ArtCo 2025 – The Art of Cooperation
Budapest, 2–3 December 2025

Workshop #4: Interreg and accession countries, supporting integration

The panel discussion highlighted the **strategic role of Interreg** in preparing EU accession countries for future participation in cohesion policy and the management of EU funds. Bringing together representatives from the European Commission (DG REGIO), Interreg program authorities, technical assistance providers, and accession countries, the session explored how Interreg functions as a bridge between pre-accession assistance and full EU membership. The panel emphasized that Interreg is unique among EU instruments in allowing candidate countries to participate in **shared management on an equal footing with Member States**, making it a practical laboratory for learning EU cohesion policy rules in real operational settings.

A central focus was the **"Capacity for Cohesion" initiative**, launched by DG REGIO, implemented by Particip and SZPO, which supports Moldova, Ukraine, North Macedonia, and Albania through tailored trainings, peer-to-peer study visits, and exposure to the full program lifecycle. These activities help close capacity gaps, strengthen institutions, and build readiness for managing future cohesion funds. Although Interreg represents a relatively small share of the EU budget, speakers underlined its **outsized institution-building impact**, particularly through financing agreements, audits, control systems, and preventive mechanisms that align accession countries with cohesion policy standards.

The discussion further framed Interreg as an **early safeguard and stress test** for future cohesion policy rather than merely an enlargement tool. The Hungary–Serbia Interreg IPA Programme was presented as a strong example of long-term institutional learning, where Serbian authorities progressively modeled and adapted key structures—such as managing authorities, control systems, monitoring committees, and partnership arrangements—based on Hungarian practice. Over time, this led to stronger national ownership, improved stakeholder involvement, and increased readiness to assume more complex program management responsibilities.

From the accession-country perspective, speakers acknowledged the **significant human and administrative challenges** of capacity building, especially where EU-related tasks are carried out alongside regular public administration duties. Nevertheless, sustained participation in Interreg has resulted in notable improvements in institutional maturity, technical expertise, and organizational confidence. Video messages from Albania, Serbia, and Moldova reinforced these findings, while also identifying remaining gaps in strategic planning, project maturity, procurement, IT systems, and institutional stability. A shared message emerged: capacity building must be **practical, tailored, and closely aligned with cohesion policy rules**, supported by mentoring, simulations, and pilot experiences.

Panelists consistently highlighted the value of **study visits, immersive learning, and peer exchange**, noting that these formats not only benefit accession countries but also broaden the perspectives of trainers, program managers, and Commission staff. A

particularly illustrative example was a study visit on control systems, which helped shift controllers' mindsets from a punitive role toward a more supportive, preventive approach that balances compliance with partnership and trust.

While the **impact of capacity building is difficult to measure quantitatively**, participants agreed that it becomes visible over time through better program performance: faster procedures, fewer errors and financial corrections, improved audits, and higher-quality projects. A major risk identified was the **loss of institutional knowledge** due to staff turnover or political change, underscoring the need for politically independent, expertise-based structures, stable teams, and deliberate knowledge-retention strategies. Looking ahead, the panel concluded that future efforts should focus on strengthening administrative capacity, expanding peer learning and gradual integration mechanisms, and enabling countries to take greater ownership of capacity building through training-of-trainers approaches. Overall, Interreg was reaffirmed as a vital platform for sustainable learning, cooperation, and preparedness on the path to EU membership.