs. This financial assistance may encourage entrepreneurship, foster innovation and enhance the overall competitiveness of the region's businesses.

Harnessing the rich cultural and historical heritage of the region offers significant potential to boost **tourism** and strengthen cross-border ties. As mentioned by the respondents, the development of thematic tourism routes—centred around shared interests like history, cuisine or natural landscapes—can connect key Romanian and Bulgarian landmarks, providing

visitors with a complete experience. To further enhance tourism, digital tools such as interactive maps and mobile apps should be created to spotlight lesser-known attractions. These tools can help travellers discover the region, thereby diversifying tourist activities and distributing economic benefits more evenly across the cross border region.

c. Education and health

Fostering **educational collaboration** between Romania and Bulgaria is key to building a foundation for long-term cross-border cooperation. As the respondents pointed out as a significant obstacle in cooperation different languages, establishing bilingual and cross-border schools would allow young generation to engage in cultural and linguistic exchange, promoting mutual understanding and inclusivity from an early age. Additionally, funding opportunities should be expanded for student exchange programs, scholarships and collaborative university research projects. These initiatives would enhance academic ties, encourage innovation and prepare the next generation to address common cross-border challenges.

Improving **healthcare accessibility** in the cross-border region is seen as vital for enhancing the quality of life, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Establishing shared healthcare facilities along the border would ensure that residents on both sides can access essential medical services without geographical constraints. Furthermore, cross-border telemedicine initiatives should be developed to bridge healthcare disparities. These programs can leverage digital technologies to provide remote consultations, diagnostics and treatment plans, ensuring that even the most isolated communities receive adequate care

d. Connectivity development

The development of **cross-border connectivity** is essential for fostering stronger regional integration and enhancing connection between Romania and Bulgaria. As resulting from the received answers, efforts should prioritize on promoting initiatives improving critical links that facilitate the cross-border movement of people and goods. Enhancements to existing connections are equally important to ensure smooth and efficient transit. Modernizing infrastructure to align with sustainable standards, such as eco-friendly means of transport, will contribute to both environmental goals and long-term usability.

Interreg projects can contribute to an improved connectivity and accessibility of population living in our cross border area, by providing financial support that complements the big investments in infrastructure across border, made by national authorities and financed by other national or EU funding sources.

e. Digital and Green Transformation

Enhancing **digital connectivity** is critical for fostering development in the Romania-Bulgaria cross-border region. Expanding high-speed internet access in underserved and remote areas will create opportunities to support education, stimulate business growth and improve governance efficiency. Digital inclusion can enable communities to participate more actively in the digital economy and access vital services. To complement this, targeted digital literacy programs should be implemented, focusing on youth and marginalized groups. These programs would equip individuals with essential skills to navigate in a safe way and thrive in an increasingly technology-driven world.

Promoting green energy and sustainability initiatives is essential for building a resilient and eco-friendly cross-border region. Renewable energy projects, such as solar farms, wind

turbines and biomass production, should be prioritized, particularly in rural areas where they can stimulate local economies and reduce reliance on fossil fuels. In addition, energy-efficient buildings should be promoted to reduce energy consumption and lower costs for residents and businesses. Electrification of public transportation systems will further contribute to sustainability goals, reducing greenhouse gas emissions while improving mobility and connectivity within and across the border region.

4.2. Geography of Interreg RO-BG Programme post 2027

To ensure equitable development across the Romania-Bulgaria border region, special attention must be given to remote and economically disadvantaged areas. Efforts should be intensified to engage rural communities and encourage their active participation in cross-border initiatives. Specific funding mechanisms should be established to target regions with a limited history of project implementation. This approach can address structural inequalities, enable these areas to benefit from cross-border cooperation and unlock their untapped potential for development. The next programme may be tailored to address the unique socio-economic challenges of remote, rural or coastal regions (Black Sea region). These areas often face disparities in access to resources, infrastructure and economic opportunities. By designing targeted interventions, such as skills development, infrastructure improvement and business support initiatives, the programme can help bridge these gaps. This tailored approach will foster more inclusive growth and ensure that all communities in the cross-border region share the benefits of collaboration.

Projects that focus on constructing or enhancing connectivity links should be prioritized to facilitate the movement of people and goods. In this context, promoting, upgrading and modernizing environmental friendly systems can provide a practical alternative to ensure reliable accessibility (water and rail connections). These efforts will reduce travel times, increase trade opportunities and improve the integration of peripheral regions into the broader economic framework.

Strengthening ties between neighbouring cities along the Romania-Bulgaria border is essential for fostering cohesive cross-border development. Joint urban planning initiatives may encourage shared growth by harmonizing infrastructure development, housing projects and public services. Collaborative efforts in urban design can also create integrated economic zones, promote efficient resource use and enhance the quality of life for residents on both sides of the border.

4.3. Implementation of projects

To streamline the project application and management process, it is essential to keep developing clear and simple procedures, unified templates, evaluation criteria and reporting formats. These standardized tools will simplify the submission process, reduce ambiguity, and ensure consistency along the process of implementation. Additionally, keeping the Jems (its successor) electronic system for submitting reports and project documentation will enable real-time updates, reduce administrative delays and enhance transparency. This centralized electronic system will allow both applicants and administrators to monitor the status of projects efficiently, making the process more accessible and timely.

To improve the quality and quantity of project submissions, it is necessary to invest in capacity-building initiatives. As already done by the programme structures during the previous programming periods, workshops should be organized to train local authorities and NGOs on the application procedures, eligibility requirements and reporting standards. These workshops will enhance stakeholders' understanding of the application process, leading to more informed and successful submissions. As a result, local communities will be better equipped to leverage funding opportunities for their projects.

Establishing consistent communication channels is key to fostering strong cooperation between Romania and Bulgaria. Forums and online platforms may be created, where stakeholders from both countries can come together to engage in strategic planning, assess progress and address any emerging challenges. These forums will provide a platform for dialogue and ensure that all parties are aligned on priorities and objectives of the Programme in due time.

The decision-making process should be kept collaborative and transparent, with equal representation from both countries. This balanced approach will ensure that decisions reflect the interests and needs of both countries and the cross border region, leading to more equitable and effective outcomes for cross-border initiatives.

As mentioned by the majority of respondents, to achieve a well-rounded development approach, the Interreg Programme should allocate funding to both "hard" and "soft" projects. In this way, we can ensure that infrastructure projects, such fields as environment, connectivity and energy, are balanced with social and cultural initiatives, such as community exchanges and heritage preservation. Additionally, mixed projects that combine infrastructure development with community-focused goals, such as eco-tourism hubs or cultural centres, should be encouraged. These projects can drive economic growth while fostering stronger social bonds between border communities.

To keep pace with technological advancements and future regional challenges, projects incorporating innovative solutions should be prioritized. Extra points may be awarded during the evaluation process for proposals that utilize cutting-edge technologies, such as smart infrastructure, renewable energy or digital platforms.

Increasing awareness of the opportunities available through the Interreg Programme is essential for broadening participation. Digital platforms, local media and regular meetings with stakeholders should be leveraged to promote the program priorities and domains of intervention and inform potential applicants about funding opportunities. Engaging the younger generation is especially important, as they represent the future of cross-border collaboration. Hackathons, competitions and internships focused on cross-border issues may be organized to engage students and young professionals, encouraging their involvement in acting as promoters of the programme and in cross-border development projects.

To ensure inclusivity, it is crucial to engage marginalized groups in cross-border projects. Partnerships with local NGOs can help reach these communities and raise awareness of the benefits of participation. These collaborations will help increase the diversity of applicants and ensure that projects reflect the needs and priorities of all members of society, especially those who may otherwise be left behind.

Periodic assessments of project outcomes will ensure that the Interreg Programme is meeting its objectives and delivering tangible benefits to the cross border region. These reviews should focus on the economic, social and environmental impacts of the funded projects, using measurable indicators to track progress. Feedback from these assessments may be used to refine project selection criteria, ensuring that future initiatives are even more aligned with the region's needs.

To build trust among stakeholders, transparency of information about project progress, budgets and outcomes is essential to be kept as well in the future programme, as this will foster greater confidence in the programme, encourage wider participation and hold all parties accountable for their roles in the project's success. These reports can also serve as valuable tools for learning and improvement in future programme cycles.

In conclusion, the consultation and analysis of responses from citizens and stakeholders within the Romania-Bulgaria cross-border area have provided critical insights for shaping the post-2027 Interreg RO-BG Programme. This forward-looking framework must address the multifaceted needs of the region while fostering collaboration, inclusivity, and sustainability.

Prioritizing and complementing infrastructure development will enhance connectivity and improve accessibility across border. Environmental protection initiatives should focus on preserving biodiversity, mitigating pollution and addressing climate resilience through sustainable solutions. Economic and social development can be advanced by empowering SMEs, leveraging cultural heritage and promoting inclusive educational and healthcare opportunities.

Digital and green transformations will serve as foundational pillars, driving the region towards a more connected, eco-friendly future. Ensuring equitable attention to disadvantaged areas and implementing tailored interventions will foster balanced growth across the region. Additionally, streamlined project management, capacity building and transparent communication will enhance the efficiency and impact of the programme. Ultimately, the post-2027 Interreg RO-BG Programme represents an opportunity to deepen cross-border cooperation, strengthen regional integration and create a sustainable, inclusive, and prosperous future for all communities along the Romania-Bulgaria border.

