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**Cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian Region –
An empirical study of selected Interreg V-B
ADRION 2014-2020 projects**

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ABSTRACT IN ITALIAN

Questa tesi esamina la cooperazione transnazionale nella regione Adriatico-Ionica, concentrandosi sui progetti ambientali finanziati dall'UE nell'ambito del programma ADRION Interreg (2014-2020). Analizza l'impatto della Politica di Coesione Europea e della Cooperazione Territoriale nel promuovere la collaborazione regionale. Nonostante le disparità economiche, la cooperazione ha favorito lo sviluppo sostenibile e l'integrazione delle politiche.

Utilizzando un approccio metodologico misto, lo studio combina l'Analisi della Rete degli Attori, sondaggi tra le parti interessate e interviste con esperti per valutare l'efficacia dei progetti, le sfide e le opportunità di miglioramento. I risultati evidenziano successi nella connettività regionale e nella sostenibilità, ma rivelano ostacoli amministrativi persistenti e vincoli finanziari.

Lo studio propone processi semplificati, un maggiore coinvolgimento degli stakeholder e migliori meccanismi finanziari per garantire un impatto a lungo termine. Fornisce approfondimenti per i responsabili politici, le autorità regionali e le organizzazioni, sottolineando la necessità di politiche raffinate e di una cooperazione transfrontaliera più profonda.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines transnational cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region, focusing on EU-funded environmental projects under the ADRION Interreg program (2014-2020). It explores the impact of European Cohesion Policy and Territorial Cooperation in fostering regional collaboration. Despite economic disparities, cooperation has driven sustainable development and policy integration. Using a mixed-method approach, the study combines Actor-Network Analysis, stakeholder surveys, and expert interviews to evaluate project effectiveness, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. Findings highlight achievements in regional connectivity and sustainability but reveal persistent administrative hurdles and funding constraints.

The study advocates for streamlined processes, enhanced stakeholder engagement, and better financial mechanisms to ensure long-term impact. It provides insights for policymakers, regional authorities, and organisations, emphasising the need for refined policies and deeper cross-border collaboration. Strengthening cooperation frameworks is essential for a more cohesive and resilient Adriatic-Ionian region.

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INTRODUCTION

Regional cooperation plays a crucial role in addressing shared challenges and fostering economic, social, and environmental integration. The Adriatic-Ionian region, encompassing both European Union (EU) member states and candidate countries¹, represents a unique geographical and political area where transnational cooperation serves as a vital tool for development and stability. This thesis explores the dynamics of cooperation within the region, particularly under the EU's Cohesion Policy and European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) frameworks. By analysing the 2014-2020 programming period and its environmental projects under the ADRION Interreg program, this study aims to assess the effectiveness of transnational cooperation and identify opportunities for improvement. EU Cohesion Policy is the main investment strategy to reduce regional disparities, promote economic growth, and strengthen cooperation. Within this framework, ETC supports cross-border, transnational, and interregional partnerships to address common challenges. The ADRION program, a key transnational initiative, supports cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region through projects focused on environmental sustainability, innovation, and regional connectivity. Despite its significant contributions to fostering collaboration, the region still faces economic, social, and political obstacles that hinder the full potential of cooperative efforts. The Adriatic-Ionian region exhibits stark contrasts in economic development, infrastructure, and institutional capacities. Coastal areas benefit from tourism and trade, while inland regions struggle with economic stagnation and depopulation (Gaifami, et al., 2020; Berisha, 2023). Additionally, environmental challenges such as pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change pose critical concerns that require

¹ EU member states: Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia; Non-Eu countries (candidates): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia; San Marino (not an EU member or candidate, but involved in cooperation)

coordinated efforts across borders. Given these disparities, cooperation mechanisms must be carefully structured to ensure equitable development and effective policy implementation.

This study employs a mixed-method approach to analyse the effectiveness of cooperation in the region. The methodology integrates Actor-Network Analysis (ANA), a survey targeting key stakeholders involved in ADRION-funded environmental projects, and interviews with experts and project participants. The ANA provides a structural visualisation of cooperation networks, highlighting key actors and their roles in fostering collaboration. The survey captures quantitative and qualitative insights into stakeholders' experiences, while the interviews offer in-depth perspectives on best practices, challenges, and recommendations for improving future cooperation.

Key research questions guiding this study include: How effective have ADRION-funded environmental projects been in promoting transnational cooperation? What are the main obstacles faced by stakeholders in implementing collaborative initiatives? How can cooperation frameworks be enhanced to ensure long-term sustainability and impact? By addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute valuable insights to the discourse on regional cooperation and policy-making within the Adriatic-Ionian context.

The findings of this thesis will be relevant to policymakers, regional authorities, academic institutions, and organisations involved in transnational projects. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of cooperation mechanisms will help refine future strategies and ensure that the region maximises its potential for sustainable development. Ultimately, this study advocates for a more integrated and inclusive approach to regional cooperation, where diverse stakeholders collaborate effectively to tackle shared challenges and create a more cohesive and prosperous Adriatic-Ionian region.

1 Literature Review

1.1 EU Cohesion Policy

The European Union created a framework for its member states that is designed to foster cohesion, economic integration and cooperation. This framework is intended to eliminate socio-economic disparities and lead to balanced development in all member states (Schwarz, 2023).

EU cohesion policy and European territorial cooperation (ETC) are at the core of these efforts and provide mechanisms to ensure cooperation between regions, member states and neighbouring countries. Cohesion policy and its main elements will be discussed in more detail below.

Cohesion policy is the European Union's main investment policy. It promotes economic growth, job creation, business competitiveness, sustainable development and environmental protection, and benefits all EU cities and regions. (Schwarz, 2023) The main objectives of the Cohesion policy are to advance sustainable development and lessen social and economic inequalities (Cohesion Fund 2014-2020, n.d.).

The European Union (formerly the European Community) is characterised by major demographic disparities, which have significantly hindered development and integration. As a result, two funds were established in 1957 under the Treaty of Rome as a solidarity mechanism. Other funds were added later, until 1994, when the Cohesion Fund (CF) was also established. The CF contributes money to environmental projects and trans-European networks in the field of transportation infrastructure. Only Member States whose Gross National Income (GNI) per capita is less than 90% of the EU average are eligible to access this fund. (Schwarz, 2023) Another important component of the Cohesion Policy is the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). It was established in 1975 with the intention of

lowering the gaps between the various European regions' levels of development and raising the standard of living in the areas that were least fortunate. The northernmost regions, which have extremely low population densities, as well as island, cross-border, and mountainous regions, receive special attention since they face significant and long-lasting environmental or demographic disadvantages. The two primary goals of the ERDF are European territorial cooperation, which aims to improve cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation within the EU, and investment in growth and jobs, which seeks to develop the labour market and the regional economy (Schwarz, 2024a).

In summary, the ERDF supports investments in areas such as infrastructure, innovation, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), research and development, and environmental protection. It is very similar to the Cohesion Fund, as both funds aim to reduce regional disparities. However, there are important differences. The Cohesion Fund is specifically for less developed Member States, to support large infrastructure projects in areas such as transport and the environment. The ERDF, on the other hand, supports all EU Member States and has a broader scope, investing in more areas than the Cohesion Fund. (The European Regional Development Fund / Cohesion Fund , n.d.)

In 2013, the European Union's cohesion policy experienced extensive and fundamental regulatory changes – those that have not existed since the landmark reform of Structural Funds in 1988 (Bachtler, Berkowitz, Hardy, & Muravska, 2016, S. 1). So, in the 2014-2020 period, the CF allocated €63.4 billion for environmental projects (energy or transportation projects) and trans-European transport networks (Cohesion Fund 2014-2020, n.d.).

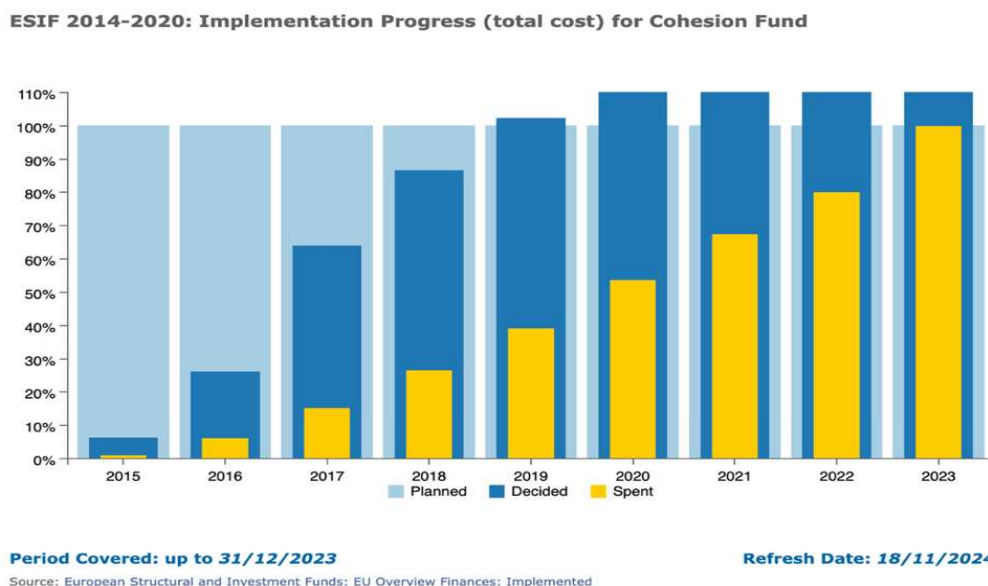


Figure 1: ESIF 2014-2020: Implementation Progress for Cohesion Fund²

The ERDF's overall budget for the 2014–2020 period was close to €200 billion, which was financed through grants and, increasingly, financial instruments. By the end of 2013, the ERDF had paid over €9 billion into financial engineering instruments, which provided loans, guarantees and equity in almost all EU Member States. Over 200,000 individuals and businesses received support for business development, urban projects and investments in energy efficiency and renewable energies. (The European Regional Development Fund. Financial instruments., 2015)

The ERDF concentrated its investments on several key priority areas. These included innovation and research, the digital agenda, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and a low-carbon economy. The allocation of ERDF funding depends on the category of region. More developed regions must focus at least 80%

² Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/funding/cohesion-fund/2014-2020_en

of their funding on at least two of the priorities mentioned above. In transition regions, this focus is on 60% of the funding, and in less developed regions, it is 50%. (European Regional Development Fund 2014-2020, n.d.)

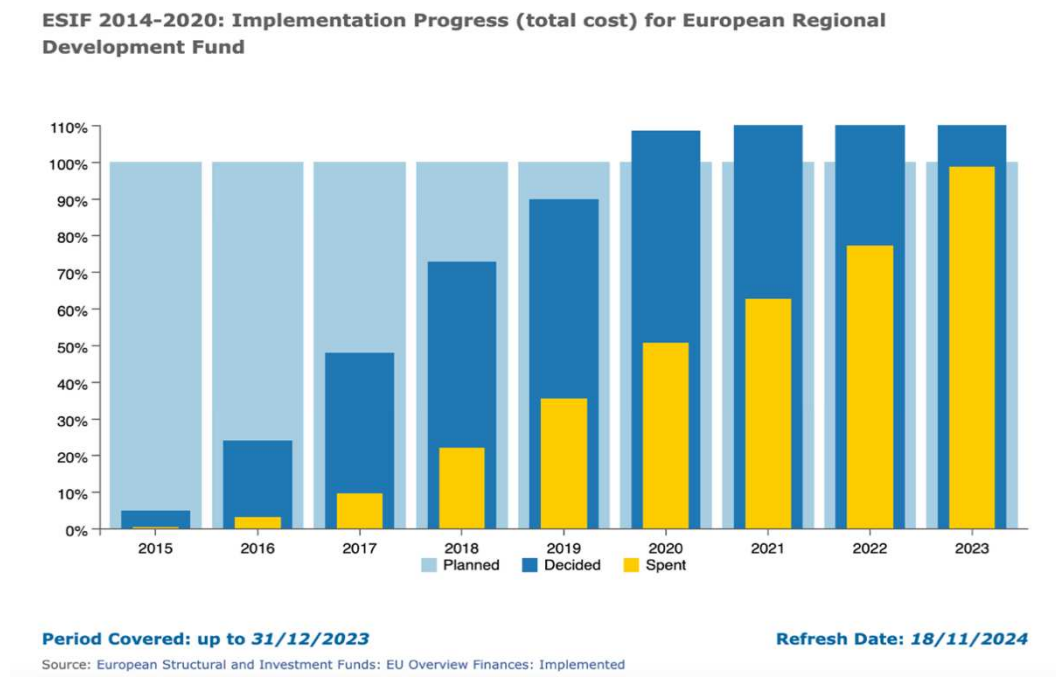


Figure 2: ESIF 2014-2020: Implementation Progress for European Regional Development Fund³

The primary objective of cohesion policy is European territorial cooperation (ETC), which seeks to collaboratively develop the potential of varied areas and resolve cross-border issues. Cross-border, transnational, and interregional collaboration are the three main ways that the ERDF supports cooperation initiatives. Cross-border cooperation (CBC) plays an essential role in softening country borders and enhancing EU spatial integration (Pinnavaia & Berisha, 2021).

³ Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/funding/erdf/2014-2020_en

1.2 European Territorial Cooperation

Since 1990, ETC has been a component of cohesion policy. The development of cross-border cooperation (CBC) programmes and activities aims to tackle shared regional issues, fostering political understanding, economic and social prosperity, and overall integration (Pinnavaia & Berisha, 2021). Also, for the first time in the history of European cohesion policy, a special regulation governing ETC measures financed by the ERDF was enacted for the programming period 2014-2020. (Schwarz, European territorial cooperation, 2024b)

The ETC mission is represented by the interregional programmes. This is the reason why the ETC is also called Interreg.

ETC/Interreg, is divided into several strands: cross-border (Interreg A), transnational (Interreg B), interregional (Interreg C) and outermost regions' cooperation (Interreg D). In the previous period 2014-2020, Interreg underwent a complete reorganisation in order to achieve greater impact and even more effective use of investments. According to the ERDF Regulation, the fifth Interreg period is founded on 11 investment priorities that support the execution of the Europe 2020 plan for inclusive, sustainable, and intelligent growth. With a €10.1 billion budget, Interreg V funded more than 100 regional and territorial, social, and economic cooperation initiatives. Along 38 internal EU borders, there were 60 cross-border programs, known as Interreg V-A. The categorisation was as follows: 12 programs for IPA cross-border cooperation and 16 programs for ENI cross-border cooperation. Additionally, there were 15 transnational programs (Interreg V-B) that covered several non-EU nations as well as bigger cooperation areas like the Baltic Sea, Alpine, and Mediterranean regions. (2014-2020 period – Interreg V, n.d.)

In 2021, a new multi-year programming cycle for the EU began. Enhancing collaborative governance and ensuring European security are the primary goals of

funding territorial cooperation during this time. The ETC has four components in the 2021–2027 period, just like it did in the 2014–2020 period. One of these is cross-border cooperation, which encourages collaboration between NUTS 3 regions located next to or immediately on borders from at least two separate member states. In order to promote the Union’s overall harmonious development, the goal is to improve collaboration while simultaneously addressing common issues found in border regions and taking use of their unrealised growth potential. Then there is transnational cooperation, which enables cooperation in larger transnational areas or around sea basins. This instrument will be discussed in more detail later. Interregional collaboration as well. All of the EU and its member states are involved in this pan-European operation. It creates networks to create best practices and to make it easier for successful regions to share and transmit their expertise. Finally, the outermost regions cooperation axis seeks to facilitate the most effective and direct cooperation between the outermost areas and their neighbouring nations and territories. In order to do this, the Interreg regulation provides the opportunity to manage the ERDF and external money under the same guidelines. Additionally, the law creates collaboration outside the EU that fosters good neighbourliness and sustainable development between EU Member States and countries that are part of the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood, as well as between the EU’s outermost regions and their neighbours. Along with supporting the accession process, the rule lays out preparations for future Union membership and covers cooperation with Turkey and the Western Balkans through the IPA. (Schwarz, 2024b)

As transnational cooperation, known as Interreg B, is the main focus of this study, it will be examined in more detail below.

In order to attain a greater level of territorial integration, Interreg B involves national, regional, and local program partners in the Member States, as well as non-EU, enlargement, and neighbourhood partner nations and OCTs (Overseas nations

and territories) in certain programs. It seeks to improve collaboration among nations within the assigned regions in order to develop effective solutions to shared territorial, economic, and social problems that are too large to be adequately handled at the national level. Innovation, green and digital transitions, accessibility, digitalization, urban development, innovation and interoperability in the public sector, and other fields are among the many project investments that Interreg B supports. The transnational programs give regional development a significant European component, resulting in established priorities and a coordinated strategic response among participating nations. Innovation, particularly in university, research, and SME networks; climate change and the environment, especially in the areas of water resources, flood protection, and the sustainable green and blue economy; digital connectivity and environmentally friendly transportation; sustainable regional development, particularly in relation to education, labour markets, and collaboration; cultural heritage and sustainable tourism development; capacity building and governance; and action and engagement at the interpersonal level represent a few of the objectives that they support. (Interreg B - Transnational cooperation, n.d.)

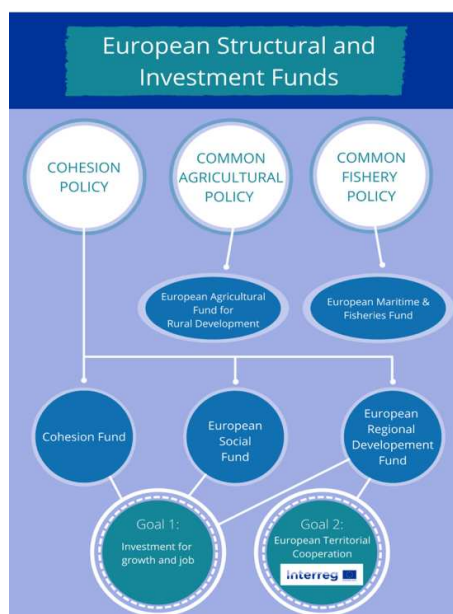


Figure 3: European structural and investment funds⁴

1.3 The Adriatic Ionian Region

The Adriatic-Ionian region is a geographically and politically diverse macro-region that extends across Southern and Eastern Europe, encompassing EU Member States as well as candidate and potential candidate countries. It is characterised by significant (Cohesion Fund 2014-2020, n.d.), and infrastructural disparities, with coastal areas often more developed than inland regions. However, its strategic location at the intersection of the Mediterranean and Central Europe makes it a key area for transnational cooperation, economic exchange, and environmental sustainability.

The region, encompassing Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia, is characterised

⁴ Retrieved from: <https://interreg.eu/about-interreg/>

by significant economic and territorial disparities. While Northern Italy and Slovenia are highly developed, many parts of the Western Balkans struggle with economic stagnation, high unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure (OECD, 2021).

A distinct divide exists between coastal regions, which benefit from trade, tourism, and maritime activities, and inland areas, which face depopulation and low investment levels. Key challenges include infrastructure deficits that hinder economic integration and cross-border trade, as well as environmental issues such as coastal erosion, biodiversity loss, and pollution in the Adriatic-Ionian Sea. Additionally, high emigration rates, particularly in the Western Balkans, contribute to brain drain and labour shortages. Institutional fragmentation, resulting from varying governance structures and EU integration levels, further complicates policy coordination and cooperation. Despite these challenges, ADRION presents significant opportunities for sustainable growth and regional integration. The region's extensive coastline and marine resources offer strong potential for the development of a sustainable blue economy, including fisheries, aquaculture, and coastal tourism. Moreover, Adriatic-Ionian region has the potential to become a hub for renewable energy, particularly in wind and solar projects, helping to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and contribute to EU climate goals. Lastly, the region's rich cultural and historical heritage provides a strong foundation for sustainable tourism, promoting economic growth while preserving natural resources. (Gaifami, et al., 2020)

1.4 Cooperation in the Adriatic Ionian Region

The Adriatic-Ionian region, which includes the Western Balkans, has a long and complex history of both cooperation and conflict. Once part of a unified state, collaboration in the region has now evolved into cross-border cooperation between

newly established nations. Despite its diversity, the region shares common interests, making an adapted strategy necessary to efficiently utilise resources and ensure effective collaboration (Bianchini, Cittadini, & Zoppi, 2024).

The region faces numerous challenges that can only be addressed through international cooperation while also offering significant opportunities that require a regional approach to be fully realised (Molnár, 2014, p. 188). Cooperation facilitates better management of shared resources, enhances regional transactions, and fosters the development of common infrastructure, regulations, and institutions. Furthermore, it contributes to the creation of intangible assets such as identity, trust, and stability (De Lombaerde, 2024, p. 2).

Collaboration plays a crucial role in advancing both horizontal and vertical integration, both of which are essential for addressing shared challenges and maximising collective benefits. In EU case law, cooperation between two or more competitors is classified as horizontal integration, while cooperation between businesses operating at different stages of the production or distribution chain is considered vertical integration (Horizontal and Vertical Cooperation, 2014). After years of political unrest, the region is currently moving towards both horizontal integrations, through the creation of a free trade area, and vertical integration, by increasing its participation in European and international institutions (Spiliopoulos & Petropoulos, 2016).

Macro-regional policies offer a broader framework for cooperation by systematically improving the effectiveness of EU policies through the use of existing resources in a coordinated, cross-sectoral, and territorially defined manner (Belloni, 2019). This approach not only strengthens policy implementation but also fosters democratic governance. While EU accession conditionality has had limited success in driving significant reforms, particularly in the Western Balkans, where EU membership remains a distant prospect, macro-regional policies provide an

alternative platform for functional cooperation. By fostering problem-solving and reinforcing linkages between the EU and third countries, these policies help improve governance standards and advance European integration (Lavenex, 2008). The Adriatic-Ionian region has long been a crossroads of civilizations, shaped by both division and convergence. Centuries of geopolitical shifts, territorial disputes, and ideological divides have complicated cooperation. The fall of the Ottoman Empire and early 20th-century border changes further fragmented the region. During the Cold War, ideological divisions restricted cross-border cooperation. The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s brought violent conflicts, leaving a legacy of mistrust that continued to hinder regional collaboration. While political instability and economic hardship persisted, EU-driven initiatives gradually encouraged renewed collaboration.

Despite historical divisions, cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region is advancing through transnational programs focused on economic integration, sustainability, and connectivity. While challenges persist, EU policies offer a foundation for deeper collaboration.

1.4.1 Cooperation under the EU Umbrella

The EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) is a significant mechanism for regional cooperation. EU macro-regions have evolved as a natural result of sub regionalisation processes within the EU since 1989 (Solly & Berisha, 2021). EUSAIR was approved by the European Council on September 29, 2014, is a mechanism for promoting social, economic, and territorial cohesion in order to lessen inequalities in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region through collaboration. Ten countries are included in the strategy, of which five are candidate nations: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia; San Marino

constitutes a third nation; and the other four remain EU members (Greece, Croatia, parts of Italy, and Slovenia). (EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region, 2024)

The EUSAIR is unique among EU macro-regional policies because of the weight of its exterior dimension and the percentage of non-EU nations involved (Cugusi & Stocchiero, 2016, p. 170). This requires a special approach if common needs are to be fulfilled. The governance structure of EUSAIR is built upon a multi-level approach. Macro-regions function as multi-level governance entities, shaping management processes and interactions within domestic governance systems (Solly & Berisha, 2021).



Figure 4: EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region⁵

⁵ Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/adriatic-ionian_en

The EUSAIR utilises the three-tier governance structure that is typical of macroregional policies and supports its core goals and logic. First, effective decision-making and leadership should come from the political level. Second, the Permanent Secretariat of the Adriatic Ionian Initiative, representatives of the Interreg Adriatic Ionian cooperation program, and a Governing Steering Board comprising national and EU officials represent the coordinating level. Third, Thematic Steering Groups (TSGs) at the operational level are in charge of four interconnected pillars: 1. Maritime and marine expansion (also known as “Blue Growth”); 2. Regional connectivity (transport and energy networks); 3. Environmental quality; and 4. Sustainable tourism. (Belloni, 2019, p. 824)

Cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region is structured within the broader framework of ETC, which includes three main types of cooperation: Transnational, cross-border, and interregional.

- Transnational Cooperation – EUSAIR itself operates within the Interreg IPA ADRION program (which will be explained in more detail below).
- Cross-border cooperation – While transnational programs address broader strategic objectives, cross-border cooperation (CBC) plays a crucial role in fostering local and regional partnerships. The Adriatic-Ionian region benefits from several CBC programs⁶ focus on improving economic ties, infrastructure, and environmental protection at the borders. These initiatives are essential for addressing immediate cross-border challenges and enhancing regional cohesion (Interreg A - Cross-border cooperation, n.d.).
- Interregional cooperation – Although less relevant in this context, Interreg Europe, Urbact, and ESPON provide platforms for knowledge exchange and best practices among European regions, indirectly benefiting the Adriatic-

⁶ Particularly Interreg Italy-Croatia, Interreg Greece-Albania, and Interreg Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Montenegro

Ionian region. These programs help strengthen institutional capacities and foster innovation by connecting local actors with broader European networks (Interreg C - Interregional cooperation, n.d.).

In order to achieve common goals in these fields, regulations must be adhered to. Among many other essential conditions, implementation requires that non-EU countries be fully and effectively involved at all levels and that key target groups actively participate. These include national, regional and local authorities, members of parliaments (regional, national and European), economic and social actors, civil society, academia and NGOs (European Commission, 2014, p. 11). In this way, the EU strategy ensures a certain degree of diversity, but also fairness, among the participating actors. The quality of multi-level governance and cooperation among the various stakeholders, the amount of private, European, and national funding available for investment, the efficient use of these sources, and the synergy between the occasionally overlapping EU programs for cohesion, territorial cooperation, enlargement, and neighbourhood policy are some of the factors that determine the often exaggerated effectiveness of this macro-regional strategy (Molnár, 2014, p. 191).

The IPA ADRION program supports the implementation of the EUSAIR macro-regional strategy by embedding EUSAIR flagships and key strategic projects (Interreg IPA ADRION Programme, 2024), which one of the key transnational cooperation initiatives in the region. This framework promotes large-scale, cross-country projects focused on economic integration, environmental sustainability, and connectivity. It brings together ten EU and non-EU nations, providing financial support to research institutions, private businesses, NGOs, and public authorities at local, regional, and national levels, fostering cross-border collaboration. The current programming period (2021-2027) has a total budget of €160.81 million,

with approximately €136.7 million allocated through Interreg. The program follows a strong and sustainable strategy, dedicating up to 54% of its resources to green policies. In the previous funding period, ADRION supported 87 projects.

The program focuses on four key priorities: (1) Innovative and Smart Region, promoting collaboration between industry, academia, and research to enhance innovation capacity; (2) Sustainable Region, supporting the protection and sustainable management of natural and cultural resources while preserving ecological services; (3) Connected Region, improving multimodal transport, mobility services, and integrated transport networks; and (4) Effective Governance of EUSAIR, ensuring the smooth implementation of the EU's Adriatic-Ionian Region Strategy (Interreg IPA ADRION Programme, 2024).

1.4.2 Cooperation outside the EU umbrella

The Adriatic-Ionian region has always been of strategic importance for Italy, serving as a crossroads of cultural, economic, and political interactions. Italy's geographic position, with its eastern coastline directly facing the Adriatic Sea, underscores the significance of fostering cooperation in this region. For Italy, collaboration with its Adriatic-Ionian neighbours not only facilitates regional stability but also enhances economic growth, environmental sustainability, and cultural exchange. The establishment of the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (AII) in 2000 marked a pivotal moment in institutionalising this cooperation, creating a platform for dialogue and partnership that has since expanded into a robust network of associations and collaborations. AII was officially launched during the Ancona Conference on “Development and Security in the Adriatic and Ionian Seas,” hosted by Italy in May 2000. This seminal event brought together eight founding countries—Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro,

Albania, and Greece—to address shared challenges and opportunities in the region. The initiative’s primary goals included promoting sustainable development, fostering regional stability, and enhancing cross-border cooperation. Italy, as one of the driving forces behind the AII, positioned itself as a leader in facilitating dialogue and joint action among these nations (AII-PS About , n.d.).

Since its inception, the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative has spurred the development of a network of associations and collaborations aimed at addressing a wide array of regional priorities. Among these, the Regione Marche has emerged as a cornerstone institution, playing a central role in coordinating activities and representing Italian interests in the region. Located in central Italy, the Marche region’s institutional strength and proactive engagement have made it a key player in shaping the agenda of the Adriatic-Ionian region. (AII-PS About , n.d.)

Two of the most prominent entities contributing to cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region are UniAdrion and the Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce (Forum AIC). These organisations embody the collaborative spirit of the region, bringing together academic institutions, business communities, and governmental bodies to achieve shared objectives.

UniAdrion, an academic network established under the umbrella of the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative, plays a pivotal role in fostering educational and research collaboration among universities in the region. UniAdrion’s primary goal is to foster international cooperation and support the advancement of culture, science, training, and research among the nations that make up the Adriatic-Ionian region by bringing together universities and research centres.

Through the implementation of teaching and research activities, including training courses, post-graduate diplomas, summer schools, and collaborative research projects, UniAdrion primarily fosters scientific-academic cooperation. The partnership focuses on various issues that align with the EU Strategy for the

Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) pillars: environmental quality, sustainable tourism, blue growth, connecting the region, R&I and SME development, and capacity building. (Mission - UniAdrion, 2021)

Similarly, the Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce connects the chambers of business of nations that are located on the Adriatic and Ionian coasts. Another important advocate of EUSAIR is Forum AIC. By employing pre-existing networks rather than building new ones, this approach promotes the region's cultural legacy and the diversity of its reality while putting the ideas of environmental preservation, territorial cohesion, and sustainable economic and social growth into practice. (Forum AIC, 2024)

The synergy between UniAdrion and Forum AIC exemplifies the multifaceted nature of cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region. While UniAdrion emphasises education and research, Forum AIC focuses on economic development, creating a complementary dynamic that addresses both the intellectual and economic dimensions of regional integration. Together, these organisations contribute to a holistic approach to cooperation, fostering a sense of shared purpose and mutual benefit among member countries.

1.5 Actor-Network Theory

Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) is a theoretical and methodological framework grounded on the work of Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law from the late 20th century. It is based on the study of the interconnected relationships between actors within a network (Latour, 2005; Callon, 1986). Although ANT encompasses both human and non-human entities, this work focuses only on human actors and their collaboration.

ANT emerged in the 1980s as a reaction to traditional sociological theories, which often separated the social from the material (Law, 1992). Latour, Callon and Law

sought to bridge this divide by emphasising the mutual influence and interdependency of entities within networks. However, to understand human cooperation, the focus shifts to identifying the relationships between actors who jointly create and maintain social realities. ANT illustrates these relationships and identifies the actors who play a central role within a network. Their importance depends on the number of connections to other participants in projects or other working groups (or other communities). This concept is often referred to as network centrality and is crucial for understanding power dynamics and coordination within cooperative efforts (Graham & Marvin, 2001).

Visualisation tools allow the mapping of networks to highlight central actors or what are referred to in the theory as “obligatory passage points” (Callon, 1986). These are nodes that many other actors must interact with in order to achieve their goals. For example, in a collaborative network, an institution, which coordinate or participate in several projects can serve as a key actor because of its ability to transfer resources and knowledge. Understanding these central roles can help in developing strategies for improving collaboration within a project.

The ANT method also facilitates the identification of groups (clusters) within networks in which actors are more strongly connected. The groups/clusters may in reality be several projects, but by involving active actors, they can be shown as one large group in the visualisation. These clusters can serve as entry points for strengthening collaboration and developing targeted interventions (Latour, 2005). Furthermore, by visualising the connections between different actors, gaps or weak points in the network are identified. These may hinder effective collaboration or the transfer of important knowledge and resources to other participants. By specifically addressing these gaps by building relationships, the overall functionality of the network can be significantly improved.

Visualising a network can also reveal, for example, actors who, as mentioned above, act as key actors. By strengthening such actors, more integrated and resilient partnerships can be fostered.

Several case studies illustrate the utility of ANT in visualising and analysing human cooperation. For example, in the context of transnational governance, ANT has been used to map interactions among policymakers, nongovernmental organisations, and local communities. These visualisations have revealed which institutions or individuals are important to fostering dialogue and implementing collaborative initiatives. By focusing on these key actors, policymakers can more effectively allocate resources and ensure that collaborative processes are inclusive and efficient (Belliger & Krieger, 2006).

Visualising the network structure also led to an understanding of how certain departments or individuals function as central hubs to coordinate activities. This insight has led to strategies that strengthen their role while also encouraging actors in peripheral areas to participate more actively in the cooperation process (Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005).

In summary, ANT can clearly and visually depict complex interactions, making it easier to gain actionable insights. This holistic understanding and relational perspective are especially valuable for addressing collaboration challenges because it emphasises the importance of interconnectedness and the dynamic nature of joint efforts (Latour, 2005). In the context of regional cooperation, particularly in contexts such as the Adriatic-Ionian region, network visualisations inspired by ANT can provide valuable insights. By mapping the relationships between different actors (e.g., government agencies, academic institutions, and business interest groups), it becomes possible to identify which actors serve as key facilitators of cross-border cooperation.

2 Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework of this study. The research is based exclusively on the 2014-2020 ADRIION IPA program with a focus on environmental projects. A total of 35 projects were examined.⁷ The research methodology follows a structured, three-step approach that includes both quantitative and qualitative analysis: actor-network analysis (ANA), a survey targeting all actors involved in these projects, and interviews. The aim of the interviews is to deepen the research by engaging with actors who participated in multiple projects and experts whose main objective is to promote cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

A crucial aspect of the methodology is its adoption of a triple approach:

- Horizontal: A survey to gather broad insights from all actors involved in the selected projects.
- Vertical: Interviews with selected leading actors to understand in-depth perspectives and experiences.
- Expert opinion: Consultations with relevant institutions and experts to provide a broader contextual understanding of transnational cooperation dynamics.

The diagram (**Figure 5**) illustrates the methodological framework for improving cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region (AIR). The process begins with Actor-Network Analysis as the foundation. From there, the research follows a three-

⁷ The following: Adriacaves plus, Adrilink, Adrinetbook, Adrionet, Adrion 5 senses plus, Adrion trainee, Approdi plus, Adriseismic, Amoceab, Cci4tourism, Circle, Creatures, Crescendo, Dinalpconnect, Ecovinegoals, Ecowaves, Emoundergrounds, Harmonia, Impreco, I-storms, Muha, Portodimare, Pronacul, Qnest & qnest plus, Seaviews, Smart heritage, Smartriver, Sustourismo, Tangram, Thematic, Tourest, Transfer, Transcepearlywarning, Wonder, Wool

pronged approach. These combined approaches contribute to achieving the final goal of improving cooperation in AIR. The diagram effectively highlights how ANA informs both the survey and interviews, with expert opinions complementing both.

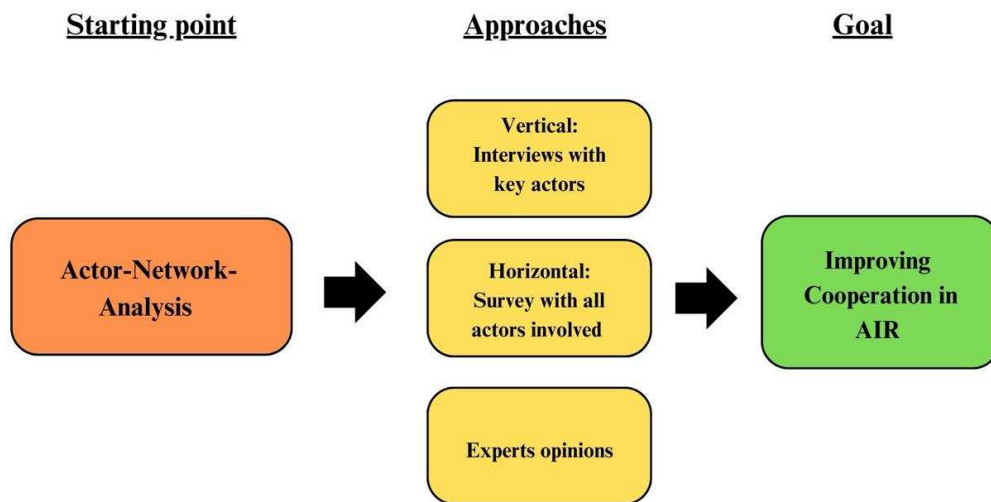


Figure 5: Methodological Framework for Improving Cooperation in AIR (source: authors' own elaboration)

2.1 Actor Network Analysis

The network analysis and visualisation can be divided into four methodological steps. The methodological steps are illustrated in **Figure 6**.

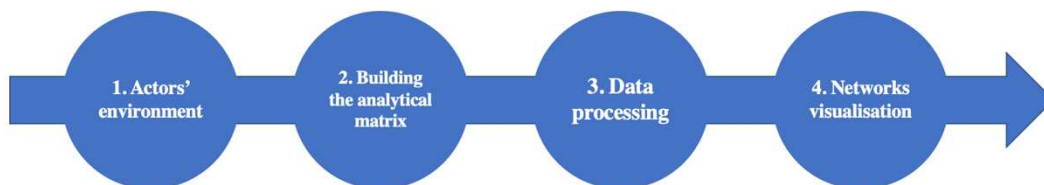


Figure 6: Research methodological steps (source: authors' own elaboration)

The first step was to determine the actors' environment. The second step focuses on developing an analytical matrix to systematically organise and interpret the collected data. The third step is to process and analyse the data to understand the interactions of the actors, and then to visualise the network in the fourth step. These steps and procedures are explained in more detail below.

2.1.1 Actors' environment

The first step in the actor network analysis was to define the actors' environment. This included identifying the boundaries of the network, selecting the relevant projects and cataloguing the actors involved. The ADRION IPA program was selected because it represents almost all countries in the Adriatic-Ionian region, making it a comprehensive case study for understanding transnational cooperation. Only projects in the environmental sector were included, as this area shows the most activity and thus includes a large number of initiatives. All data and information were taken from the adrioninterreg.eu website. A total of 262 actors were identified through a detailed review of the selected ADRION-IPA programs. Since participating institutions often employ different names when taking part in several projects, each participating organisation was examined separately in order to assign a unique code to the repeated institutions. This process cleaned the data to better identify repeating participants. These were then applied to an analytical matrix in the next step.

2.1.2 Analytical matrix

Creating an analytical matrix to methodically arrange and evaluate the gathered data is the main goal of the second stage. The matrix is a technique for documenting important aspects of the involvement of stakeholders, such as their types and levels of operation. Actors can be categorised as either private (business,

research centres, associations, NGOs, enterprise, tourism organisation, development agency, technology park) or public (national institution, regional authority, municipality, university, school centre, cultural institution, utility company, government agency, chamber of agriculture, chamber of commerce). The matrix also includes the countries in which the stakeholders operate, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia, as well as the impact of the stakeholder group, which can be local, regional, or national.

Furthermore, the matrix distinguishes between an actor's status as a project partner and lead partner. This distinction was not further examined in the study that follows, despite the fact that it is crucial for comprehending the general dynamics of project coordination and responsibility distribution. This choice was selected since the research's main emphasis is not on the hierarchical roles within the projects, but rather on more general patterns of players' engagement and interactions. However, this distinction offers helpful background information for analysing the data and comprehending the leadership roles in international collaboration projects. After the actors have been characterised, they are now processed in the next step.

2.1.3 Data processing

In the third step, a mixed-method approach was used to ensure a comprehensive evaluation. To ensure that the data is adequately evaluated, both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis were combined. First, the quantitative analysis is discussed in more detail.

Centrality indicators in network analysis assign ranks or numbers to nodes in a graph that correlate with their network positions. This identifies the frequency of interactions and the identification of key actors in the network. Key actors were

identified in this analysis based on their degree of interconnectedness (degree centrality) and their role as intermediaries (betweenness centrality). These measures indicate which actors are most important for promoting collaboration and teamwork throughout the network. In addition, clusters within the network are identified using modularity clustering. This technique identifies actors who repeatedly form partnerships in several projects by highlighting those who are more connected to each other than to the rest of the network.

Qualitative analysis, instead, examines the characteristics of the main actors, focusing on their country of origin and the type of institution (private or public). This allows a deeper understanding of the diversity of the network and how it is composed. This analysis highlights whether certain types of actors or certain countries were disproportionately represented and therefore influential. Together, these methods provide an understanding of the actor networks, from the influence of individual actors and their ability to cooperate to the dynamics within communities in cross-border and transnational partnerships.

2.1.4 Network visualisation

In the fourth and thus final methodological step, the actor networks are visualised using the network analysis tool Gephi. The tool provides a detailed illustration, with the nodes representing the actors and the edges representing their relationships. The network visualisation not only presents a complete picture of the selected collaborations, but also reveals gaps, such as underrepresented sectors or actors isolated from others. It offers important insights into the structure and dynamics of collaborative initiatives by highlighting the density of connections, key actors holding central positions, and clusters of stakeholders that show strong collaboration. Using Gephi, the network layout was optimised using a force-directed algorithm to highlight structural patterns. Metrics such as modularity (to

identify clusters), betweenness centrality (to locate intermediaries), and degree centrality (to locate coordinators) were calculated. The highlighted actors underscore the importance of intermediaries in bridging gaps and coordinators in guiding collaborations.

2.2 Survey on Cooperation in Adriatic-Ionian region

The survey's aim is to collect comprehensive data and information on cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region, with a focus, as mentioned above, on projects financed under the ADRION 2014-2020 program in the field of the environment. This methodological note outlines the design, structure, implementation and analysis of the survey, which is tailored to collect both quantitative and qualitative insights into the experiences, challenges and successes of the actors involved in those selected projects.

2.2.1 Survey objective, design and structure

The main objective of the survey is to evaluate the effectiveness of cooperation within the chosen project period - to identify the most important factors and obstacles to cooperation and to provide actionable recommendations and suggestions for improving future partnerships. The representative of each institution should address the topic and provide constructive feedback, regardless of whether they have participated in several projects or only in one.

The survey is divided into four sections, each targeting specific aspects of the collaboration. In the first section, "Cooperation experiences," respondents are asked to rate their satisfaction with the program and identify factors that contributed to its effectiveness. The second part, "Drivers of cooperation," explores the fundamental factors for successful collaboration. Questions focused

on shared goals, trust, communication, innovation, and financial management. Respondents were asked to indicate which of these factors played the most important role in fostering collaboration. The third section, “Cooperation impediments,” explores the barriers to effective collaboration, such as administrative and bureaucratic challenges, resource constraints, and a lack of trust. This section also solicited suggestions for overcoming these obstacles. In the last section, “Factors that can further enhance cooperation”, respondents are asked to suggest strategies for improving the cooperation framework. This part also includes an open question to encourage participants to suggest strategies for improving the cooperation frameworks. Participants are asked to share their thoughts and opinions on cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region – the main achievements and challenges and what improvements they would suggest for future cooperation. Thus, in all parts, quantitative questions are chosen, such as single-choice and multiple-choice options, and in the last part, a qualitative question of an open-ended question is applied.

2.2.2 Target population, sampling and implementation

The target group of the survey consists of project representatives involved in ADRION-funded environmental projects. These included representatives of national and regional governments, NGOs, universities, municipalities, research institutions, private companies and other organisations from the entire Adriatic-Ionian region. Stakeholders from all countries in the ADRION program area were invited to ensure diverse perspectives. For the selection of respondents, actors were contacted who were listed as contact persons on the respective adrioninterreg.eu websites of the selected projects. The invitations were sent by email, together with a detailed explanation of the purpose of the survey and the importance of their

participation. Respondents were assured of the confidentiality of the data, with all information being managed in accordance with the guidelines of the GDPR.

The survey was conducted online using the Google Forms tool to maximise accessibility and convenience for participants from different countries. The platform was chosen for its user-friendly interface. Respondents were given a flexible timeframe to complete the survey, with regular reminders to participate. The survey was pre-tested to ensure clarity and completeness. Feedback from this pilot phase was used to refine the wording of the questions, eliminate ambiguities and improve the overall structure.

2.2.3 Data collection and analysis - Survey

The responses were collected over a three-month period to achieve a high response rate. The collected data was analysed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. First, in the quantitative analysis, responses to closed-ended questions were analysed using statistical procedures to identify patterns and trends. Descriptive statistics highlighted the frequency and distribution of responses, while inferential statistics were used to examine relationships between variables. Thus, certain correlations were determined. Additionally, the responses of participants who had taken part in multiple projects were separately analysed to identify any specific trends or insights related to their repeated involvement. In turn, qualitative analysis subjected open-ended responses to a thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and unique insights.

2.3 Interviews with key actors and experts

The final phase involves conducting semi-structured interviews with two distinct groups: key actors and experts. Key actors are selected based on their involvement

in more than one project. Experts, who are directly connected to fostering cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region, are also interviewed to provide strategic insights and recommendations. The interview questions focus on validating findings from the survey, exploring specific challenges, and identifying actionable strategies for enhancing collaboration. To maximise the value of the interviews, a comparative approach was adopted. The insights of stakeholders and experts were compared to identify similarities and differences in perspectives. The interviews with stakeholders provided in-depth, practical insights, while the expert interviews offered a broader, strategic view. The data from the interviews was triangulated with the results from the survey and desk research to increase validity. This approach helped to cross-check information and reveal nuanced dynamics. The findings were analysed in the socio-political and economic context of the Adriatic-Ionian region. Particular attention was paid to how local realities align or contrast with strategic visions. Again, the challenges and limitations should be mentioned directly. Although English was used as the main language, some participants preferred to communicate in their mother tongue, which required translation and interpretation. Interviews, by their very nature, reflect the perspectives and experiences of the participants. Efforts were made to minimise bias by cross-checking responses with other data sources. The following section describes the objective, sampling strategy, data collection process and data analysis of the interviews.

2.3.1 Interviews with key actors

The questions in the interview with each key actor focus on validating the results from the survey and to determine the indicators for why these actors were involved in several projects when some were only involved in one project during the 2014-2020 period. The aim of the interviews is also to gain a first-hand understanding

of the practical aspects of the collaboration during this period. Actors, who are directly involved in the selected projects deliver insights into the challenges, successes and dynamics of implementing common goals in the region and future cooperation.

As mentioned above, the selection of stakeholders was based on purposive sampling. Among the criteria for selecting interviewees, participation in several projects was a primary consideration. Priority was given to the stakeholders that had been most actively involved in two or more projects during the program period. Efforts were also made to include representatives from different countries, sectors and types of organisations to ensure a comprehensive understanding of regional dynamics. Practical considerations, such as individuals' willingness to participate and their availability, also influenced the selection process.

Data collection for the interviews with the stakeholders involved the following steps: In the preparation, a semi-structured interview guide was developed. This guide included questions on project experiences, cross-organisational cooperation and perceived barriers to cooperation. The influence of the organisers and the EU as a guiding hand and the satisfaction with its support were also addressed. The questions were tailored to the specific roles and responsibilities of the respondents to ensure relevance. The interviews were conducted via video call, whereby the duration of the individual interviews was approximately 40 minutes. Open-ended questions encouraged the respondents to share detailed narratives and examples. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were recorded on tape to ensure accuracy. During each session, detailed notes were taken to record immediate observations and important points. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of their responses.

2.3.2 Interviews with experts

The goal of expert interviews is to gather high-level insights and theoretical perspectives on regional cooperation. Experts provide a broader, strategic understanding of policies, governance structures, and the socio-political context influencing the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

The selection of experts was carried out using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The criteria for selecting experts included individuals with extensive knowledge of the Adriatic-Ionian region, including academics, policy advisors and high-level representatives of international organisations. Preference was given to experts who have published significant research or played a key role in shaping cooperation policies. Further experts were identified through recommendations of the first interviewees.

The process for conducting expert interviews followed a structured approach. In preparation, a structured interview guide was created to explore strategic issues related to governance, financing mechanisms and the future of cooperation in the region. The questions were formulated to encourage analytical and reflective answers. The interviews were conducted via video conferencing, with each interview lasting between 40-60 minutes.

Audio recordings were made with the consent of the interviewees. Notes were also taken to document important observations and non-verbal cues that might provide additional context. As with the interviews with the actors, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of their responses.

2.3.3 Data collection and analysis - Interviews

The data collection and analysis of both key actor and expert interviews followed a structured and methodical approach to ensure consistency and depth in the evaluation of the findings. Once the interviews were conducted, the recorded conversations were transcribed to enable a systematic and detailed review of the responses. A qualitative approach was applied, focusing on identifying recurring themes, significant insights, and variations in perspectives.

A thematic analysis was employed to categorise and code the responses. This process combined deductive coding, based on predefined research priorities, with an inductive approach to incorporate emerging themes. Particular attention was given to topics related to governance structures, financial mechanisms, cross-organisational collaboration, and the broader socio-political context influencing cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding, a comparative analysis was conducted between interviewees, both within and across the two groups. This helped highlight areas of consensus, divergence, and sector-specific viewpoints. Additionally, the findings from the interviews were triangulated with survey results and secondary data sources to enhance the validity and reliability of the conclusions. This multi-layered approach allowed for a nuanced interpretation of the challenges and opportunities in regional cooperation, contributing to a well-founded and evidence-based analysis.

2.4 Methodological limitations and risks

While the methodology employed in this study is comprehensive and provides valuable insights, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, the number of programmes and projects analysed is limited, which may affect the generalisability

of the findings. Although the selected cases provide a relevant basis for discussion, they do not represent the full spectrum of cooperation initiatives in the region. Second, the number of interviews conducted is also limited. While the interviews contribute qualitative depth and first-hand perspectives, they do not capture the viewpoints of all relevant stakeholders. The reliance on self-reported data in both the survey and interviews introduces the potential for bias, as participants may provide responses influenced by personal perceptions or strategic considerations. Furthermore, the network analysis conducted in this study depends on the availability of publicly accessible data. As a result, the analysis is constrained by the extent and accuracy of the information provided by different actors online. This could lead to gaps in the representation of certain relationships or interactions. Despite these limitations, the study offers a solid foundation for understanding transnational and cross-border cooperation in the region. The findings allow for a structured and coherent analysis; however, they do not claim to provide a fully comprehensive picture of all dynamics at play.

3 Findings and Discussion

3.1 Actor Network Analysis

The dataset involves eight countries, reflecting a broad geographic scope and including all countries in the Adriatic-Ionian region. Institutions from these countries actively contribute to fostering international cooperation and implementing cross-border projects aimed at regional development in the Adriatic-Ionian area. San Marino and North Macedonia are not represented. The number of institutions per country is as follows: Italy (65), Croatia (38), Greece (37), Slovenia (37), Bosnia and Herzegovina (23), Albania (22), Serbia (20), Montenegro (20).

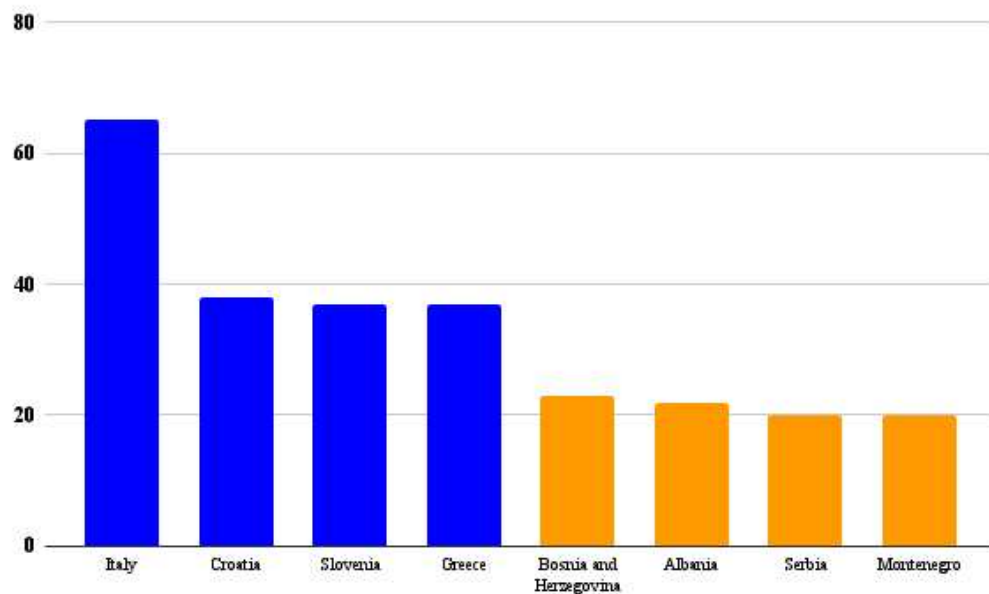


Figure 7: Participation by country in the Adriatic-Ionian region (source: authors' own elaboration)

Public entities dominate the landscape, accounting for 182 institutions, while private institutions (80) are less represented. Institutions operate across different levels: national (91), regional (89), and local (82).

<i>Institution Type</i>	National	Regional	Local	<i>Total</i>
Public	61	53	67	181
Private	30	36	15	81
<i>Total</i>	91	89	82	262

Table 1: Distribution of public and private institutions across governance levels

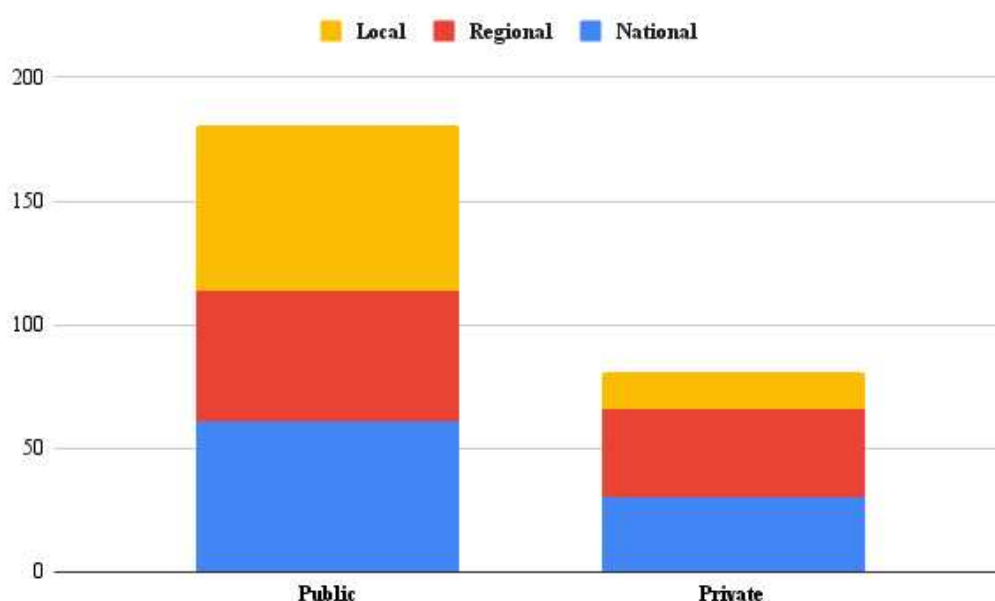


Figure 8: Distribution of public and private institutions across governance levels (source: authors' own elaboration)

Public organisations include 67 regional authorities, 52 municipalities, 34 universities and 28 national institutions. It should be noted that some institutions have been categorised as both national institutions and regional authorities, even though they can be assigned a more detailed organisational type. For example,

public utility companies, government agencies, chambers of agriculture and chambers of commerce have been identified as regional authorities, though their operations often span multiple levels. Brčko District, on the other hand, is a hybrid, but is considered here as a national institution. In the private institutions, 37 research centres, 16 development agencies, eleven associations, ten NGOs and eight companies are counted.

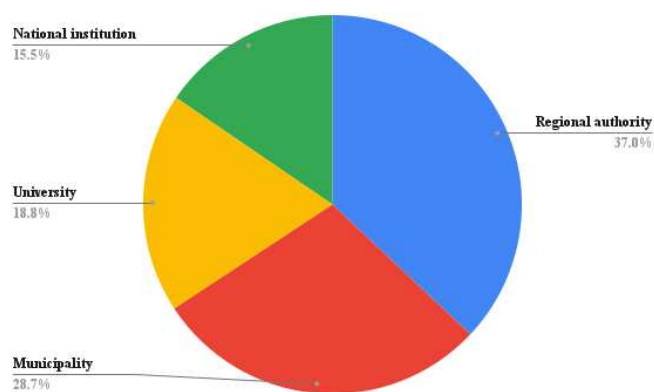


Figure 9: Public institutions – Distribution by type (source: authors' own elaboration)

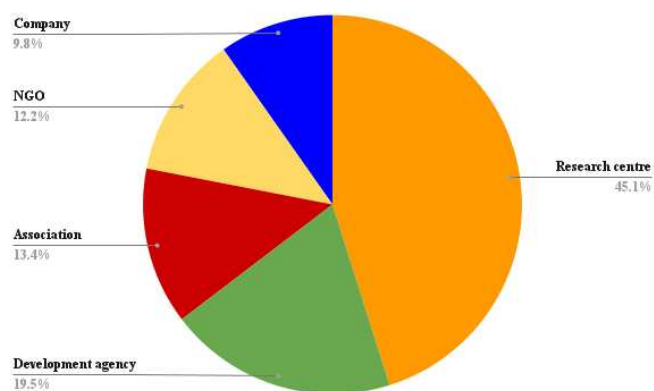


Figure 10: Private institutions – Distribution by type (source: authors' own elaboration)

It can be stated that this distribution indicates a stronger focus on public administration structures, complemented by a specialised but smaller private sector presence. Furthermore, this analysis also shows that Italy is considered a leading country, thus positioning itself as a central player in cross-border and transnational cooperation. It is also noteworthy that the EU member states Greece, Croatia and Slovenia are more strongly represented than the non-EU states Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Albania (**Figure 7**). Although private entities are less well represented, they probably bring specialised expertise and innovation potential that could complement public institutions in the implementation of projects and cooperation.

In the network analysis, several actors repeatedly appear, each playing different but interrelated roles within the cooperation framework. These actors include the Zadar County Rural Development Agency (Croatia), the Region of Crete (Greece), the Regional Development Centre Koper (Slovenia), the Albanian Development Fund (Albania), the Development Agency of Evia SA (Greece), the Sarajevo Economic Region Development Agency (SERDA) (Bosnia and Herzegovina), the RDA of Northern Primorska Ltd. Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and the Regional Agency for Socio-Economic Development – Banat Ltd (Serbia). The analysis of their recurrence provides insights into their centrality and influence within the network, which is described below. Quantitative analysis using centrality indicators highlights these actors as key nodes in the network. Degree centrality identifies their frequent interactions and emphasises their role in promoting connections and forming solid partnerships. For example, the Region of Crete and the Regional Development Centre of Koper show interconnectedness by participating in different projects that connect other nodes, although their level of interconnectedness is similar to that of other institutions. Similarly, the Albanian Development Fund shows strong centrality, as evidenced by its active participation in four projects.

Development agencies such as EVIA SA Development Agency, Development Agency of the Sarajevo Economic Region SERDA, RDA of North Primorska Ltd. Nova Gorica, Regional Agency for Socio-Economic Development – Banat Ltd and Zadar County Rural Development Agency, also play a crucial role. These agencies show involvement in several projects and thus also contribute significantly to the connectivity and cohesion of the entire network.

Furthermore, universities such as the University of Tirana, the University of Zagreb, the University of Bologna and the University of Athens have participated in up to four projects within the network. However, because of their complex structures, including branches and several faculties, it is difficult to identify them as a single actor. Nevertheless, their repeated participation in various projects makes them key actors or intermediaries within the network.

Betweenness centrality emphasises these kinds of actors, highlighting their ability to connect otherwise unconnected clusters. All institutions exhibit similar levels of connectivity, indicating that their positioning within the network provides them with a unique strategic advantage.

The qualitative analysis examines the characteristics of these actors and uncovers patterns and contrasts based on their country of origin and the type of institution. A common feature of most actors is their regional focus, with the exception of the Albanian Development Fund, which operates at the national level and acts as a bridge between national and regional initiatives.

Institutionally, these actors are mostly private institutions (development agencies), which, however, focus on the promotion of socio-economic development and regional cooperation. Their roles, whether public or private institutions, vary in scope and influence. For example, the Region of Crete and the Regional Development Centre of Koper (regional authorities) focus on local initiatives, reflecting their alignment with local government priorities and their ability to

channel resources effectively at a regional level. Regional authorities often serve as facilitators of collaboration, ensuring alignment between local stakeholders and broader policy objectives. By contrast, the Albanian Development Fund acts as a national institution, balancing local interests with broader regional objectives. Universities as public entities highlights their institutional flexibility and wide reach, enabling diverse contributions in different thematic areas.

Development agencies, as private institutions, act as important intermediaries that connect local, regional and national stakeholders. They identify regional needs, align them with overarching policy objectives and ensure the effective implementation of projects. By bridging the gap between different actors, they can enable the sharing of resources.

Geographically, the network reflects the diverse representation of the Adriatic-Ionian region. It is noteworthy that both EU and non-EU countries are at the top of the repeating partners, even though more EU countries are included in the total.

Figure 11 visualises the network structure of the 262 actors. The network is an undirected graph, where each node (dot) represents a single actor involved in the collaborative programs. The edges (lines) connecting the nodes represent partnerships or collaborations within these programs. The graph provides insights into the relationships and networking between different actors and highlights isolated components.

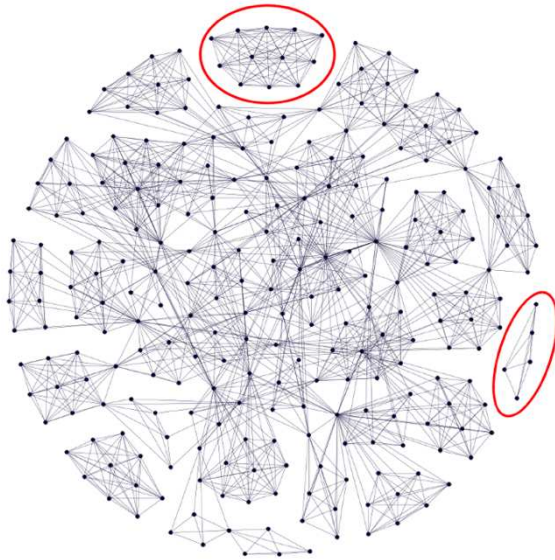


Figure 11: Actor-Network Graph highlighting isolated actors (source: authors' own elaboration)

Two examples of isolated actors are outlined in red in Figure 11. The upper cluster represents a project with strong internal connectivity but limited integration into the main network. The right cluster, on the other hand, consists of fewer loosely connected actors, but is also separated from the other clusters. The network has a high density at its core, where intermediaries and coordinators play a crucial role in maintaining cohesion and ensuring an efficient flow of information.

In the next illustration (**Figure 12**), centrality is used to highlight intermediaries and coordinators. The nodes highlighted in green and yellow represent these.

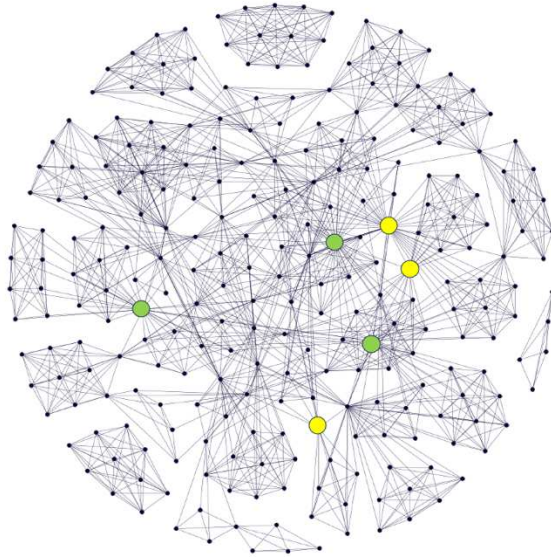


Figure 12: Actor-Network Graph highlighting intermediaries and coordinators (source: authors' own elaboration)

Intermediaries (yellow nodes) serve as bridges between different groups or clusters in the network and facilitate communication and collaboration. Their high betweenness centrality underscores their crucial role in connecting otherwise isolated groups. These actors can, for example, only participate in two projects. Coordinators (green nodes), on the other hand, are involved in several projects (up to four in this example) and usually head specific projects. Their high degree of centrality indicates their direct connections to a significant number of other nodes in the network.

The visualisation (**Figure 13**) shows the complex network, to which a modularity analysis was applied to identify and highlight community structures.

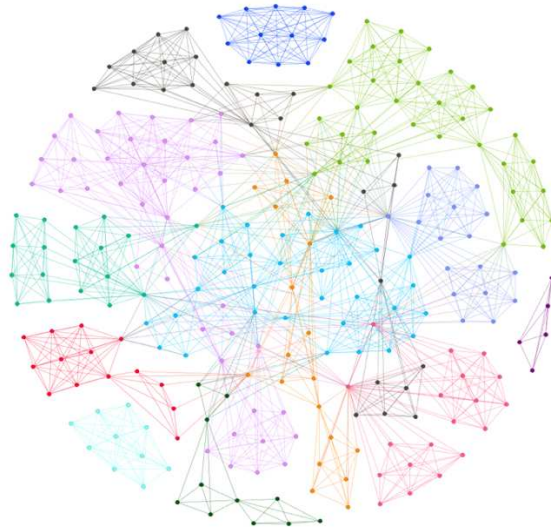


Figure 13: Actor-Network Graph with Modularity Clustering (source: authors' own elaboration)

Modularity is a key metric that quantifies the strength of the division of a network into clusters or communities. By grouping nodes with a high density of internal connections and relatively sparse external connections, modularity provides insights into the underlying structural and functional organisation of the network. The different colours indicate different modularity classes, each representing a unique community within the network. These classes were derived by an algorithm that maximises the modularity score and effectively partitions the network into coherent clusters. The modularity analysis provides a clearer understanding of the network structure and identifies not only the central actors within the communities, but also the bridges or links that connect different clusters. The size and density of each cluster illustrates the complexity of the network. The large cluster in the middle in **Figure 13** are in this case 3-4 ADRION projects, in which very cooperative project partners participate or participate in several projects. These insights are particularly valuable for analysing systems to understand the interaction of actors in the same sector (in this analysis, the environment) is the case. This

approach also improves the ability to identify key players and understand the systemic behaviour of the network.

3.2 Survey “Cooperation Adriatic Ionian Region”

The Adriatic-Ionian survey on Cooperation provides valuable insights into the experiences, challenges and opportunities faced by actors involved in transnational initiatives during the programming period. This section examines the key findings of the survey and highlights the drivers of cooperation, obstacles, and suggestions for improving cooperation in the region. By understanding these dynamics, strategies can be identified to foster a stronger cooperation framework and effectively address common challenges.

Here it must be mentioned that although the questionnaire was sent to all 262 identified actors, more than one representative person was contacted per institution. This is because, for example, an institution may have participated in two different projects and there may be two project managers (one person for each project). This results in 51 responses from 49 institutions.⁸ In this study, the 51 responses to the questionnaire are weighted because each experience provides valuable insights into the participants' cooperation behaviour.

3.2.1 General Overview

The survey captured insights from a diverse range of organisational types and administrative levels across the region. Notably, 28.6% (14 out of 49) were institutions that participated in more than one project, which also allows them to be grouped. The respondents represent a wide range of institution types, including

⁸ This sample size was finally obtained because three representative individuals from different departments at the University of Tirana completed the questionnaire.

regional authorities (14), research centres (10), universities (6), national institutions (4), municipalities (6), NGOs (4), development agencies (2), associations (2) and one company (Figure 14).

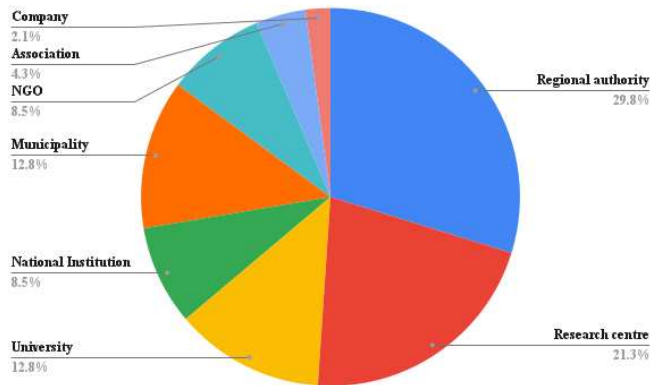


Figure 14: Distribution of survey respondents by institutional type (source: authors' own elaboration)

In terms of government levels, the majority of institutions operate at the regional level (21), followed by national institutions (18) and local institutions (10). The results show that networking and knowledge sharing are the main drivers of cooperation, while bureaucratic and administrative challenges remain major obstacles. Respondents emphasised the need for simplified procedures, increased funding and better stakeholder engagement to improve future cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

3.2.2 Detailed Presentation of Results – Quantitative Insights

In the first part, in which the respondents talked about their experiences of cooperation, the following results were obtained. The first question was about the frequency of participation in ADRION tenders in 2014–2020. The majority (51%) indicated moderate participation, i.e., participation in some tenders, while 33.3% indicated sporadic participation. Only 15.7% of respondents indicated that they

regularly participated in most tenders. When asked about the factors that contributed to their effective participation in ADRION 2014–2020, the majority (54.9 %) answered “The quality of the network and coordination”, while 33.3 % cited a progressive understanding of call logic and parameters as the reason. Only 11.8 % consider persistence to be the main factor in their effectiveness.

Satisfaction How can you assess your general satisfaction participating in the ADRION 2014-2020?
51 responses

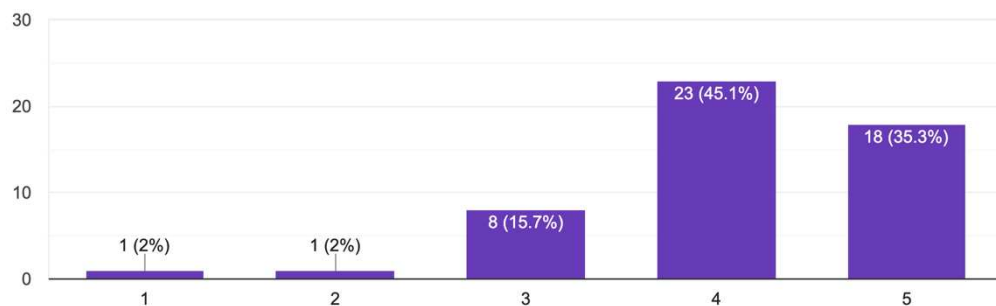


Figure 15: Satisfaction level ADRION 2014-2020 (survey data analysis)

This bar chart (Figure 15) shows the general satisfaction levels of participants in the ADRION 2014-2020 program. The majority rated their satisfaction highly, with 45.1% giving a score of 4 and 35.3% awarding the highest score of 5. Lower satisfaction ratings were rare, with only 2% assigning scores of 1 or 2.

In the second part, the factors for cooperation were analysed.

Shared goals and objectives How do you align your goals and objectives for successful cooperation?
51 responses



Figure 16: Shared goals and objectives for successful cooperation (survey data analysis)

The pie chart in **Figure 16** illustrates how participants align their goals and objectives for successful cooperation in ADRION 2014-2020. The majority (45.1%) prioritise ensuring a shared understanding of project objectives through regular orientation meetings, while 33.3% focus on developing joint action plans with clear goals and timelines. Smaller proportions highlight collaborative visioning sessions (11.8%) and continuous feedback loops (9.8%) as their preferred methods.

The next pie chart (**Figure 17**) outlines how trust, reliability, and effective communication are built in cooperation efforts. The majority (54.9%) rely on transparent sharing of information and the use of digital platforms for real-time updates. Additionally, 33.3% emphasise meeting deadlines and commitments, along with monthly online meetings and workshops, while 11.8% focus on regularly updating partners and establishing weekly communication protocols.

Trust, reliability and effective communication How do you build trust, reliability, and ensure effective communication in cooperation efforts?

51 responses

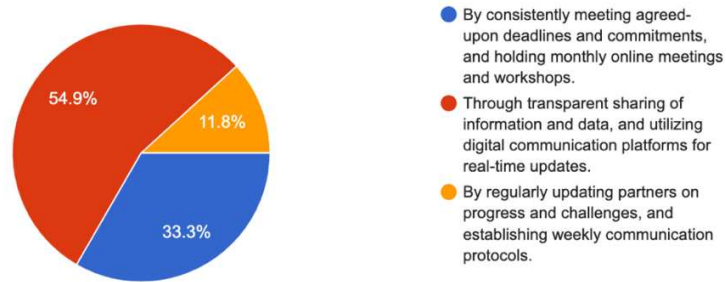


Figure 17: Trust, reliability and effective communication in cooperation efforts (survey data analysis)

When it comes to methods for resolving project conflicts, almost half (49%) of respondents said they use long-standing relationships to resolve disputes, while 43.1% rely on the definition of clear conflict resolution mechanisms in agreements. Only 7.8% opt for mediated negotiations supported by neutral third parties. The second part also looks at methods of promoting innovation and continuous improvement in collaboration. Almost half (49%) of respondents focus on promoting experiments and pilot projects. In addition, 37.3% emphasise that strategies are regularly reviewed and updated based on new insights, while 13.7% hold innovation competitions and contests. Important results also emerge in the third part, which deals with the obstacles to cooperation.

Behaviour What do you think represents the hidden factor of cooperation?

51 responses

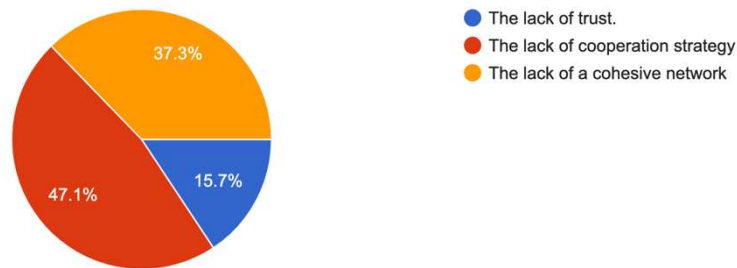


Figure 18: Hidden factor of cooperation (survey data analysis)

This pie chart in **Figure 18** identifies hidden factors affecting cooperation. The majority (47.1%) of respondents believe the lack of a cooperation strategy is the key issue, while 37.3% point to the absence of a cohesive network. A smaller proportion (15.7%) considers the lack of trust as the main hidden factor hindering successful cooperation.

The main resource-related barriers to collaboration are shown in **Figure 19**. The biggest obstacle, according to the majority of respondents (60.8%), is a lack of human resources and knowledge, which is followed by inadequate money (23.5%). A lower percentage (15.7%) identified insufficient access to essential infrastructure or technology as a major barrier.

Resources What do you consider the most significant resource-related impediment to cooperation?
51 responses

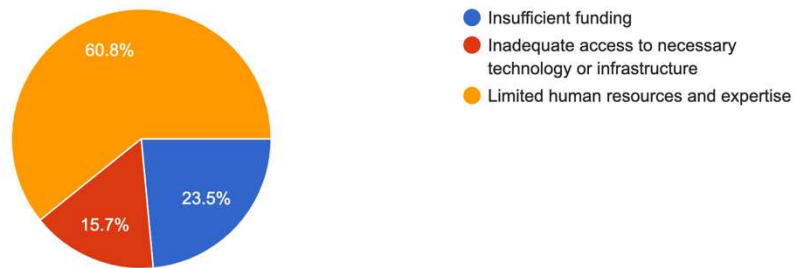


Figure 19: Resources-related impediment to cooperation (survey data analysis)

The last diagram (**Figure 20**) in this third part illustrates the administrative and bureaucratic challenges impacting cooperation efforts. The majority (45.1%) of respondents identified delays in decision-making and fund disbursement as the most significant issue, followed by strict regulatory and reporting requirements (37.3%). A smaller proportion (17.6%) cited complex and time-consuming application processes as a primary challenge.

Administrative and bureaucratic challenges Which administrative or bureaucratic issues have most impacted your cooperation efforts?
51 responses

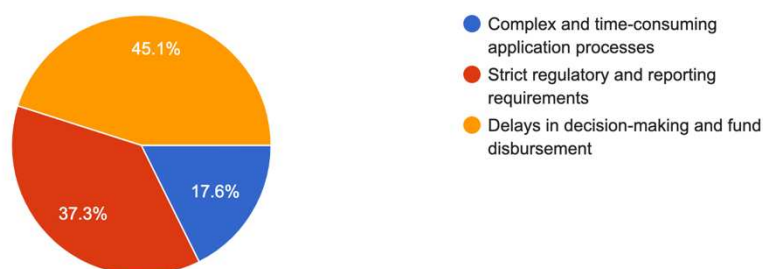


Figure 20: Administrative or bureaucratic issues which impacted cooperation efforts (survey data analysis)

The last part of the survey deals with factors that can further enhance cooperation. Follow diagrams are intended to illustrate these results.

Effective coordination and governance What structures can help improve coordination among project partners?

51 responses

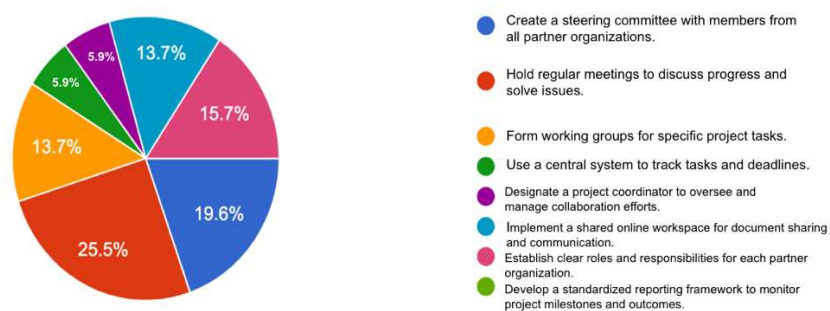


Figure 21: Effective coordination and governance – structures (survey data analysis)

This pie chart in **Figure 21** highlights structures that can improve coordination among project partners. The most popular suggestion (25.5%) is holding regular meetings to discuss progress and resolve issues. Other significant suggestions include using a central system to track tasks and share documents (19.6%) and establishing clear roles and responsibilities (15.7%). Smaller groups proposed forming working groups (13.7%), creating a steering committee (13.7%), or designating a project coordinator (13.7%) as key strategies. Additionally, implementing a shared online workspace (5.9%) and developing a standardised reporting framework (5.9%) were also considered useful approaches for enhancing coordination.

The following diagram (**Figure 22**) shows methods for building skills and capacity among partners. The majority (47.1%) prefer organising workshops and training sessions on key topics, while 35.3% suggest arranging visits to successful

projects for learning. Smaller groups recommend setting up mentorship programs with experienced partners (15.7%) or providing online courses and resources (2%).

Capacity building and training How can you build skills and capacity among partners?
51 responses

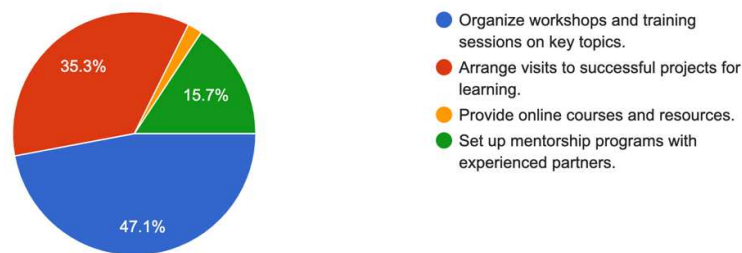


Figure 22: Capacity building and training among project partners (survey data analysis)

Regarding the question about strategies for effective community engagement and stakeholder participation in projects, the diagram in **Figure 23** shows the following: The largest proportion (35.3%) suggests holding meetings to collect feedback from residents. 33.3% suggest conducting awareness campaigns via social media and local events, and 31.4% recommend establishing advisory boards with community representatives for continuous input.

Community engagement and stakeholder involvement How can you effectively involve the community in your projects?
51 responses

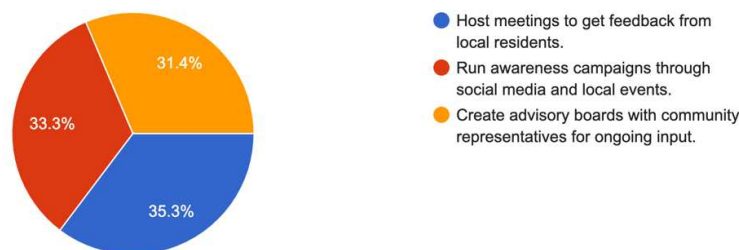


Figure 23: Community engagement and stakeholder involvement in projects (survey data analysis)

The survey results indicate that cooperation within the ADRION 2014-2020 program was generally well-received, with most participants expressing high satisfaction. However, bureaucratic delays, funding limitations, and a lack of clear cooperation strategies were noted as key challenges. Despite these obstacles, respondents highlighted networking, coordination, and knowledge-sharing as major success factors. To enhance future collaboration, they emphasised the need for streamlined administration, better coordination structures, and stronger stakeholder engagement.

3.2.3 Results open-ended question – Qualitative Insights

The qualitative responses from the survey provide a deeper understanding of the experiences, challenges and recommendations of the stakeholders involved in transnational cooperation in the Adriatic and Ionian region. These insights reveal both the strengths and limitations of current cooperation mechanisms and offer valuable perspectives for improving future collaborations.

One of the most frequently mentioned successes of cooperation in the Adriatic and Ionian region is the creation of strong networks that facilitate the exchange of knowledge between different stakeholders. Many respondents emphasised that their participation in cooperation projects enabled them to establish valuable links with partners from different countries, sectors and institutional backgrounds.

- *“The main achievements were networking with state-of-the-art partners, dealing with different legislation in partner countries and filling the legislative gaps.”*
- *“We have successfully created a strong network dedicated to fostering a culture of cooperation, which will benefit future collaborations.”*

- *“The knowledge sharing that took place in these projects was invaluable. Learning from good practices in other countries has significantly improved our approach.”*

Respondents also emphasised that the cooperation efforts have led to progress in regional connectivity, economic development and environmental sustainability. These projects have enabled cross-border initiatives that promote mutual understanding and joint problem-solving.

- *“Cooperation in the AIR has significantly advanced regional connectivity, economic development and environmental sustainability. (...)”*
- *“The creation of cross-border networks has helped to bridge the gap between institutions and regions and foster a more integrated approach to regional challenges.”*

Several interviewees provided concrete examples of successful projects that resulted from cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian Region. These projects demonstrate the practical benefits of working together across national and institutional borders.

- *“We have successfully developed a master’s program in circular economy and bioeconomy with eight partner universities in just one year, despite working within different legal frameworks.”*
- *“Cooperation has allowed us to create joint initiatives that would not have been possible otherwise. The success of some projects has encouraged further collaboration.”*

A recurring theme in the responses was the complexity and rigidity of administrative procedures. Many participants found the application, reporting and financial management requirements cumbersome and time-consuming.

- *“Please simplify application and implementation procedures and rules. The complexity discourages some potential partners from participating.”*
- *“The effort required for financial administration ties up considerable resources that could be better used for project implementation.”*
- *“The rigidity of the rules and the complicated handling of budget payments and changes cause unnecessary delays.”*

Disparities in national priorities, guidelines and legal frameworks were identified as major obstacles to seamless collaboration.

- *“One of the main challenges is the mismatch between project objectives and the number of partners required per project. This makes it difficult to maintain consistency and alignment.”*
- *“Cultural and regulatory differences between participating countries make collaboration difficult and slow down implementation.”*

Although networking was identified as one of the main achievements, some respondents felt that the involvement of stakeholders needed to be improved, particularly with regard to ensuring participatory governance and involving local communities.

- *“More work is needed to ensure participatory governance in projects. Some stakeholders are excluded from important discussions.”*
- *“Involving all relevant actors, including civil society and local businesses, remains challenging. Broader engagement strategies are needed.”*

Several interviewees pointed out that financial constraints and short project durations limited their ability to achieve long-term impact.

- *“More funding should be allocated to sustainable development initiatives to ensure continuity beyond project completion.”*
- *“Limited financial resources make it difficult to involve industry partners in academic collaborations, even though their participation would be highly beneficial.”*

Respondents overwhelmingly called for simplifications in application, reporting, and financial administration to make collaboration more efficient.

- *“Streamlined administrative procedures would reduce bureaucratic hurdles and free up resources for more impactful activities.”*
- *“Establishing standardised guidelines at the beginning of projects would facilitate consistency and implementation.”*

Many respondents emphasised the need for greater financial support and more flexible funding mechanisms.

- *“Projects should receive more funding to ensure long-term sustainability and greater impact.”*
- *“The financial framework should allow more flexibility in budget adjustments based on changing project needs.”*

Although digital platforms have facilitated collaboration, respondents suggested that more in-person exchanges and study visits would further enhance collaboration.

- *“Digital tools such as Basecamp are useful, but more in-person meetings and study visits should be encouraged.”*
- *“An increase in training and exchange programs would foster deeper understanding between partners.”*

To address challenges with engagement, respondents recommended better integration of local stakeholders and private sector actors.

- *“More participatory governance models should be adopted to ensure all stakeholders have a voice.”*
- *“Promoting the participation of businesses and civil society groups would increase the diversity of perspectives and strengthen project outcomes.”*

An important concern for many respondents was ensuring that project outcomes would have an impact beyond the funding period.

- *“There should be better support for post-project initiatives to ensure that results are widely disseminated and sustained.”*
- *“Living labs and long-term networks should be encouraged to sustain collaboration beyond the initial project period.”*

The qualitative responses from the survey highlight both the successes and challenges of transnational cooperation in the Adriatic and Ionian region. While stakeholders appreciate the opportunities for networking, knowledge sharing and project achievements, they also stress the need for tighter management, increased funding and greater stakeholder involvement.

3.2.4 Analysis of repeated participants

Participation in multiple projects offers unique insights into the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of collaborative efforts. This analysis focuses on institutions that have participated in multiple ADRION projects in the environmental field (here 28.6% of respondents)⁹, and particularly examines key aspects such as shared objectives, trust and communication, conflict resolution, challenges and opportunities for improvement, in order to distinguish them from “one-time participants”

Aligning project goals between different stakeholders is a fundamental aspect of successful collaboration. The repeat participants (10.7%) said they had developed joint action plans with clearly defined goals and timelines, while another 10.7% emphasised the importance of ensuring a common understanding of project goals through regular orientation meetings. By contrast, only a small number engaged in joint visioning sessions and strategic planning at the beginning of the project or utilised continuous feedback loops and regular goal adjustments during monthly review sessions. This implies that these institutions rely on structured, clearly defined planning mechanisms rather than informal agreements. The emphasis on shared action plans and regular orientation meetings suggests that these institutions recognise the importance of structured goal-setting and continuous evaluation for maintaining project coherence and success.

Transparent communication and trust building are essential for long-term collaboration. The repeat participants, 16.1% preferred transparent information sharing and the use of digital communication platforms for real-time updates, while 8.9% relied on consistent adherence to agreed deadlines and the implementation of

⁹ The percentages given below are as follows: 51 respondents = 100%, of whom 16 were repeat participants in projects = 28.6%. The percentage given here corresponds to the total number of all respondents.

monthly online meetings and workshops. Transparency and digital real-time communication are highly valued by repeat participants, suggesting that they prefer structured and efficient collaboration to informal and occasional interactions. These institutions also recognise the importance of meeting deadlines and ensuring consistent communication.

Resolving conflicts effectively is crucial to sustaining collaboration in transnational projects. Among repeat participants, 12.5% specified clear conflict resolution mechanisms in agreements, while 8.9% relied on long-standing relationships to resolve disputes. In addition, 7.2% used facilitated negotiations, supported by neutral third parties, to resolve conflicts. This shows that while repeat participants may use different ways to resolve conflicts, they are still effective.

Several underlying problems can hinder effective cooperation. Among institutions, 17.9 % cited the lack of a cooperation strategy as the main obstacle, while 7.2 % pointed to the lack of a coherent network. In addition, 3.6 % mentioned a lack of trust as an underlying factor hindering cooperation. The high percentage of participants citing the lack of a cooperation strategy indicates a significant structural problem in transnational cooperation. While networking is still a problem, it is less worrying than the broader need for a clearly defined strategic framework.

Funding and personnel are crucial for project implementation. The majority of repeat participants (14.3%) cited limited personnel resources and expertise as a major obstacle, while 8.9 % cited insufficient access to necessary technology or infrastructure. In addition, 5.4 % highlighted insufficient funding as a key challenge. This shows that the biggest challenge for repeat participants is a lack of personnel and expertise, rather than financial constraints. Complex administrative requirements can also present obstacles to cooperation. Overall, 16.1% of participants cited delays in decision-making and funding disbursement as a major problem, while 10.7% pointed to strict regulatory and reporting requirements. Only

a fraction cited complex and time-consuming application procedures as their primary challenge. Delays in decision-making and strict reporting requirements pose greater challenges for repeat participants than the application process itself. This suggests that the most important administrative problems arise during project implementation rather than in the initial phase.

The fact that several coordination strategies were equally supported indicates that no single approach dominates, but rather that a combination of structured communication and defined roles is preferred.

Developing institutional capacity improves project sustainability. Of the participants who had already participated repeatedly, 14.3 % stated that they consider the organisation of workshops and training on key topics to be important, while 8.9 % advocated the organisation of visits to successful projects for learning. Stakeholder involvement ensures inclusive and effective project implementation. Of the repeat participants, conducting awareness campaigns via social media and local events and emphasising the importance of meetings. Social media campaigns and direct participation through feedback meetings are the preferred methods for engaging the community. Advisory boards are used less frequently, possibly due to challenges with sustainable participation.

Analysis of repeat participants reveals important trends in collaborative behaviour. Structured planning, transparent communication, and formalised conflict resolution mechanisms are highly valued. Among the most significant barriers are resource scarcity, administrative delays, and the lack of a coherent collaborative strategy. To improve future transnational cooperation, simplifying bureaucracy, improving funding mechanisms, and strengthening capacity-building initiatives are crucial. Stakeholder engagement through direct communication and digital public relations remains a priority to ensure that cooperation efforts are both inclusive and impactful.

3.2.5 Analysis correlation matrix

Understanding the relationships between the key factors influencing collaboration in the Adriatic-Ionian region provides valuable insights into the dynamics of cross-border projects. The correlation matrix highlights the interactions between four crucial dimensions: behaviour, administrative and bureaucratic challenges, shared objectives, and trust and communication. While some relationships indicate expected trends, others show unexpectedly weak correlations, suggesting that additional factors may be at play. This chapter examines these results in detail and analyses their implications for improving collaboration efficiency. Table 2 shows the correlation matrix.

	<i>Behaviour</i>	<i>Administrative and bureaucratic challenges</i>	<i>Shared goals and objectives</i>	<i>Trust, reliability and effective communication</i>
<i>Behaviour</i>	1			
<i>Administrative and bureaucratic challenges</i>	-0,014228	1		
<i>Shared goals and objectives</i>	0,16698156	-0,007890973	1	
<i>Trust, reliability and effective communication</i>	-0,0350747	0,074639337	-0,290582727	1

Table 2: Correlation matrix

The correlation analysis provides valuable insights into cooperation dynamics within transnational projects. The relationship between behaviour and administrative challenges (-0.0142) suggests that administrative burdens, such as bureaucratic delays and reporting requirements, do not significantly impact an institution's collaborative behaviour. This challenges the assumption that institutions struggling with bureaucracy are also weaker in cooperation. It indicates that organisations have already developed independent mechanisms to handle administrative complexity while maintaining effective collaboration. The positive correlation between behaviour and shared goals (0.167) implies that institutions with clearer cooperation strategies tend to align their objectives more effectively. While the correlation is weak, it suggests that organisations focusing on strategy, trust-building, and coordination are more likely to define common goals. The correlation between behaviour, trust and communication (-0.0351) is weak, even though a strong cooperation strategy is expected to lead to improved communication and more trust. However, this also shows that institutions can compensate for weak strategic coordination with frequent meetings and digital tools, while others with clear strategies may communicate less frequently due to established expectations. A marginal correlation between administrative challenges and shared goals (-0.0079) suggests that bureaucratic complexity does not hinder goal achievement. This may be because administrative hurdles are often external factors imposed by regulations, while goal-setting is an internal process among project partners. It implies that improving administrative efficiency alone does not guarantee better strategic alignment—institutions should focus on structured planning and stakeholder engagement to ensure well-defined objectives. A slightly positive correlation (0.0746) between administrative challenges and trust and communication suggests that institutions facing bureaucratic hurdles may rely more heavily on communication and coordination to overcome these difficulties. One of

the most striking insights from the analysis is the negative correlation between shared goals and trust & communication (-0.2906). This suggests that organisations with well-defined and structured objectives tend to communicate less frequently. On the other hand, when objectives are less structured or ambiguous, institutions might compensate by increasing communication, scheduling more meetings, and emphasising trust-building efforts to keep projects aligned. Overall, the analysis suggests that administrative challenges and cooperative behaviour are largely independent of each other, meaning that bureaucratic complexity does not necessarily weaken collaboration. More importantly, institutions should be mindful that setting clear goals should not come at the expense of maintaining open communication. A structured approach is valuable, but flexibility and trust-building remain key to successful cooperation.

3.3 Interview with selected actors in transnational cooperation

As learned from above, in the context of transnational cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region, several key institutions and actors have played a crucial role in designing projects, promoting cooperation and addressing regional challenges. In parallel with the survey, a vertical interview campaign has been conducted. The objective was to test and consolidate the findings emerged from the survey while understanding the different actors' view point. Among the different constellation of actors that are active in the region, it was possible to interview the following:

- SERDA (Sarajevo Regional Development Agency, Bosnia and Herzegovina): a long-standing participant in EU-funded initiatives with a focus on economic development and sustainability;
- Agricultural University of Albania: A research-oriented institution working on environmental and aquaculture projects to align Albania with EU environmental policies;

- Region of Crete, Greece: Actively involved in policy implementation, sustainability projects and cross-border cooperation in the environmental and economic sectors;
- Redea (Regional Development Agency, Croatia): A leading institution in initiatives on circular economy and regional tourism development;
- Emilia-Romagna Region, Italy: A central actor in maritime spatial planning and environmental governance in the Adriatic-Ionian region;
- Agrra (Zadar County Rural Development Agency, Croatia): A focus on rural development, agriculture and strategic implementation of EU projects.

Each of these actors has made a significant contribution to transnational projects with its unique perspectives, strengths and challenges, and agreed to take part in the interviews. This chapter presents the answers to the topics of participation in transnational projects, key achievements during the program period, challenges in promoting cooperation, impact of the EU program framework and good practices and recommendations for cooperation.

3.3.1 Involvement in Transnational Projects

Over the past decade, transnational projects in the Adriatic-Ionian region have played a fundamental role in fostering collaboration, addressing environmental challenges, and enhancing economic development. The engagement of key actors in these projects reveals a deep commitment to regional cooperation, despite varying capacities and challenges.

SERDA's engagement in transnational cooperation

SERDA has been an active participant in transnational cooperation for over a decade, engaging in multiple EU programming periods. As a project partner, it has

focused on economic development, sustainability, and knowledge transfer. Recently, SERDA has taken the opportunity to apply as a lead partner for the 2021-2027 programming period, marking a significant step in its institutional evolution. Their current involvement includes two active projects under the IPA Adrion program, with a broad engagement spanning several EU-funded initiatives. One key aspect of SERDA's approach has been its ability to build long-term partnerships beyond individual projects. This networking capability has allowed the agency to foster deeper collaboration and leverage new funding opportunities.

Agriculture University of Albania: A scientific approach to cooperation

The Agriculture University of Albania has primarily focused on environmental and aquaculture research within transnational projects. Through its participation, the university has played a pivotal role in harmonising marine environmental monitoring and data management. By engaging PhD students and early-career researchers, it has supported knowledge exchange and aligned local practices with EU environmental standards. One notable success has been its involvement in projects developing harmonised protocols for pollution assessment in coastal areas. These initiatives have enabled Albania to move closer to EU environmental policy compliance, demonstrating the significant impact of academic institutions in transnational cooperation.

The Region of Crete: Sustainability and policy implementation

Despite being geographically outside the Adriatic-Ionian core, the Region of Crete has actively participated in transnational projects due to its shared Mediterranean ties. Its involvement has included roles as a project coordinator, policy implementer, and selected pilot region for environmental initiatives. Key projects have focused on environmental monitoring, business sustainability, and community engagement.

The region has established an online platform to support businesses in improving water sustainability practices and has implemented education programs for local communities. Additionally, Crete has leveraged transnational cooperation to enhance its entrepreneurship ecosystem, establishing a Virtual Business Innovation Centre (VIBIEC), on national, regional and transnational level.

Redea's contribution to circular economy and cultural heritage

Redea has taken part in several impactful projects, most notably CIRCLE and ADRIONET. The CIRCLE project addressed waste management through circular economy principles, helping businesses and institutions transition to sustainable practices. REDEA's role in managing electronic and industrial waste aligned with Croatia's national sustainability efforts. In contrast, the ADRIONET project focused on cultural heritage and tourism, aiming to establish a transnational network of authentic villages. Through extensive stakeholder engagement, REDEA facilitated the creation of sustainable cultural festivals, which continues to thrive beyond the initial funding period. These festivals preserve local traditions and promote the region's cultural heritage.

Emilia-Romagna's leadership in maritime spatial planning

As one of the leading regions in transnational cooperation, Emilia-Romagna has played an important role in environmental governance. The Porto di Mari Project, developed from a previous Adriatic IPA CBC-funded initiative, has focused on maritime spatial planning and integrated coastal management. The region's leadership in an environmental cluster within the Adriatic-Ionian framework has enabled it to bridge multiple EU-funded initiatives, ensuring knowledge transfer and strategic policy alignment. A key success has been the creation of the

GeoPortal, a digital platform that consolidates environmental data for policymakers and researchers.

AGRRA's adaptation to transnational cooperation

The Agency for Rural Development of Zadar County (AGRRA) has strategically aligned its participation with available EU funding opportunities, ensuring compliance with programmatic requirements. Its focus on rural development has led to the establishment of a Rural Development Center in Zemunik, providing training and support for young farmers and agribusinesses. AGRRA's approach highlights a pragmatic adaptation strategy—rather than dictating project priorities, it aligns its initiatives with EU funding calls, ensuring continuous participation. This flexibility has been a key factor in its sustained involvement in transnational cooperation.

3.3.2 Key Achievements During the Program Period

SERDA's achievements in Wool valorisation

One of SERDA's most successful projects was the WOOL project, which focused on valorising wool as a sustainable resource in the Adriatic-Ionian region. The project addressed the issue of wool waste by identifying alternative uses, such as composting, frost protection, and fire-starting briquettes. Additionally, SERDA facilitated the training of female entrepreneurs in wool-related crafts and branding strategies, strengthening the economic viability of traditional practices. Another key achievement was the transfer of knowledge from Italian partners, introducing innovative wool processing techniques. The partnerships formed during the project have endured beyond its formal completion, demonstrating the sustainability of SERDA's approach.

Agriculture University of Albania: Advancing environmental science

The Agriculture University of Albania made significant progress in harmonising marine environmental monitoring. By developing standardised methodologies for pollution assessment and aligning local practices with EU environmental directives, the institution played a vital role in regional environmental policy improvements. A major achievement was the integration of Albania's marine data with the European Marine Observation and Data Network (EMODnet), improving access and reusability of research outputs. Additionally, the university contributed to Albania's EU accession efforts by enhancing its technical capacity in environmental monitoring and governance.

The Region of Crete: Enhancing sustainability and digital tools

The Region of Crete successfully implemented digital tools to enhance business sustainability, including an online assessment platform for enterprises to evaluate their water consumption. By involving local stakeholders in sustainability education, Crete strengthened the community's engagement in environmental preservation. Another significant outcome was the INNOVAGRO network, which provided mentorship and funding opportunities for start-ups. This initiative connected entrepreneurs across the Adriatic-Ionian region, fostering cross-border cooperation in business innovation.

Redea's long-term impact on circular economy and cultural heritage

Through the CIRCLE project, Redea helped local businesses implement circular economy principles, enabling them to transition toward sustainable waste management. The project introduced electronic waste recycling initiatives, ensuring compliance with EU environmental standards. The ADRIONET project had a

profound cultural impact, creating a transnational network of authentic villages. The festivals initiated through ADRIONET, such as the Cekar Festival and the Lace Festival, continue to thrive today, supported by municipalities and tourism boards.

Emilia-Romagna's role in environmental governance

Emilia-Romagna's leadership in Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) led to the successful creation of the Porto di Mari GeoPortal, which consolidates environmental data for policy-making. This tool improved transparency and accessibility of maritime data, strengthening regional governance. Additionally, Emilia-Romagna played a pivotal role in environmental cluster development, integrating various EU-funded initiatives and facilitating knowledge-sharing across institutions.

AGRRA's agricultural development successes

AGRRA established the Rural Development Center in Zemunik, a hub for training young farmers and supporting rural entrepreneurship. The centre provides workshops on EU-funded business models and agricultural innovation. Furthermore, AGRRA optimised its internal project management system, ensuring efficient EU fund utilization. By fostering long-term partnerships, it has remained an active participant in EU-funded cooperation projects.

3.3.3 Challenges in Fostering Collaboration

SERDA: Overcoming institutional and financial constraints

Despite its strong track record in transnational cooperation, SERDA faces persistent challenges related to institutional capacity and financial constraints. As a non-EU partner, it is required to provide a higher co-financing rate (20%) compared to EU

institutions, placing a significant financial burden on its operations. Unlike its EU counterparts, which can rely on structured funding mechanisms, SERDA must navigate complex bureaucratic processes to secure co-financing from national sources. This often results in delayed project execution and limited ability to expand its participation in large-scale initiatives. Another major challenge SERDA faces is the consequence of brain drain, which affects the availability of skilled professionals in Bosnia & Herzegovina. Many highly qualified individuals seek better opportunities abroad, leading to a shortage of human resources for managing complex EU-funded projects. The limited institutional capacity, exacerbated by staff turnover, further complicates administrative and reporting requirements. SERDA struggles to retain experienced personnel, which hinders its ability to develop long-term expertise in EU project management.

Agriculture University of Albania: Addressing policy fragmentation

A significant challenge faced by the Agriculture University of Albania is policy fragmentation in the environmental sector. Albania's regulatory framework is still evolving, and the lack of a dedicated Ministry for Environment has created inefficiencies in policy implementation. This results in inconsistent enforcement of environmental laws, making it difficult to align national policies with EU standards. Additionally, cross-sector collaboration between environmental and agricultural agencies remains weak, which hinders the university's ability to integrate scientific research into national decision-making processes. Bureaucratic delays and regulatory uncertainty further complicate the university's role in transnational projects.

Region of Crete: Bridging public and private engagement

While the Region of Crete has been a proactive player in transnational cooperation, it has encountered significant obstacles in securing private sector engagement. Many of its sustainability initiatives remain government-driven, with minimal participation from local businesses and industry stakeholders. This lack of private sector involvement raises concerns about the long-term financial sustainability of projects once EU funding expires. Additionally, businesses often perceive transnational projects as too bureaucratic or disconnected from their immediate commercial interests, leading to low participation rates. The region also calls for incentive mechanisms such as tax benefits for companies that actively contribute to EU-funded sustainability initiatives.

Redea: Managing cross-border differences

As a regional development agency actively engaged in circular economy and cultural heritage projects, Redea frequently encounters cross-border regulatory differences that complicate project implementation. Working with partners from diverse legal and administrative backgrounds requires additional efforts in coordination, compliance, and reporting. A key challenge is the pre-financing requirement, which is particularly problematic for non-EU institutions that lack sufficient reserves to cover initial project costs. Some Redea project partners have faced delays in fund disbursement, causing disruptions in project timelines. Additionally, linguistic and cultural differences sometimes slow down decision-making processes.

Emilia-Romagna: Balancing policy and practical implementation

While Emilia-Romagna has been a leader in environmental governance, it faces ongoing challenges in ensuring that policy-driven projects result in practical,

measurable outcomes. The region has successfully led multiple policy initiatives, yet translating these into tangible results remains complex. One of the key issues is the fragmented policy landscape across different administrative levels, which sometimes leads to misalignment between regional and national priorities. Additionally, ensuring long-term cooperation beyond the initial EU-funded project period requires stronger integration of project outcomes into local governance frameworks. Also, to maintain long-term cooperation beyond project timelines requires greater coordination between policymakers and stakeholders.

AGRRA: Retaining employees

AGRRA has successfully managed multiple EU-funded initiatives, but a key challenge remains staff retention and expertise drain. The high demand for experienced EU project managers in the job market has led to frequent turnover of skilled personnel, making it difficult for AGRRA to maintain institutional knowledge and ensure continuity in project execution. The public sector salary structure limits AGRRA's ability to offer competitive wages, leading many employees to seek opportunities in the private sector. Additionally, overlapping project commitments often create operational strain, with staff managing multiple deadlines and reporting obligations simultaneously. Nevertheless, the fact that they were most frequently involved in projects of all respondents shows that they were able to successfully overcome these difficulties.

3.3.4 Impact of the EU Programming Framework

SERDA: Strengthening Institutional Capacity and Financial Access

EU funding is crucial for SERDA's participation in transnational projects, reducing regional disparities and supporting local development. However, bureaucratic

barriers and financial constraints remain significant. The co-financing requirement (20%) for non-EU partners creates difficulties in securing project funding. While EU technical assistance helps, many non-EU administrative structures struggle with complex compliance requirements, leading to project delays. SERDA advocates for simplified financial rules and tailored support mechanisms to improve participation.

Agriculture University of Albania: Aligning policies and overcoming financial barriers

EU-funded projects have helped Albania harmonise environmental policies and research methodologies with EU standards. However, pre-financing requirements for non-EU partners continue to be an obstacle, making project participation challenging for institutions with limited budgets. The university suggests more flexible financial mechanisms to facilitate smoother cooperation and ensure broader access to funding.

Region of Crete: Enhancing governance and regional integration

EU programs have strengthened Crete's governance structures and administrative efficiency, improving project execution and transparency. Participation in regional initiatives has fostered better collaboration with non-EU Western Balkan partners. However, rigid funding and administrative procedures sometimes limit adaptability in project execution, calling for greater flexibility in program implementation.

Redea: Ensuring efficient project implementation

EU support has been instrumental in facilitating Redea's sustainability and cultural projects. However, heavy administrative burdens on lead partners make project management complex. Streamlining reporting and compliance processes would enhance efficiency, ensuring smoother execution and stronger regional impact.

Emilia-Romagna: Promoting policy continuity and strategic coordination

Emilia-Romagna highlights the need for policy continuity to maintain long-term impact. Fragmented project funding cycles often disrupt progress, requiring permanent cooperation networks to ensure sustained engagement. The region also calls for better alignment between EU, national, and private sector funding sources to optimise resource allocation.

AGRRA: Reducing bureaucratic barriers and improving fund allocation

While EU-funded training and workshops have helped AGRRA improve project efficiency, lengthy reporting and reimbursement delays pose challenges. Many essential project needs, such as infrastructure investments, are not covered by current EU funding rules, requiring a more flexible approach to fund allocation. Additionally, imbalanced financial structures between EU and non-EU partners create disparities, highlighting the need for a more equitable funding model.

3.3.5 Best Practices & Recommendations for Collaboration

SERDA's approach to sustainable partnerships

To address the above issues, SERDA advocates for reduced co-funding requirements for non-EU partners, more technical assistance to enhance institutional capacity, and strategies to stem the brain drain by targeting staff retention efforts. SERDA emphasises the importance of long-term partnerships in transnational cooperation. By maintaining strong relationships beyond individual projects, the agency ensures continuous knowledge sharing and new funding opportunities. Its structured communication strategy includes:

- Regular updates via email and project management tools

- Half-yearly in-person meetings to discuss progress and challenges
- Mentoring programs for first-time project participants

In addition, SERDA recommends improving human resource capacity by training EU project specialists to ensure continuity of participation.

Agriculture University of Albania: Strengthening environmental data sharing

The Agriculture University of Albania highlights the need for harmonised environmental data collection and sharing. To improve collaboration, they suggest:

- Developing standardised methodologies for environmental monitoring
- Utilising shared digital platforms for cross-border data integration
- Increasing technical training programs for researchers and policymakers

Furthermore, the university underscores the importance of early stakeholder involvement to ensure policy alignment and long-term engagement. Also, the university recommends greater governmental coordination in environmental policymaking and the establishment of a centralised environmental regulatory authority.

The Region of Crete: Enhancing private sector engagement

Crete has initiated targeted outreach programs to engage businesses in sustainability efforts and is exploring public-private partnerships to improve project continuity. It also stresses the necessity of involving the private sector and academic institutions in transnational projects. Key recommendations include:

- Incentivising private businesses to participate through tax benefits and funding opportunities
- Developing public-private partnerships for sustainability initiatives
- Encouraging universities to play an active role in research-driven projects

To facilitate smoother collaboration, Crete also advocates for clear separation of roles and responsibilities among partners.

Redea's strategy for community engagement

To improve collaboration, Redea has established structured communication protocols, increased the use of digital project management tools, and facilitated regular training sessions for cross-border partners on EU regulatory compliance. Redea highlights also the importance of grassroots involvement to ensure project sustainability. Their recommendations focus on:

- Conducting local stakeholder consultations before project initiation
- Ensuring direct benefits for local communities to foster long-term commitment
- Organising workshops and training sessions to transfer knowledge effectively

One of Redea's key strategies has been to prioritise cultural heritage projects, as they generate sustained engagement and economic benefits for the local population.

Emilia-Romagna's leadership in policy alignment

To bridge this gap mentioned in the challenges, Emilia-Romagna emphasises the need for institutional mechanisms to embed successful project practices into local and national regulations. The region also highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement beyond policymakers, ensuring that local communities and businesses are actively involved in project implementation. The Emilia-Romagna Region stresses the significance of policy continuity beyond individual funding periods. Their best practices include:

- Establishing long-term cooperation networks that transcend project timelines

- Integrating multiple EU-funded initiatives to maximise impact
- Ensuring that knowledge transfer mechanisms are built into project structures

Additionally, they recommend improving financial dialogue to secure more consistent funding for environmental initiatives.

AGRRA's recommendations for financial sustainability

AGRRA is advocating for greater financial flexibility in project budgets to allow for competitive salaries, as well as structured internal training programs to continuously develop new EU project specialists. Furthermore, the agency suggests establishing a centralised knowledge-sharing platform to ensure continuity in best practices, even when staff turnover occurs. AGRRA highlights as well financial constraints as a major barrier to effective transnational cooperation. Their key recommendations include:

- Introducing a national co-financing fund to support smaller institutions
- Providing zero-interest loans or government-backed credit options for project pre-financing
- Allowing greater flexibility in fund allocation to cover infrastructure costs

To address capacity challenges, AGRRA also suggests structured internal training programs to build expertise in EU project management.

3.3.6 Comparative analysis of actor perspectives

3.3.5.1 Commonalities in perspectives across actors

Across the different actors involved in transnational cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region, several recurring themes emerge in their perspectives on challenges, achievements, and best practices.

Importance of long-term partnerships

Nearly all actors emphasise the need for sustainable, long-term partnerships beyond individual project cycles. SERDA, Redea, and Emilia-Romagna, in particular, highlight the value of continuous networking, knowledge exchange, and structured communication. This is evident in their efforts to maintain relationships with past project partners and ensure knowledge transfer through workshops and structured learning exchanges.

Financial barriers for non-EU partners

A recurring challenge, particularly for non-EU partners such as SERDA and the Agriculture University of Albania, is the higher co-financing requirement for non-EU entities. These institutions struggle with securing the required upfront contributions, which limits their ability to participate in large-scale initiatives. AGRRA and Redea echo similar concerns about financial constraints, particularly in terms of pre-financing and reimbursement delays. The common recommendation is for greater financial flexibility, including lower co-financing rates, dedicated national funds, and improved EU reimbursement timelines.

Challenges of bureaucratic and administrative complexity

All actors recognise the heavy administrative burdens associated with EU-funded projects. Emilia-Romagna, Crete, and Redea stress that fragmented regulatory landscapes across different administrative levels complicate project execution. SERDA and AGRRA experience this acutely, as they must navigate both EU and national bureaucratic systems, often resulting in delayed project implementation (on the part of other project members). Many actors advocate for streamlined reporting processes, simplified approval procedures, and improved fund disbursement mechanisms.

Knowledge transfer and capacity building

Many institutions acknowledge that a lack of institutional capacity can hinder successful participation in transnational projects. SERDA, the Agriculture University of Albania, and AGRRA highlight the need for structured training programs for staff involved in EU projects. They propose mentoring schemes, capacity-building workshops, and dedicated training programs to ensure continuity in expertise. Emilia-Romagna and Redea extend this point by advocating for knowledge-sharing platforms that integrate past and present project insights.

Engagement of local and private sector stakeholders

Several actors agree that engaging local communities and private sector actors is crucial for the long-term sustainability of transnational projects. Crete and Redea particularly emphasise the role of businesses, cultural organisations, and local entrepreneurs in ensuring the continuity of initiatives beyond the project's funding period. Emilia-Romagna and AGRRA also stress that engagement at the grassroots level enhances project effectiveness, with AGRRA specifically advocating for public-private partnerships in rural development projects.

Alignment of national policies with EU standards

The harmonization of national policies with EU environmental, economic, and governance frameworks is a shared priority among the Agriculture University of Albania, Emilia-Romagna, and Crete. These actors see their projects as vehicles for aligning local and regional governance structures with EU best practices, particularly in environmental sustainability and maritime spatial planning. This issue is particularly critical for Albania and Bosnia & Herzegovina, where policy

fragmentation and the absence of dedicated environmental authorities hinder full EU integration.

3.3.5.2 *Divergences in perspectives and strategic approaches*

Despite these commonalities, key differences emerge in how actors perceive challenges and prioritise solutions.

Role of policy vs. practical implementation

Emilia-Romagna and Crete take a policy-driven approach, focusing on ensuring that their projects lead to regulatory improvements at the regional and national levels. For them, participation in EU-funded initiatives is a means of influencing long-term policy change. In contrast, Redea and AGRRA take a more practical and community-driven stance, prioritising tangible, on-the-ground results such as waste management improvements, rural development centers, and cultural heritage preservation.

Private sector involvement: A divided view

While Crete and AGRRA strongly advocate for greater private sector engagement, some actors, like SERDA and the Agriculture University of Albania, do not place as much emphasis on this issue. SERDA, for example, focuses more on institutional networking and public sector-driven partnerships, whereas Crete actively seeks business participation through incentive programs. The absence of strong private sector engagement remains an issue for several actors, but solutions vary—some call for financial incentives, while others push for increased policy alignment to facilitate business participation.

Adaptability to EU funding structures

AGRRA has demonstrated a flexible approach by aligning its project priorities with available EU funding calls. Rather than dictating its own development agenda, AGRRA strategically adapts to funding opportunities to ensure continuous participation in EU projects. In contrast, SERDA and Redea face significant constraints due to rigid financing models, as they struggle with pre-financing requirements and difficulty in securing matching funds. Emilia-Romagna, benefiting from a more structured EU partnership framework, is less affected by financial uncertainty but acknowledges the need for better continuity mechanisms between funding cycles.

Challenges in human resource retention

SERDA and AGRRA identify brain drain and staff retention as major obstacles, whereas this issue is not as prominent for other actors like Crete or Redea. High turnover of experienced EU project managers in Bosnia & Herzegovina and Croatia creates instability in project execution, requiring additional investments in training and recruitment. Emilia-Romagna, with more stable institutional structures, does not highlight staff retention as a pressing issue.

Infrastructure and funding priorities

AGRRA and Redea call for expanded funding eligibility to include essential infrastructure investments, such as waste management facilities and rural development hubs. They argue that current EU funding models focus too heavily on soft measures, such as training and policy development, while neglecting tangible infrastructure improvements. Emilia-Romagna and Crete, while recognising this gap, prioritise policy-driven environmental governance over direct infrastructure funding.

Overall, while there is broad agreement on financial, administrative, and knowledge-sharing challenges, differences in strategic priorities, adaptability to funding mechanisms, and stakeholder engagement approaches set these actors apart. Institutions with a strong policy orientation, such as Emilia-Romagna and Crete, focus on long-term regulatory impact and alignment with EU standards. Pragmatic actors, such as Redea and AGRRA, prioritise on-the-ground implementation and local engagement, often facing greater challenges in securing sustainable financing. Non-EU partners, such as SERDA and the Agriculture University of Albania, struggle with higher financial burdens, policy fragmentation, and human resource shortages, making participation in EU projects more complex.

3.4 Expert perspective on transnational cooperation in the AIR

This chapter presents insights from distinguished experts on cross-border cooperation within the Adriatic-Ionian region. The experts come from diverse backgrounds, including the European Commission, regional cooperation programs, cross-border associations, and academic institutions. Their perspectives provide a multi-dimensional understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and strategic alignments in fostering cooperation.

Experts:

- *Gilles Kittel* – Team Leader, Instrument for Pre-Accession, Enlargement Negotiations and EUSAIR, European Commission, DG REGIO
- *Ana Nikolov* – Head of the AEBC (Association of European Border Regions) Office, Cross-Border Cooperation

- *Barbara Di Piazza* – Head of Joint Secretariat Interreg, VI-B IPA Adriatic-Ionian programme - IPA ADRION
- *Eleonora Tramannoni* – Executive Manager, AIC Forum (Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce)
- *Donatella Romozzi* – Technical referent of the Marche Region for the European macro-regional strategy EUSAIR, Regione Marche
- *Silvia Mangialardo* – Head of International Relations Office at Marche Polytechnic University, UniAdrion
- *Branimir Gojković* – Project Manager, Interreg VI-A IPA Programme Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Montenegro

Each expert contributed valuable insights into various aspects of cross-border and transnational cooperation, including institutional roles, key challenges, successful examples, alignment with the EUSAIR strategy, and recommendations for enhancing cooperation.

3.4.1 Role in fostering cooperation

Gilles Kittel (DG REGIO): The EU strategy has encouraged dialogue among stakeholders, creating a framework for collaboration across multiple policy areas. He highlighted that the EU-funded projects offer a structure for cooperation, but the long-term sustainability of these collaborations depends on strong political commitment and institutional engagement. He emphasised the need for knowledge-sharing platforms where regions can exchange best practices.

Ana Nikolov (AEBR): Emphasises bilateral cooperation mechanisms that focus on mutual learning and capacity building. She noted that effective cross-border cooperation requires more than funding—it necessitates an understanding of the socio-political dynamics of the regions involved. She highlighted that trust between

partners is a key determinant of project success and recommended targeted networking initiatives to foster stronger relationships.

Barbara Di Piazza (IPA ADRION): Highlights the program's function as a crucial transnational cooperation tool, bridging policy gaps. She argued that by bringing together diverse stakeholders, the program fosters synergies that individual national policies often lack. She pointed out that cooperation should extend beyond economic development to include cultural and educational exchanges to strengthen regional identity.

Eleonora Tramannoni (AIC Forum): Discusses the role of the AIC Forum in enhancing economic cooperation and sectoral networking. She emphasised that trade cooperation can drive economic integration, but this requires reducing bureaucratic barriers. She suggested that chambers of commerce should play a more active role in fostering regional trade relations by organising business matchmaking events.

Donatella Romozzi (Regione Marche): Stresses the role of regional authorities in mediating cooperation between local stakeholders. She noted that despite good intentions, regional disparities often hinder effective engagement in EU-funded projects. She proposed that technical assistance programs be made more widely available to underfunded regions to ensure equal participation.

Silvia Mangialardo (UniAdrion): Focuses on academic collaboration, particularly research partnerships across borders. She pointed out that universities need more incentives to work collaboratively on cross-border research projects. She suggested establishing joint research centres dedicated to addressing transnational challenges such as climate change and sustainable tourism.

Branimir Gojković (Interreg HR, BiH, MNE): Highlights Interreg projects as vital instruments for grassroots-level cooperation, but noted that red tape and lack of continuity in project funding often create barriers. He advocated for more flexible

funding structures to allow for longer-term engagement and better integration of local actors into decision-making processes.

3.4.2 Key challenges

Cross-border cooperation faces several significant challenges that impede efficient collaboration. Gilles Kittel pointed out varying institutional capacities that present coordination challenges. While some nations have well-established mechanisms for cross-border engagement, others continue to struggle with governance and regulatory issues. He stressed the importance of harmonising regulations to create a more cohesive framework for cooperation. Ana Nikolov highlighted that opportunities exist for enhancing formal recognition of CBC in national frameworks to streamline funding and policymaking – less structured governmental support, the specific needs of cross-border regions are frequently overlooked, leading to delays and challenges in project execution. Barbara Di Piazza underscored the administrative barriers that slow down projects, particularly the complex procurement rules that hinder efficient implementation. She emphasised that these bureaucratic hurdles create unnecessary delays and called for legal reforms to simplify processes for cross-border initiatives. Eleonora Tramannoni pointed to awareness gaps among local stakeholders, particularly businesses that often remain uninformed about available cooperation programs. She suggested that stronger outreach and communication strategies are necessary to bridge this gap and increase participation in cross-border projects. Donatella Romozzi emphasised that aligning regional and national priorities remains a challenge that requires integrated governance structures for effective cross-border initiatives. She advocated for integrated governance structures that align political interests across different administrative levels. Silvia Mangialardo discussed the lack of an institutionalised strategy for research cooperation, noting that without

clear frameworks, academic institutions struggle to form long-term partnerships. This lack of strategic direction limits knowledge transfer and innovation. Finally, Branimir Gojković identified that streamlining financial processes and improving the predictability of reimbursements can enhance the sustainability of cross-border initiatives, calling for faster financial processing mechanisms to prevent disruptions.

3.4.3 Successful examples of cooperation

Despite these challenges, several successful cross-border cooperation initiatives highlight the potential for impactful collaboration. Gilles Kittel shared insights on the Maritime Protected Areas initiative, which has successfully brought together multiple stakeholders to manage coastal resources. This project has improved environmental governance and enhanced marine biodiversity protection in the Adriatic-Ionian region. Ana Nikolov pointed to the Serbia-North Macedonia employment initiative as a model for job creation across borders. She highlighted the importance of labor market integration, demonstrating how such initiatives help reduce unemployment in border regions and foster economic stability. Barbara Di Piazza emphasised the success of cross-border environmental protection projects that align with EU green policies. She cited specific initiatives focused on pollution reduction and sustainable development, such as those addressing water contamination in the Adriatic-Ionian region. Eleonora Tramannoni showcased business networking efforts facilitated by the AIC Forum. She detailed how these initiatives have enabled businesses to expand their operations across borders, fostering economic growth and increasing trade opportunities. Donatella Romozzi provided insights into financial dialogue initiatives that have contributed to the effective implementation of the EUSAIR strategy. She highlighted cases where targeted financial support has facilitated regional economic development,

particularly in infrastructure projects. Silvia Mangialardo discussed the Joint Master's Program on Circular Economy, a collaboration between universities that promotes knowledge exchange and innovation. She emphasised that such programs strengthen the link between academia and industry, enhancing regional competitiveness. Branimir Gojković described waste management projects that have improved sustainability through regional cooperation. He highlighted how these joint projects have led to better waste disposal practices, reducing environmental degradation and promoting sustainable development.

3.4.4 Alignment with the EUSAIR strategy

Experts also assessed the alignment of cross-border cooperation efforts with the EUSAIR strategy. Gilles Kittel noted a strong connection between these initiatives and EUSAIR's focus on blue economy sectors. He pointed out specific policy measures that reinforce the link between cross-border projects and regional strategic objectives. Ana Nikolov called for greater coherence between cross-border policy frameworks and the EUSAIR strategy. She proposed the establishment of joint task forces to oversee the implementation of EUSAIR-aligned projects, ensuring more effective coordination. Barbara Di Piazza highlighted the role of the IPA ADRION program in supporting EUSAIR's objectives through targeted funding and policy support. She suggested leveraging financial instruments to enhance the strategic impact of cooperation initiatives. Eleonora Tramannoni emphasised the need for business networking to align with EUSAIR's economic pillars. She provided examples of trade programs that exemplify how cross-border economic initiatives contribute to the broader regional strategy. Donatella Romozzi discussed financial instruments that support EUSAIR's economic goals, advocating for the creation of a regional investment fund to facilitate project implementation.

She stressed the importance of financial stability in sustaining long-term collaboration. Silvia Mangialardo pointed out the limited alignment between research cooperation and EUSAIR priorities. She called for stronger incentives to encourage interdisciplinary research and increased funding for academic partnerships that align with EUSAIR's strategic objectives. Finally, Branimir Gojković highlighted the role of Interreg programs in implementing EUSAIR projects at the local level. He provided examples of community-led development programs that contribute to the broader goals of the EUSAIR strategy, particularly in sustainability and infrastructure.

3.4.5 Enhancing cross-border cooperation

Cross-border cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region faces various challenges, yet experts have proposed solutions to strengthen these initiatives. Gilles Kittel emphasised the necessity of empowering local authorities through capacity-building programs, allowing them to manage EU-funded projects more efficiently. He also stressed the importance of participatory planning, advocating for the involvement of NGOs and civil society in decision-making processes. To enhance transparency and coordination, he suggested the establishment of shared information systems across partner countries. Ana Nikolov echoed the importance of formalising cross-border cooperation (CBC) in national and regional policies. She argued that CBC efforts should not be treated as secondary initiatives but rather as strategic priorities integrated into governmental frameworks. Additionally, she underlined the need to engage young professionals in CBC projects, believing that their involvement would lead to greater innovation and long-term sustainability. Barbara Di Piazza highlighted the need for closer regulatory alignment between EU and non-EU countries could facilitate smoother cross-border cooperation while

respecting national frameworks. She stressed that simplifying regulatory frameworks would enable smoother cooperation and ensure equal participation in cross-border initiatives. Furthermore, she called for increased pre-financing options for IPA beneficiaries, allowing them to initiate projects without immediate financial burdens. She also advocated for a more significant role for national contact points in guiding and monitoring project implementation. Eleonora Tramannoni placed a strong emphasis on youth involvement, advocating for greater awareness and engagement in regional initiatives. She highlighted the importance of building networks that connect businesses, policymakers, and institutions to foster stronger collaboration across borders. Donatella Romozzi focused on financial accessibility, recommending improved financial support mechanisms that would enable non-EU countries to secure funding for CBC projects. She called for the simplification of bureaucratic procedures to accelerate project approvals and enhance implementation efficiency. Additionally, she suggested that major financial institutions, such as the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the World Bank, could play a critical role in financing large-scale infrastructure projects that benefit the entire macro-region. Silvia Mangialardo proposed that universities play a more proactive role in cross-border cooperation. She advocated for structured institutional collaboration rather than fragmented research initiatives. She also called for simplifying accreditation procedures to facilitate student exchanges and academic partnerships while promoting regional research networks that ensure long-term knowledge sharing and capacity building. Finally, Branimir Gojković identified financial challenges as one of the most significant barriers to CBC. He suggested adopting more flexible EU-backed co-financing models to bridge funding gaps and encourage participation. He also recommended fostering public-private partnerships, allowing businesses to contribute to cross-border initiatives. Furthermore, he stressed the importance of targeted capacity-building programs for

municipalities and NGOs to equip them with the skills necessary to access and manage EU funding efficiently.

3.4.6 Recommendation for improvement

In order to improve cross-border cooperation, experts provided various recommendations aimed at strengthening institutions, simplifying administrative processes, and increasing financial accessibility. Gilles Kittel emphasised the necessity of increasing funding for institutional development, focusing on targeted training programs to build the capacity of local and national institutions. He also advocated for reducing bureaucratic hurdles and providing technical assistance to candidate countries to facilitate easier access to EU support mechanisms. Furthermore, he recommended integrating multiple stakeholders into CBC projects to promote long-term sustainability beyond individual project cycles. Ana Nikolov underscored the importance of formally recognising CBC within national policies to ensure its strategic prioritization. She called for capacity-building initiatives tailored for municipalities and border regions, aimed at improving their ability to manage projects and acquire funding. In addition, she proposed youth-oriented CBC programs that focus on employment and entrepreneurship, helping to retain young talent in border areas. Barbara Di Piazza highlighted the need to simplify administrative processes, particularly in public procurement, to speed up project implementation. She also suggested strengthening financial support mechanisms by expanding advance payment options for IPA beneficiaries. Additionally, she emphasised the importance of enhancing communication and transparency through improved dialogue mechanisms between partner organisations to ensure more effective execution of CBC projects. Eleonora Tramannoni proposed the introduction of mentorship programs linking experienced professionals with young entrepreneurs to stimulate business development and knowledge sharing across

borders. She also suggested increasing networking opportunities, such as B2B events and industry collaborations, to foster deeper economic integration across regions. Donatella Romozzi recommended enhancing financial accessibility for all CBC participants, including non-EU entities, could strengthen cross-border collaboration. She also called for a long-term political commitment to EUSAIR, advocating for financial commitments linked to policy objectives to sustain cooperation beyond electoral cycles. Furthermore, she stressed the need for streamlining administrative regulations to reduce barriers that hinder participation in cross-border initiatives. Silvia Mangialardo suggested the development of a regional research strategy that integrates multiple universities into CBC efforts, rather than relying on fragmented, individual initiatives. She also advocated for the institutional recognition of ADRION projects within academic institutions to ensure sustained participation and funding. Additionally, she encouraged expanding collaboration among Western Balkan universities to enhance knowledge transfer and research network development. In the end, Branimir Gojković emphasised the importance of simplifying legal and administrative procedures to make CBC project participation easier for non-EU entities. He also encouraged the harmonization of national regulations to facilitate smoother cooperation between countries. Furthermore, he called for increased financial support mechanisms for municipalities, proposing advance funding and accessible loans to help local governments cover pre-financing requirements. Additionally, he suggested creating incentives and funding models to encourage greater private sector involvement in cross-border initiatives.

3.4.7 Comparative analysis of expert perspectives

This section compares expert perspectives, identifying key convergences in institutional roles, challenges, success stories, EUSAIR alignment, and cooperation improvements.

3.4.7.1 Commonalities in expert perspectives

Institutional roles and the importance of cooperation frameworks

A recurring theme among experts is the necessity of structured cooperation frameworks. Gilles Kittel emphasises the role of EU-funded projects in fostering collaboration, while Barbara Di Piazza underscores the IPA ADRION program as a key tool in bridging policy gaps. Similarly, Donatella Romozzi highlights regional authorities' role in facilitating cooperation, emphasising that institutional commitment is essential for long-term sustainability. Experts agree that structured cooperation requires not only financial backing but also strong institutional engagement and political will.

Key challenges in cross-border cooperation

Several challenges were identified by the experts, with a strong consensus on issues related to institutional disparities and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Kittel and Di Piazza both pointed to regulatory harmonization as a crucial requirement to enable more effective cooperation. Ana Nikolov and Eleonora Tramannoni emphasised the lack of awareness and outreach among businesses and local stakeholders, which hinders participation in cross-border initiatives. Another shared concern is financial

accessibility: Branimir Gojković and Donatella Romozzi stressed the need for more flexible funding models and simplified administrative procedures to prevent project delays and inefficiencies.

Success stories in cooperation

Despite the challenges, experts provided various examples of successful cooperation efforts. Kittel and Di Piazza both cited environmental initiatives as positive examples of regional collaboration, with Kittel pointing to the Maritime Protected Areas project and Di Piazza referencing cross-border environmental protection programs. Tramannoni and Romozzi highlighted economic cooperation and financial dialogue initiatives as effective mechanisms for fostering regional integration. Meanwhile, Mangialardo emphasised academic collaborations such as the Joint Master's Program on Circular Economy, underscoring the potential for research-driven cooperation.

Alignment with the EUSAIR Strategy

Most experts acknowledged the importance of aligning cooperation initiatives with the EUSAIR strategy. Kittel and Di Piazza emphasised that existing EU funding instruments are already designed to support EUSAIR's economic and sustainability goals. However, Nikolov and Mangialardo expressed concerns about gaps in policy coherence and called for dedicated task forces to oversee strategic alignment. Tramannoni reinforced the need for business networking initiatives that contribute directly to EUSAIR's economic pillars, while Romozzi suggested the creation of a regional investment fund to finance EUSAIR-aligned projects.

3.4.7.2 *Differences in expert perspectives*

Focus areas for improvement

While experts agreed on key challenges, their proposed solutions varied based on their institutional backgrounds. Kittel prioritised strengthening local authorities and shared information systems to facilitate knowledge exchange, whereas Nikolov stressed the need for formalising cross-border cooperation within national and regional policies. Di Piazza focused on regulatory simplification, particularly in procurement processes, while Tramannoni and Romozzi emphasised financial accessibility and private sector engagement. Mangialardo advocated for a stronger role for universities in fostering transnational research collaboration, a perspective less emphasised by others.

Views on the role of youth and academia

Some experts, particularly Mangialardo and Nikolov, placed strong emphasis on youth engagement and academic cooperation as essential elements of long-term sustainability. Mangialardo called for structured university partnerships and research incentives, while Nikolov suggested targeted programs to engage young professionals in cross-border initiatives. By contrast, experts like Tramannoni and Romozzi focused more on economic and financial instruments, viewing business and trade cooperation as the primary drivers of regional integration.

4 Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Summary of key findings

This study has explored transnational cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region through a comprehensive approach that combined actor-network analysis, a survey, and expert interviews. By triangulating these methods, a clearer understanding of cooperation dynamics, key actors, challenges, and opportunities has emerged.

As evidenced by the network analysis, cooperation in the region is characterised by a concentration of key institutions, such as development agencies and regional authorities, which play a crucial role in linking different stakeholders. The analysis highlighted that while cooperation is well-established, certain actors remain isolated, suggesting the need for better integration strategies. Additionally, the dominance of public institutions indicates a strong reliance on government-led initiatives, with private sector involvement still limited. The study identified key structural roles, such as "Intermediaries" and "Coordinators." Intermediaries act as bridges between different groups within the network, facilitating communication and collaboration. Coordinators, on the other hand, lead specific initiatives and maintain network cohesion. Some actors fulfill both roles, increasing their influence in cooperation efforts.

Insights from the survey confirmed the importance of networking and coordination as key drivers of successful cooperation. Respondents emphasised that well-defined project goals, trust, and reliable communication structures significantly contribute to effective collaboration. However, major obstacles persist, including bureaucratic complexity, financial bottlenecks, and regulatory fragmentation. The correlation matrix (Table 2) revealed that administrative burdens do not significantly impact institutions' collaborative behavior (-0.0142), suggesting that organisations have developed mechanisms to handle these challenges without compromising

cooperation. Furthermore, the weak negative correlation between shared goals and trust and communication (-0.2906) highlights the need for balancing structured planning with continuous engagement to maintain successful cooperation dynamics.

The expert interviews provided additional depth by contextualising these findings within broader governance and policy frameworks. Experts underlined the significance of multi-level governance structures and the role of EU frameworks in facilitating cooperation. They also stressed that administrative complexity often hinders project implementation, reinforcing the survey findings. Furthermore, interviewees highlighted the necessity of balancing EU regulations with localised governance approaches to enhance the adaptability and efficiency of transnational initiatives.

Differences in national policies and legal frameworks make seamless collaboration difficult, especially for participants from non-EU countries. The modularity analysis of the network also highlighted the existence of isolated actors and clusters with strong internal connectivity but limited integration into the broader network. This fragmentation indicates that certain projects or partnerships may not be fully embedded in the overall cooperation framework, necessitating targeted strategies to enhance integration.

Bringing together these three approaches, a few key recommendations emerge. First, simplifying administrative procedures would encourage broader participation and reduce delays in project implementation. Second, fostering greater engagement from private sector actors could diversify funding sources and increase innovation in cooperation efforts. Third, strengthening capacity-building initiatives through training programs and mentorship could enhance institutional effectiveness. Finally, a more inclusive and participatory approach to stakeholder engagement,

particularly involving civil society, would ensure long-term sustainability of cooperative initiatives.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that while cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region is well-structured and supported by EU frameworks, several challenges need to be addressed to enhance its efficiency. EU funding plays a crucial role in supporting cooperation, but administrative burdens and strict financial rules often delay project implementation. Calls for simplification and flexibility in funding mechanisms are recurring themes in feedback from stakeholders. To improve the sustainability of projects, respondents and interviewees emphasised the need for streamlined administrative processes, better financial support structures, and greater involvement of local stakeholders and private entities. By integrating insights from network analysis, survey responses, and expert interviews, this research provides a holistic perspective on cooperation dynamics, contributing valuable recommendations for future policy-making and implementation strategies.

4.2 Policy implications for the ADRION programme

The results of this study have direct implications for the future design and implementation of the ADRION Programme. Firstly, it should be more flexibility in the programme rules. More precisely, future ADRION programming should incorporate more adaptable financial and administrative regulations to encourage broader participation. As also mentioned before, balanced representation of public and private actors is recommended to enhance project innovation and implementation effectiveness. Additionally, they could offer more personnel capacity, allowing them to dedicate more time to the project. In this way, the projects would need to be made more attractive for private entrepreneurs. During

the investigation, it also became clear that actors from non-EU countries experience disadvantages like additional financial and administrative burdens. Therefore, ADRION should introduce dedicated support mechanisms, such as tailored funding schemes and technical assistance. On the whole projects should be designed to encourage cross-sectoral cooperation, integrating academia, businesses, and civil society to ensure comprehensive problem-solving approaches and future funding periods should place greater emphasis on long-term impact assessment to ensure that projects achieve sustainable results beyond their formal conclusion.

To achieve this, projects should be designed to involve actors from science, business and civil society. One effective approach is to set up „living labs“, in which universities, environmental organisations and local governments work together on nature-based solutions. While this is being attempted in the current projects, it could be done more intensively and effectively. By assigning projects to the relevant stakeholders – stakeholders who have the relevant resources or to whom resources can be provided. Furthermore, permanent platforms for exchange should be established to facilitate the exchange of best collaboration practices and experiences. Findings from the questionnaire and interviews indicate that, in the future, it would be most effective to involve actors who have already participated in projects. It was often stressed that collaboration fails due to project partners struggling with administration when, in reality, they lack the financial or personnel resources, as well as the necessary knowledge, to face these challenges is the actual reason. The correlation matrix also shows that administrative burdens do not significantly impact institutions' collaborative behaviour. Therefore, while efforts should be made to simplify administrative processes, they should not be eliminated entirely. These permanent platforms could serve as a valuable solution by integrating new actors into the „actors' environment“, assessing their capabilities, and providing training to ensure they are prepared to participate in the project. This

would prevent inefficiencies and ensure that the work of other project partners is not hindered. As a result, putting more effort at the beginning of a project to evaluate the capacities of these actors—essentially creating a 'baseline'—or at least establishing a framework would ensure effective collaboration.

Another way to foster interdisciplinary collaboration is through joint research and development initiatives, in which companies invest in environmental research conducted by universities, thus promoting sustainability innovations. Actors should be better coordinated in the projects and should have a chain course. This means that the course of the project can be precisely coordinated in advance and resources can be allocated before the project to avoid obstacles. Another idea would be for ADRION to try to involve actors from EU and non-EU countries in existing transnational stakeholder forums and platforms to facilitate continuous dialogue on urgent environmental issues (this of course also applies to other sectors, not just the environmental sector). At least, to promote cooperation, it is crucial to ensure that projects foster long-term collaboration among stakeholders. To achieve this, mandatory post-project evaluations after 1–3 years should be introduced to assess the success of cooperation, including the durability of partnerships, knowledge transfer, and sustained engagement in joint initiatives.

4.3 Strategies for enhancing cooperation – list of recommendations

Building on the findings, the following strategies are proposed to strengthen transnational cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region:

1. Streamlining administrative and bureaucratic processes

It would be beneficial to reduce the administrative burden. More specifically, the requirements for application, reporting and financial management should be

simplified. Furthermore, the introduction of standardised guidelines at the beginning of projects would ensure clarity and consistency. Digital platforms should be used to improve document exchange and project monitoring in order to enhance transparency and coordination.

2. Improving financial accessibility and sustainability

Here, a reduction in co-financing requirements for non-EU participants would be beneficial to ensure equitable access to funding. Furthermore, the establishment of a regional co-financing programme to support smaller institutions with limited financial capacity. It is recommended that pre-financing options be expanded to reduce financial obstacles that delay project start-up and that a faster and more flexible reimbursement system be introduced to avoid liquidity problems for participants.

3. Strengthening capacity building and knowledge exchange

First, it is proposed to develop structured training programmes to improve expertise in EU project management and cooperation strategies. In doing so, mentoring programmes should be promoted that bring together experienced institutions and new participants to ensure knowledge transfer. It would also be a suitable approach for organisations to organise regional workshops, study visits and cross-sectoral exchange programmes to enable joint learning.

4. Encouraging stakeholder and private sector engagement

Companies should be more involved through financial incentives and dedicated outreach programmes. In this way, public-private partnerships (PPP) can be established to integrate expertise from the private sector. Furthermore, it is

recommended to implement mechanisms (before the project start) that ensure that this private institution have the capacity for effective participation.

5. Aligning national policies with EU standards

Finally, greater harmonisation of policies between EU and non-EU countries should be encouraged to ensure consistent regulation. Furthermore, regional authorities should be more involved in bridging policy gaps and aligning local initiatives with EU priorities. In general, the aim is to promote joint policy development initiatives that address common regional challenges, such as environmental sustainability and economic integration

4.4 Future research directions and final remarks

This research has provided valuable insights into the mechanisms and challenges of transnational cooperation, but there are areas that require further study. There is no question that a long-term analysis of cooperation efforts will have an impact on future projects funded under the ADRION programme. Furthermore, comparative studies on cooperation models from other EU macro-regional strategies (e.g. Baltic Sea Strategy, Danube Strategy) could provide transferable insights for the Adriatic-Ionian region. Future research should also explore the role of digitalisation in cooperation, particularly how digital platforms and new technologies can facilitate this type of cooperation.

Another important area is the study of policy coherence and multi-level governance, which examines how different levels of government (EU, national, regional) interact and influence the results of cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian context. It could explore how regulations from different countries are merged and how the entire concept can be restructured so that cooperation in these areas does not fail in the future.

It is important to note that this study has focused exclusively on the environmental sector in the context of the ADRION programme. However, future research could extend the analysis to partnerships and cooperation in other areas, such as economic development, cultural exchange and social policy. A broader perspective, encompassing several areas of cooperation, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of transnational cooperation and reveal additional synergies between different sectors. Although significant progress has already been made, significant obstacles remain in the form of complex administration, financial bottlenecks and political fragmentation.

Tackling these issues through optimised processes, better access to finance, stronger stakeholder involvement and better political alignment will be key to maximising the impact of cooperation initiatives in future programming periods.

By implementing the proposed strategies and policy recommendations, the ADRION programme can become a more effective instrument for promoting cross-border partnerships and sustainable development in the region. Strengthening institutional capacity, widening participation and promoting innovative solutions are key to ensuring that transnational cooperation efforts make a substantial contribution to the long-term prosperity and stability of the Adriatic-Ionian region.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: Original survey “Cooperation in the Adriatic Ionian Region”

„Dear Participant,

My name is Ilijana Radaković, and I am conducting research as part of my thesis at the Università Politecnica delle Marche, Facoltà di Economia "Giorgio Fuà", Ancona. The supervisor is Dr. Erblin Berisha, an assistant professor at the Università Politecnica delle Marche and the Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) of Politecnico di Torino, Italy.

The title of my dissertation is ‘Cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian Region: An Analysis of the ADRION 2014-2020 Programme’. This questionnaire aims to understand the cooperation environment in the Adriatic-Ionian region by analysing the participation in the ADRION 2014-2020 programme, looking only at projects related to the environment field. You have been selected for participation because you have already been involved in these projects. Your insights will help identify key success factors and challenges in this cooperation, providing valuable lessons for future projects.

The data gathered will be used solely for the purposes of this thesis and subsequent scientific publications. Personal data will be managed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) - Regulation (EU) 2016/679).

For additional information, please contact me: Ilijana Radaković,
radakovic.ilijana2109@gmail.com

Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Ilijana Radaković“

Cooperation Adriatic Ionian Region

This survey supports a thesis on cooperation experiences in the Adriatic Ionian Region, focusing on the ADRION 2014-2020 programme. The goal is to gather insights on the effectiveness, satisfaction, and challenges of this cooperation to enhance future initiatives and advise policymakers. Your participation is vital for identifying key success factors and proposing strategies to improve collaboration.

Your feedback will help shape recommendation for future projects and policies in the region.

The questionnaire is structured into four main parts:

I. Cooperation experiences: Assessing your participation frequency, effectiveness, and satisfaction with the ADRION 2014-2020 calls.

II. Drivers of cooperation: Identifying the main factors that have facilitated successful cooperation, such as shared goals, trust, communication, conflict resolution, innovation, financial management, and sustainability.

III. Cooperation impediments: Looking into possible roadblocks to collaboration and suggesting ways to improve community involvement, capacity building, and cooperation.

IV. Factors that can further enhance cooperation: Exploring structures and strategies to improve coordination, build capacity, and engage communities more effectively.

Your honest and detailed responses are highly appreciated.

1. Frequency

In general terms, how frequently have you applied to the ADRION 2014-2020 calls?

- Rarely: Our participation has not been constant but rather sporadic.
- Moderately: We have been involved in a few calls.
- Constantly: We have been involved in the majority of the calls.

2. Efficacy

What makes your participation effective (the most) according to your experiences participating in the ADRION 2014-2020?

- Perseverance: We have never given up.
- The progressive understanding of the call logic and parameters.
- The quality of the network and coordination.

3. Satisfaction

How can you assess your general satisfaction participating in the ADRION 2014-2020?

Not satisfied
1
2
3
4
5
Highly satisfied

1. Shared goals and objectives

How do you align your goals and objectives for successful cooperation?

- By developing joint action plans with clearly defined goals and timelines.
- Through collaborative visioning sessions and strategic planning at the start of the project.
- By ensuring all parties have a shared understanding of the project's objectives through regular orientation meetings.
- Through continuous feedback loops and periodic goal adjustments as needed, typically during monthly review meetings.

2. Trust, reliability and effective communication

How do you build trust, reliability, and ensure effective communication in cooperation efforts?

- By consistently meeting agreed-upon deadlines and commitments, and holding monthly online meetings and workshops.
- Through transparent sharing of information and data, and utilising digital communication platforms for real-time updates.
- By regularly updating partners on progress and challenges, and establishing weekly communication protocols.

3. Conflict resolution

How do you handle conflicts that arise during projects?

- Through mediated negotiations facilitated by neutral third parties.
- By establishing clear conflict resolution mechanisms within agreements.
- Leveraging long-standing relationships to navigate disputes.

4. Innovation and continuous improvement

How do you foster innovation and continuous improvement in your cooperation efforts?

- By encouraging experimentation and pilot projects.
- Hosting innovation challenges and competitions.
- Regularly reviewing and updating strategies based on new insights.

1. Behavior

What do you think represents the hidden factor of cooperation?

- The lack of trust.
- The lack of cooperation strategy
- The lack of a cohesive network

2. Resources

What do you consider the most significant resource-related impediment to cooperation?

- Insufficient funding
- Inadequate access to necessary technology or infrastructure
- Limited human resources and expertise

3. Administrative and bureaucratic challenges

Which administrative or bureaucratic issues have most impacted your cooperation efforts?

- Complex and time-consuming application processes
- Strict regulatory and reporting requirements
- Delays in decision-making and fund disbursement

1. Effective coordination and governance

What structures can help improve coordination among project partners

- Create a steering committee with members from all partner organisations.
- Hold regular meetings to discuss progress and solve issues.
- Form working groups for specific project tasks.
- Use a central system to track tasks and deadlines.
- Designate a project coordinator to oversee and manage collaboration efforts.
- Implement a shared online workspace for document sharing and communication.
- Establish clear roles and responsibilities for each partner organisation.
- Develop a standardised reporting framework to monitor project milestones and outcomes.

2. Capacity building and training

How can you build skills and capacity among partners?

- Organise workshops and training sessions on key topics.
- Arrange visits to successful projects for learning.
- Provide online courses and resources.
- Set up mentorship programs with experienced partners.

3. Community engagement and stakeholder involvement

How can you effectively involve the community in your projects?

- Host meetings to get feedback from local residents.
- Run awareness campaigns through social media and local events.
- Create advisory boards with community representatives for ongoing input.

4. Open-Ended Question

At the end of the questionnaire, please take a moment to share your thoughts and opinions about the cooperation in the Adriatic Ionian Region. What do you believe are the most significant achievements and challenges, and what improvements would you suggest for future collaborations?

APPENDIX 2: Structured Interview questions for key actors

1. *Can you describe your involvement in transnational projects in the Adriatic-Ionian region?*
2. *What are the most significant achievements during the program period?*
3. *What are the main challenges in fostering collaboration between actors (from different countries)?*
4. *How has the EU programming framework influenced the implementation and outcomes?*
5. *What would you recommend, since you've been involved in several projects/ what do you do in your daily working life to achieve a good collaboration with other institutions?*

APPENDIX 3: Structured Interview questions for experts

- 1. What role does the AIC Forum play in fostering transnational and cross-border cooperation within the region?*
- 2. What are the key challenges the AIC Forum faces in enhancing regional cooperation?*
- 3. Could you share a successful example of cooperation facilitated by the AIC Forum that could inspire similar efforts?*
- 4. How does the AIC Forum align its activities with the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR)?*
- 5. In your view, what more could be done to enhance cross-border cooperation in the region?*
- 6. Do you have any specific recommendations for improving cooperation frameworks in the region based on your experiences?*