

Capacity-building for the Implementation of Interreg and Cohesion Policy

Final Report

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Prepared by a Particip-led consortium, in partnership with SZPO:



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Capacity-building for the Implementation of Interreg and Cohesion Policy

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
AFCOS	Anti-Fraud Coordination Service
C4C	Capacity-building for the Implementation of Interreg and Cohesion Policy
CBC	Cross-Border Cooperation
CBIB+	Cross-Border Institution building (Phase +)
C&F	Control and fight against fraud
DG REGIO	Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
EU	European Union
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
JS	Joint Secretariat
MA	Managing Authority
NA	National Authority
NEXT	Interreg NEXT cross-border cooperation programmes on EU external borders
PM	Programme Management
SASPAC	State Agency for Strategic Programming
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SZPO	Széchenyi Programme Office
TESIM	Facility for the ENI CBC and Interreg NEXT programmes on EU external borders with the neighbouring partner countries

Executive summary

The **Capacity-building for the Implementation of Interreg and Cohesion Policy (C4C)** project was designed to support Albania, North Macedonia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine, in strengthening their capacity to manage European Union (EU) funds, specifically under cohesion policy and the Interreg framework.

Key objectives and achievements

Training: The project targeted staff from national administrations across Interreg and Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) III programmes. The training was tailored to each country's needs, providing both in-person and online sessions that focused on different areas, such as programme management throughout the whole cycle, control systems, audit and fight against fraud and corruption. The goal was to enhance the skills of staff at both central and local/regional levels for effective participation in, and implementation of cohesion policy after accession.

Training sessions reached a total of 223 participants. The assessment of the trainings indicated a high level of satisfaction, with most trainees rating the sessions as “**very useful**”. The combination of theoretical content, group exercises, and real-life case studies was particularly appreciated, with participants emphasising the importance of practical application. In addition to the in-person trainings in July and August 2025, online sessions were delivered between December 2025 and January 2026, with a focus on programme evaluation, and knowledge management and institutional learning.

Study Visits: Participants gained practical experience through study visits to selected EU Member States. These visits were designed to expose participants to good practices and provide them with real-world examples of managing and controlling EU-funded Interreg programmes, while also addressing specific national needs and challenges. The study visits covered functions of all programme bodies, such as management of calls for proposals, contracting, reporting, setting up IT management systems, management of Technical Assistance funds, communication and capitalisation, control and audit, anti-fraud strategies, anti-fraud, data mining and other essential areas related to programme management.

A total of five study visits were delivered, two in Budapest and one in Vienna/Graz in October and November 2025, and one in Brussels/Lille, and one in Madrid in January 2026, collectively for a total of **69 participants**. Similarly to the in-country trainings, the overall satisfaction of the study visits was evaluated as “**very useful**”.

Three wrap-up sessions were organised, with 22 representatives from Ukraine, North Macedonia and the Republic of Moldova, aiming at getting an overall feedback from the national authorities on the relevance of the capacity building scheme and identifying potential future needs. EC staff participated in the wrap-up sessions with Ukraine (1 representative from DG REGIO) and North Macedonia (2 representatives from DG REGIO).

Key insights

Common capacity gaps: Despite differences in the countries' institutional maturity, shared capacity-building needs were identified, particularly in programme management, control, fraud prevention and detection, and legal compliance.

Interactive learning: Participants found the role-playing exercises and group discussions highly valuable, confirming, and reinforcing, the need for potential future interventions to be hands-on and applied, with increased emphasis on practical tools and real-life examples from EU Member States.

Institutional challenges: A common need for better coordination among in-country institutions and clearer reporting lines for irregularities in the targeted countries was identified.

Cross-border learning: The study visits played a critical role in addressing the demand for more practical, peer-to-peer exchanges. The visits offered insights into good practices and operational tools from EU Member States, directly applicable to the target countries.

1. Overview

C4C aimed to contribute to the preparation of four candidate countries - Albania, North Macedonia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine - for EU membership, in particular on Chapter 22 (Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments). It formally commenced on February 2, 2025 for a duration of 12 months.

In line with the strategy defined in the project's **Technical Tender** submitted as part of the contract bid, the **Inception Report** confirmed the approaches to address the identified capacity gaps in the target countries. This was developed based on the confirmation and fine-tuning of learning needs analysis, an inventory of existing capacity-building initiatives, and the preliminary design of training events and study visits.

There were no preceding contracts targeting all four countries together; this is a standalone initiative with a clear focus on short-term support for the preparation of the four EU accession countries for effective participation in cohesion policy implementation, particularly through Interreg programmes, but it is building on a wealth of knowledge from other projects and activities, such as the contract Facility for the ENI CBC and Interreg NEXT programmes on EU external borders with the neighbouring partner countries (**TESIM**), the Cross-Border Institution Building (**CBIB+**) and **Interact**.

A key element of the project's success has been the active engagement of **DG REGIO** and the support in the inception/mapping activities by the **EU Delegations** by ensuring the participation of the right stakeholders in each country. Their support has been crucial in aligning the project's objectives with the local context, ensuring the relevance and impact of the capacity-building efforts.

1.1. Policy context

EU cohesion policy and Enlargement

EU cohesion policy is a cornerstone of EU integration, aimed at reducing economic, social, and territorial disparities across Member States through shared management of multi-annual programmes. It plays a vital role in achieving the EU's overarching goal of economic convergence, by supporting less-developed regions and ensuring balanced development across the EU.

For candidate countries, cohesion policy offers more than just financial assistance, it provides access to the **Interreg programmes**, which foster cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation. These programmes facilitate integration by promoting regional cooperation, mutual learning, and the alignment of national strategies with EU priorities. Candidate countries' participation in these programmes is essential for their preparation for EU membership, as it enhances their governance, financial management, and institutional capacities, all of which are critical components of the EU accession process. These programmes are the only opportunity for these countries to experience the shared management mode, which is at the core of the mainstream funds available only after accession.

Preparing candidate countries

Cohesion policy plays a central role in preparing candidate countries for EU integration, particularly under **Chapter 22** (Regional Policy), which directly concerns the effective management and implementation of EU funds. This chapter is crucial during the accession process, as it requires countries to demonstrate their ability to manage EU funds in line with EU standards in shared management mode.

For Albania, North Macedonia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine, building administrative and technical capacities to effectively manage these funds is a long-term challenge. While Albania and North Macedonia, as long-standing candidates, need to continue improving their institutional frameworks to absorb and manage EU funds,

Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, as newer candidates, require foundational support in areas such as financial management, regulatory compliance, and programme development and implementation.

This project is designed to help these countries strengthen their institutional capacity to manage EU funds, ensuring that by the time they reach the final stages of EU accession, they will have developed robust frameworks capable of effectively implementing cohesion policy.

Interreg and IPA CBC Programmes

The four target countries are actively engaged in a range of **Interreg** and **IPA CBC** programmes, which play a key role in regional development and EU integration. These programmes, which all strands, that is, cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation, allow the countries to work alongside EU Member States on shared goals and common challenges. The participation in Interreg programmes is done on equal footing with EU Member States, with equal responsibilities, except the assumption of the role of Managing Authority and Audit Authority. That's why the project, on top of reinforcing capacities for their current roles and responsibilities, made a big emphasis in the contributing to the understanding of the competences needed for these two future roles, which they will need to assume for mainstream funds.

Each of the target countries has designated **National Authorities (NAs)** responsible for programme coordination. These authorities oversee financial controls, audits, and overall programme management in alignment with EU funding mechanisms as stipulated in the financing agreements signed between the EC and them for each programme. For example, in Albania, the State Agency for Strategic Programming (SASPAC) leads coordination of the Interreg IPA CBC programmes, while in North Macedonia, the Ministry of Local Self-Government coordinates the Interreg IPA CBC initiatives. Similarly, the State Chancellery in the Republic of Moldova and the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, as national authorities, work closely with EU bodies to ensure successful implementation of projects in their countries, compliance with EU standards and improve governance structures.

By participating in these programmes, the target countries gain valuable experience in the management and implementation of EU-funded programmes and projects, strengthening their institutional capacities in preparation for full EU membership.

1.2. Project context

The overall objective of the project was to **prepare candidate countries for implementing cohesion policy in the lead-up to and upon accession**, particularly in the areas of governance, financial management, and institutional capacity - key elements they must demonstrate competence in to fulfil the requirements of **Chapter 22** (Regional Policy).

The project's specific objectives were:

1. **Training activities:** Reinforced capacities for proactive participation in all stages of EU-funded programme lifecycles.
2. **Study visits:** Increased skills for better participation in existing and future programmes through short-term visits to EU Member States hosting managing and audit authorities.

Key considerations for the project included addressing institutional capacity gaps, strengthening coordination mechanisms, mitigating challenges related to staff turnover, and ensuring alignment with ongoing capacity-building initiatives. The tailored approach for each country focused on their specific needs and leveraged their existing experience with IPA funds, ENI CBC, and Interreg programmes.

1.3. Implementation overview

1.3.1. Inception phase

During the inception phase, the activities outlined in the technical tender were successfully implemented. Key accomplishments included:

- **Project mobilisation:** The core team was mobilised immediately after the contract was signed, with coordination and communication lines established.
- **Coordination meetings:** Initial meetings with the Project Director and DG REGIO took place in the first week to structure the inception phase. A meeting with the Lead Training Expert and the Training Coordinator was held on 14 February 2025.
- **Engagement with EU Delegations:** Meetings were conducted with the EU Delegations in the target countries to introduce the project, discuss ongoing initiatives, and identify synergies. Relevant ongoing capacity-building efforts were noted, including those from the Polish Aid in the Republic of Moldova, the Ukraine - Local Empowerment, Accountability and Development Programme (EU-LEAD) in Ukraine, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) in North Macedonia.
- **Project branding:** A project logo was developed for DG REGIO's approval to establish a distinct identity and avoid confusion with other initiatives.



The results of Task 1, including the updated learning needs and initial training designs, were captured in the **Inception Report (D1)**, submitted on **3 April 2025**.

1.3.2. Implementation phase

The project was structured around four key tasks, each further divided into specific sub-tasks and associated milestones. The tasks were designed to ensure a systematic approach to capacity building in the participating countries. Each task followed a clear progression with deliverables that align with the reporting requirements outlined in the Tender Specifications.

Task 1 - Confirm and update learning needs

	Task	Milestones	Deliverables (D)
Task 1 Confirm and update learning needs	<p>1.1 – Identification of stakeholders and target groups</p> <p>1.2 – Confirmation and finetuning of identified needs</p> <p>1.3 – Identification of ongoing support for capacity building</p> <p>1.4 – Preliminary design of the trainings</p> <p>1.5 – Initial ideas for the study visits</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews/Surveys • Needs analysis • Inventory of other support • Training package outline and tools • Study visits indicative planning and content 	<p>D2: 1st Interim Report presenting the results of Task 1</p>

Task 1 focused on confirming and refining the learning needs of the target groups in each country. Activities included:

- **Identification of stakeholders and target groups:** Initial interviews with national authorities responsible for Interreg in each country were conducted, and surveys were distributed to gather feedback on capacity-building needs. The survey focused on various stages of the programme cycle, from programming to closure.

- **Needs analysis:** The survey responses were analysed to identify gaps in knowledge and skills, particularly in programme management, control, and fraud prevention. The findings revealed areas where the countries needed further support, such as understanding the legal framework, managing irregularities, and improving programme monitoring.
- **Inventory of ongoing support:** A comprehensive inventory of existing capacity-building initiatives was compiled, including support from TESIM, CBIB+, Interact, and other EU-funded projects. This helped identify overlaps and areas where the project could complement existing efforts.
- **Preliminary design of trainings and study visits:** Based on the needs analysis and ongoing support, the project team developed an initial framework for the training activities and study visits, outlining key topics and country-specific content. The proposed calendar for these activities was also drafted.

The results of Task 1, including the survey data, needs analysis, and preliminary design of the training and study visits, were documented in the **1st Interim Report (D2)**, submitted on **20 May 2025**.

Task 2 - Design and delivery of training events

	Task	Milestones	Deliverables (D)
Task 2 Design and delivery of training events	2.1 – Design of the tailored approach for each country 2.2 – Final design each training event 2.3 – Mobilisation of trainers 2.4 – Development of training materials 2.5 – Selection of participants in training events 2.6 – Preparation of logistics 2.7 – Delivery of training events 2.8 – Engagement and feed-back mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall training package • 8 in-person trainings • 8 online trainings • Feedback reports 	D3: 2nd Interim Report presenting results of Task 2 and proposal for Task 3

Task 2 focused on designing and delivering tailored training events for the four countries. The task involved several key activities, from developing country-specific training agendas to delivering in-person training and gathering feedback for future improvements.

- **Design of the tailored approach:** Based on consultations with national authorities and the results of surveys conducted in the inception phase, customised agendas were developed for each country. These included both common themes (such as programme management and control systems) and country-specific topics (e.g., State aid in the Republic of Moldova, procurement by beneficiaries in North Macedonia).
- **Mobilisation of trainers:** The project mobilised a team of 11 expert trainers, all with extensive experience in programme management, control systems, and capacity-building. These trainers contributed to the development and delivery of training materials, ensuring both technical depth and capacity-building expertise.
- **Development of training materials:** Comprehensive materials were created for each session, incorporating PowerPoint presentations, practical exercises, and group activities. The materials were tailored to address each country's unique challenges, and underwent rigorous quality control to ensure they were suitable for the target audience.
- **Selection of participants:** Participants were selected by national authorities based on specific criteria, ensuring that relevant stakeholders from across the institutions were involved. A total of 278 trainees attended both the in-person and online events,

with a total of 223 in the eight in-person events held in the four countries and 55 in the two online events.

- **Logistics and delivery:** Training sessions took place in Tirana, Chişinău, Skopje, and Kyiv between July and August 2025. In-person events were complemented by online sessions. The training events used a mix of theoretical content and practical, interactive exercises, including role-playing and group work, which were well-received by participants.
- **Feedback and evaluation:** Feedback gathered from participants indicated a high level of satisfaction, with 80% of respondents rating the sessions as "very useful". Key areas for improvement included incorporating more practical exercises and real-life examples, which will be addressed in the upcoming study visits.

The results of Task 2, including training activities and participant feedback, were documented in **D3: 2nd Interim Report**, submitted on **25 September 2025**, along with a proposal for Task 3, which focuses on the organisation of study visits.

The first online session was delivered on 16 December 2025 on **programme evaluation**, followed by another on 27 January 2026 focusing on **institutional learning and knowledge management**.

Task 3 - Organise the study visits

	Task	Milestones	Deliverables (D)
Task 3 Organise the study visits	<p>3.1 – Agreements with hosting authorities on content, calendar and agendas</p> <p>3.2 – Selection of participants</p> <p>3.3 – Mobilisation of experts</p> <p>3.4 – Logistics for the trips</p> <p>3.5 – Execution of the study visits</p> <p>3.6 – Post-visit reporting and knowledge sharing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 study visit agendas • 5 study visits • 5 study visit reports • 4 online wrap-up events 	-

Task 3 focused on the organisation and execution of five study visits aimed at building capacity through hands-on experience in Member States and peer-to-peer exchanges with the colleagues of the other countries. The following activities were carried out:

- **Agreements with hosting authorities:** Agreements were established with the hosting authorities in the EU Member States for each study visit. These included discussions on the content, calendar, and agendas of the visits. The content was tailored to match the specific needs of the participants, ensuring that each visit provided practical insights into EU programme management and good practices.
- **Selection of participants:** Participants were nominated by the designated contact points in each target country. The project team reviewed the nominations and coordinated with DG REGIO to ensure that the selected participants met the criteria. This process ensured the involvement of the right stakeholders in each event.
- **Mobilisation of experts:** At least two experts were mobilised for each study visit to support its delivery. These experts provided guidance, facilitated discussions, and shared practical experiences, ensuring that the visits were informative and beneficial for the participants. The expert team was carefully selected based on their experience and knowledge of Interreg and cohesion policy frameworks and of the hosting institutions.

- **Logistics for the trips:** After confirmation of participants by DG REGIO, the project team took over the logistics for the study visits. This included booking flights, arranging accommodations, and organising related catering. The team ensured smooth coordination and communication with participants, providing them with all necessary information and support prior to the visits.
- **Execution of the study visits:** Three study visits were successfully executed to date:
 1. **Study Visit 1 (Hungary):** 6-10 October 2025 for National Controllers.
 2. **Study Visit 2 (Hungary):** 13-17 October 2025 for National Authorities and Joint Secretariat staff.
 3. **Study Visit 3 (Austria-Slovenia):** 17-21 November 2025 for Joint Secretariats, Branch Offices, and National Contact/Info Points on information/communication.
 4. **Study Visit 4 (Belgium-France):** 12-16 January 2026 for members of the Monitoring Committees and National Authorities.
 5. **Study Visit 5 (Spain):** 19-23 January 2026, focusing on Audit and Anti-fraud, for members of Groups of Auditors and staff from the Anti-Fraud Coordination Services (AFCOS).

In total, five study visits were conducted, with comprehensive agendas and tailored content to support capacity-building and enhance participants' understanding of EU-funded programme management (**Annex 1 – Study visits reports**).

Furthermore, three¹ online wrap-up sessions were conducted, aiming at supporting the consolidation of knowledge and providing further qualitative feedback to the C4C team on the overall initiative before the project's closure (For the results of these sessions, see section 2.3 in the present report).

Task 4 - Final Report

	Task	Milestones	Deliverables (D)
Task 4 Final Report	4.1 – Development of the draft Training Handbook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training Handbook • Final Report 	D4: <i>Draft Final Report</i> presenting the results of Tasks 1, 2 and 3 and outlining the proposed <i>Training Handbook</i> D5: Final Report presenting the results of all Tasks and the final Training Handbook.
	4.2 – Preparation of the draft Final Report		
	4.3 – Presentation of the draft handbook and report		
	4.4 – Management of feedback		
	4.5 – Finalisation of handbook and report		
	4.6 – Administrative closure of the project		

Task 4 focused on the development and submission of the final deliverables, including the Training Handbook and the Final Report.

- **Development of the Draft Training Handbook:** The project team developed the outline for the Training Handbook, with an advanced version already submitted alongside the draft final report for DG REGIO's initial feedback in December 2025. The team completed the handbook in January 2026 based on the comments received and the addition of the materials of the events delivered in January 2026, with the final version submitted at the end of the project.
- **Preparation of the Draft Final Report:** This document represented the culmination of activities carried out until November 2025 and provided an update on upcoming

¹ The fourth session, targeting Albania, did not take place due to the lack of response to the invitation and multiple reminders by the Contractor and the actions of DG REGIO/the EU Delegation to Albania.

events in December 2025 and January 2026. It outlined the key achievements and milestones from Tasks 1, 2, and 3.

- **Presentation of the Draft Report and Handbook:** A presentation of the draft report took place on 17 December 2025, where the team will presented key findings and discussed the progress of the project (*Annex 2 – Presentation of the Draft Final Report*).
- **Management of feedback:** The project team collected and managed feedback on the draft report and handbook. Based on the feedback, necessary revisions weremade to finalize both the report and the handbook after all activities were completed.
- **Finalisation of Handbook and Report:** Following feedback from DG REGIO, the final report and training handbook were completed and submitted as part of the administrative closure (*Annex 3 – Training Handbook*).

2. Key insights from delivery

This section presents the key insights identified by the project team during the delivery of the training programme. At the end of every training course, the trainers prepared a short training report covering the main elements of the course, from the preparation through to delivery. These reports provide a snapshot of the main issues and challenges that were encountered and insights and suggestions on how training on Interreg and cohesion could be enhanced further. The lessons learned and recommendations contained within the training reports (as well as additional insights of the training team) have been integrated into Section 3 of this report.

Highlights from the delivery of the capacity building events:

- Training events were well attended, with a good selection of participants;
- The training approach and generally good experience and capacity of participants ensured engaged and interactive sessions;
- The mix of presentations, exercises, role playing and plenary discussions enabled participants to reach a good understanding of the terminology and key elements underpinning Interreg/cohesion interventions;
- The attendance by EU Delegation staff member in North Macedonia gave an added dimension to the training and highlighted the importance of having a shared understanding of the key concepts with the other participants in the process;
- The training team was experienced and flexible: the trainers adjusted quickly to the training needs of the participants during delivery;
- The study visits were highly appreciated by the participants, as they provided relevant insights on how Member States manage EU funds, as well as different models applied. While the training events provided the necessary basic knowledge on shared management, the study visits provided insights on how to improve the institutional framework in the countries.
- The timing of the course was applied flexibly to allow the participants sufficient time to grasp the key concepts and accommodate local specificities.

2.1. Target group

Participants from the national authorities were in nearly all cases from the relevant managerial and sectoral authorities as requested by DG REGIO. This obviously helped in placing the training materials and related discussions into the local context, by taking into account the practical experience of the participants and, at the same time, the lack of knowledge of the global context of the cohesion policy. Their capacity to understand the training concepts varied, but was overall good enough to allow them to participate in the course. Overall, they also handled working in English well (in the latter case, some terminology was translated on the spot into Ukrainian to help the participants fully understand the main concepts used in the workshop).

As can be seen from the section below the number of trainees that participated in the training events was good and largely in line with expectations. The numbers of attendees in in-person trainings did not tend to drop over the second day-part of the training, which the project team believes the the length of the course overall was ideal as well as there was high interest, but also the availability from the trainees side to attend all sessions.

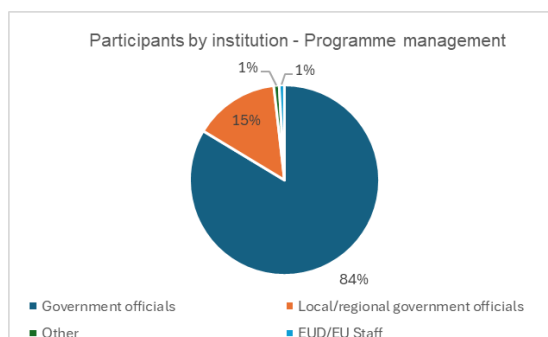
2.1.1. Training events

The distribution of participants by country was as follows:

Capacity-building for the Implementation of Interreg and Cohesion Policy

Training event	Albania	Republic of Moldova	North Macedonia	Ukraine	Total
In-person training events					
Programme management	25	38	26	21	110
Control & fight against fraud	22	29	34	28	113
Online training events					
Evaluation	3	7	2	10	22
Knowledge management & institutional memory	11	6	7	9	33

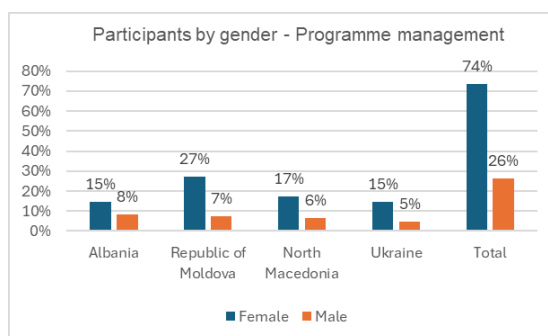
The distribution of participants for all in-country trainings by institution and gender was as follows:



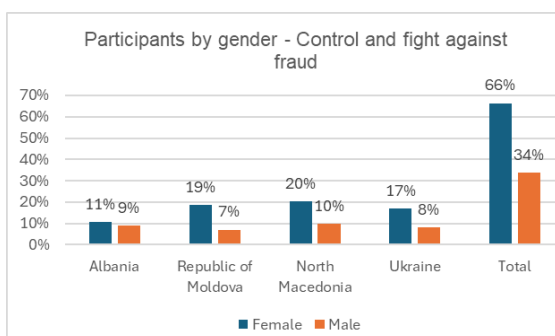
Participants by institution – Programme Management



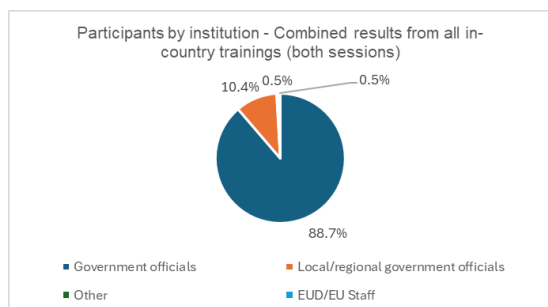
Participants by institution – Control and Fight Against Fraud



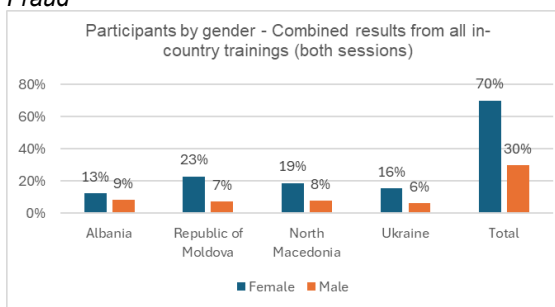
Participants by gender – Programme Management



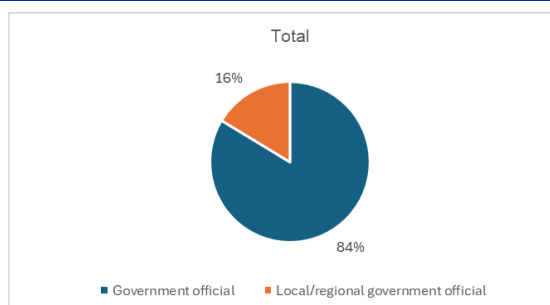
Participants by gender – Control and Fight Against Fraud



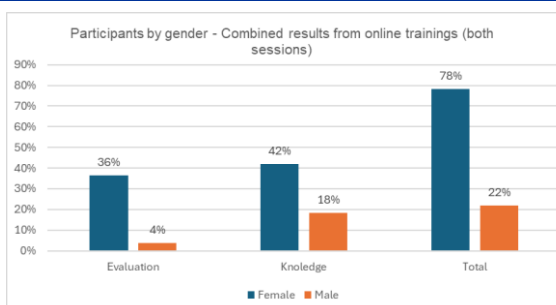
Participants by institution – Combined results from all in-country trainings (both sessions).



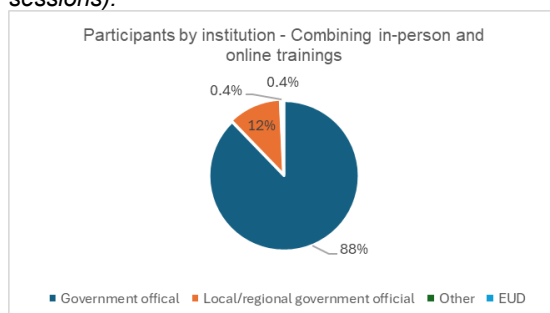
Participants by gender – Combined results from all in-country trainings (both sessions)



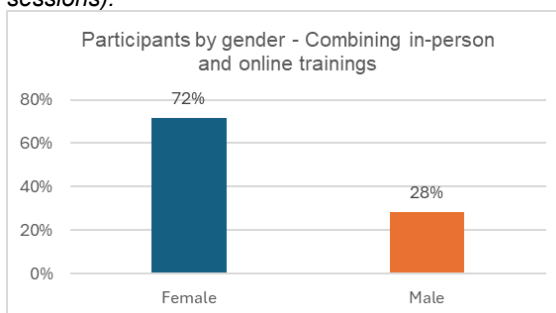
Participants by institution – Online trainings (both sessions).



Participants by gender – Online trainings (both sessions).



Participants by institution – Combining in-person and online trainings.



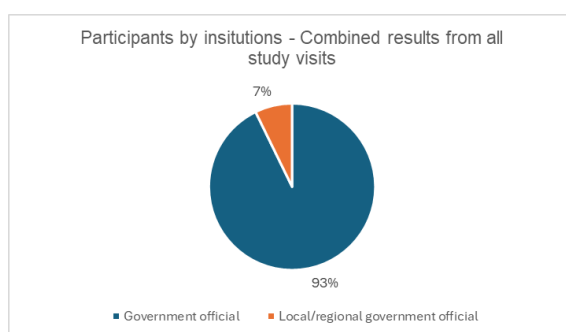
Participants by gender – Combining in-person and online trainings.

2.1.2. Study visits

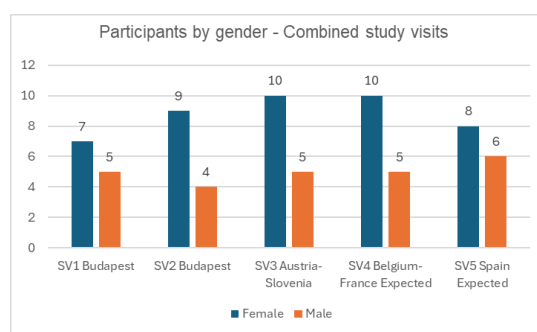
The distribution of participants by study visit was as follows²:

Study Visit 1 (Budapest)	Study Visit 2 (Budapest)	Study Visit 3 (Vienna-Graz)	Study Visit 4 (Brussels-Lille)	Study Visit 5 (Madrid)	Total
12	13	15	15	14	69

The distribution of participants by institution was as follows:



Participants by institution - Combined study visits



Participants by gender - Combined study visits

2.2. Feedback from evaluation forms

2.2.1. Training events

A total of 143 trainees (64% of participants) completed the evaluation forms for all in-country training sessions. Of these, 79% rated the training events as **very useful**, while

² Note: Invitations were issued to more than 70 participants. Logistical arrangements were ultimately made for 70 participants nominated by the national authorities of the partner countries; however, a last-minute cancellation by one participant from North Macedonia for Study Visit 2 (Budapest) reduced the final number of participants to 69.

21% rated them as **useful**. No participants considered the training to be **not useful**. Detailed scores are presented in the country-specific sections, with the aggregated results summarised below:

Global scoring	Albania		Republic of Moldova		North Macedonia		Ukraine		Total
	PM	C&F	PM	C&F	PM	C&F	PM	C&F	
Very useful	9	5	22	16	16	16	12	17	113
Useful	6	2	9	1	2	3	1	6	30
Not useful	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

2.2.2. Online trainings

The table below presents the scoring of the online trainings, based on participants' overall assessments. It summarises how each module was rated in terms of perceived usefulness across all respondents.

Global scoring/ Training	Very useful	Useful	Not useful
Evaluation	10	0	0
Knowledge management & institutional memory	6	3	0

2.2.3. Study visits

A total of 66 participants (95% of the total of the participants) provided feedback on the study visits. Overall, the satisfaction rates were very positive, with 94% of respondents rating the study visits as **very useful**. 6% found the study visits to be **useful**, and, as with the in-country trainings, no participants indicated that any of the study visits were **not useful**. A detailed overview of each study visit and the aggregated results are provided in the table below.

Global scoring	Study Visit 1 (Budapest)	Study Visit 2 (Budapest)	Study Visit 3 (Vienna-Graz)	Study Visit 4 (Brussels-Lille)	Study Visit 5 (Madrid)	Total
Very useful	12	10	14	13	13	62
Useful	0	1	1	2	0	4
Not useful	0	0	0	0	0	0

2.3. Feedback from the wrap-up sessions

The three wrap-up sessions started with a short reminder of the C4C activities during the 12 months of duration, continued with a presentation of the Training Handbook as main tool for sustainability of the project results and finalised with an open discussion on three aspects:

- An overall assessment of the capacity building events, including how effective they were in meeting expectations and needs;

- How relevant was the content of C4C events to the daily work of the participants;
- Key areas for future capacity building activities.

2.3.1. Overall assessment

All participants stated that the overall assessment is very positive, as the C4C scheme clearly met the expectations and:

- Provided knowledge on the big picture of cohesion policy;
- Combined theory and practice with not only a team of expert trainers but also real practitioners in Member States;
- Enhanced the network of contacts both in Member States and in accession countries;
- Improved the skills of the teams of the national bodies;
- Provided timely leverage for internal discussions within their organisations on methodologies, processes And tools that can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of managing their Interreg programmes.

2.3.2. Relevance on daily work

C4C provided insights on the tasks that are part of the daily work of the participants across the domains of responsibility of national authorities in Interreg. Therefore, as a direct result of C4C, all countries are designing or putting in place some changes, such as:

- Enhanced capacity to deliver awareness-raising to the decision-makers at country level;
- Modifications of the current national control system and development of new models for the next programming period, such as shifting from decentralised to centralised;
- Input and insights on how to provide better support for applicants and beneficiaries and foster the participation of newcomers;
- Input and insights on how to design and implement IT systems at national level supporting the proper implementation of all national tasks related to programme implementation (such as contracting and payment of co-financing, related financial transactions);
- More in-depth knowledge to prevent and detect irregularities in areas such as eligibility of expenditure, procurement or conflict of interest;
- Design of co-financing schemes at national level to complement EU funds and enhance the financial capacity of the project beneficiaries;
- Better understanding on the potential use of technical assistance funds.

Participants also highly appreciated the insights on programming and negotiation skills, which is expected to result in a more active engagement in the upcoming programming exercise for the 2028-2034 period.

2.3.3. Key areas for future capacity building

Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova expressed some specific requests, which may be covered by the TESIM team in relation to Interreg NEXT programmes, and pointed to the absence of specific support for the other programmes (Danube, Urbact and Interreg Europe). North Macedonia also expressed the need of ongoing C4C-like support in the near future.

Some areas of additional support mentioned in the wrap-up sessions were:

- Extending the capacity building and in particular the possibility to participate in study visits to more technicians of the national bodies or staff which was not able to participate in the in-person trainings;
- Design or revision of the institutional and legal framework in view of the negotiations for Chapter 22, including better coordination among concerned bodies;
- Information on the new strategic, operational and legal framework for the next programming period 2028-2034;
- Development of adequate mechanisms to ensure the effective application of the Partnership Principle in the current implementation and the upcoming programming exercise;
- Awareness-raising to decision-makers at regional level (Ukraine), perhaps through the organisation of a conference on the future use of mainstream funds;
- Training for regional-based institutions, potential applicants, applicants and project beneficiaries;
- Design and development of procedures and tools for fraud and conflict of interest detection, including effective data mining;
- Establishment or improvement of the risk assessment procedures and tools, currently dependent on the managing authorities;
- Setting up formalised systems for knowledge management and institutional memory;
- Supporting the set-up of a core group of national trainers able to provide capacity building without dependence on specific EU projects;
- Improvement or development of procedures and new pieces of national legislation for the better use of the funds under shared management;
- Consolidation of AFCOS and anti-fraud structures, procedures and tools;
- Improvement or development of own IT systems for programme and project implementation, reporting and monitoring.

2.4. Operational aspects

The overall delivery of the contract went smoothly, with two notable issues:

1. **Discussions with hosting authorities in the EU Member States** took longer than planned due to their **busy schedules** and **unavailability** (some authorities only available in 2026). This resulted in the need to set up two study visits in January 2026.
2. **Communication with some authorities**, particularly in Albania, was at times slow. The team relied on the responsiveness of national contact points, which is natural given the scope of the contract; however, occasional delays were observed in responses to requests (e.g. confirmation of participants' names, feedback on logistical arrangements). In some instances, no response was received from the Albanian institutions. This situation occurred at various points during the contract and had an impact in certain cases, for example when no Albanian representatives participated in the final study visit in Madrid or in the wrap-up sessions. In response to the low level of feedback from the Albanian side, and following consultation and coordination with DG REGIO, the Contractor increased the number of participants from other countries. For instance, during Study Visit 4, where only two representatives from Albania participated, participation from North Macedonia was increased. Similarly, for the study visit in Madrid, and in light of the absence of communication from the Albanian side, the Contractor, in coordination with DG REGIO, invited additional participants from North Macedonia and the Republic of Moldova.

3. Lessons learned

Lessons learned

L1 Needs across countries are highly similar – convergence, not divergence

Despite different administrative realities and maturity of accession process, participants from all four countries consistently expressed **similar capacity-building needs** across the two main thematic areas.

Key shared needs:

- deeper **practical understanding** of shared management in aspects such as monitoring, control and irregularities.
- more **hands-on work**, case studies, and examples from EU Member States.
- clarity on **national control systems**, reporting lines, conflict of interest, and anti-fraud measures.
- structured exposure to **programme implementation practice**, not only rules.

For example, study visit 1 confirmed that the controllers from all four countries engaged with the same needs in skills to be reinforced, e.g. risk-based verifications, handling irregularities, on-the-spot checks, and cooperation with JS/MA.

L2 Institutional challenges are structural and shared across countries

Linked to L1, but in broader terms of the institutional challenges in accession countries, the major shared challenges for the delivery of the capacity building scheme that have been mapped by the C4C can be grouped in five cross-cutting domains:

- uneven levels of experience across participants.
- national control systems still evolving in some countries (Republic of Moldova, North Macedonia, Ukraine).
- unclear or incomplete irregularity reporting chains.
- lack of adequate risk assessment procedures, in particular for the fight against fraud.
- weak use of data mining tools, and lack of IT system supporting programme implementation at national level.
- need for harmonisation between Interreg IPA/NEXT vs IPA CBC frameworks.
- very high interest in learning how *other countries* organise control and quality review.
- demand for clarity in stakeholder coordination (NA-JS-MA-AFCOS-Controllers-other national bodies).

L3 Cross-learning is one of the most valued approaches

The feedback received from participants consistently highlights that **peer-to-peer exchange** and exposure to colleagues in Member States and from accession countries are among the most effective drivers of learning. Participants particularly valued the “**exchange of experience**”, “**networking**”, and “**practical examples**” shared throughout the events.

The study visits received extremely high appreciation for roundtables, discussions with hosting programme bodies in a Member State, and the opportunity to compare institutional models, approaches and solutions.

In fact, there is a strong **common baseline** across the four countries (L1, L2), which reinforces the value of cross-learning among stakeholders. The **approach proposed in the technical offer**, where study visits are organised not by country but by **similar roles and stakeholder target groups across the four countries**, was confirmed as the right one. This method of bringing participants together based on their roles, rather than their country of origin, fostered more relevant and impactful learning, further strengthening initiatives like the C4C.

L4 Learning from each can lead to cross-cooperation

Bringing participants together for study visits does not only lead to **cross-learning** (C3), where participants learn from each other's experiences and challenges, but also fosters **cross-cooperation**, either authorities between the accession countries, or authorities between an EU country and an accession one, that can have additional, unexpected outcomes, after the study visits have concluded.

As learning from EU Member States' authorities has a **networking effect**, this in turn allows participants to, naturally, **share tools, exchange experiences** that go beyond the initial scope of the project. A notable example of this is the cooperation between the authorities in the **Republic of Moldova and Hungary**. After the study visit, authorities began discussing and exchanging approaches and tools, strengthening their bilateral cooperation. This demonstrates the **sustainability** of the cross-cooperation initiated during the study visits and highlights the broader impact of the project in fostering ongoing EU-accession country cooperation.

L5 Training can awaken or speed up accession countries' internal work

Cross-cooperation (L3, L4) does not need to be only across borders. One of the significant indirect outcomes of the C4C training was how it has sparked internal momentum in accession countries, encouraging them to reflect on their existing practices and take swift action to improve. A **first example** of this was the in-country training in the Republic of Moldova, which led to a **national controller developing a quality review plan for the work of controllers** just a month after the training. This plan was a direct response to insights gained during the training and delivered good results from the onset of its implementation just two months after the training. A **second example** also from the Republic of Moldova was the support in the design of the institutional framework for the use of mainstream funds. As a result of the study visit in Budapest, the national authority fine-tuned this design and modified the initial ideas on the legislation on this matter, which will be approved in summer 2026 by the Parliament. A **third example**, still from the Republic of Moldova, their intention to set up an IT system to support their national level tasks in programme implementation similarly to the NAHU system implemented by Hungary. A **fourth example** is the internal discussion currently undergoing in Ukraine to set the foundations for an effective use of ARACHNE in the country, based on the experience gained in the study visit in Madrid.

The authorities recognised a **gap** within their own systems as a result of the networking and peer exchange among them. This led them to reflect on how they could improve their internal practices, demonstrating that the training did not just inform but actively **pushed them to produce results**. The ability of the training to foster such **self-reflection** and spur **immediate action** is a clear success for C4C, showing how targeted capacity-building efforts can accelerate reform and internal development in EU-accession countries.

L6 Getting the right participants is critical for training effectiveness

Ensuring that the **right participants** attend the training was a critical factor in the success of the training. This allowed the course exercises to be tailored and explained in a **contextually relevant way** to all participants, ensuring that the learning points can be effectively integrated into their work.

The **preparatory work** conducted by the project team, in collaboration with **DG REGIO** and the **EU Delegations** in the countries, was crucial in identifying the **correct contacts** and ensuring the **right profiles** of participants. This effort directly contributed to the course's **effectiveness** and alignment with the needs of both national and EU-level stakeholders.

The presence of **EU Delegation staff** in North Macedonia throughout the entire training event had a positive impact on its effectiveness. It sent a strong message to all participants about the importance of the themes being addressed and provided valuable **insights at a programme/policy level** that national authorities or Interreg staff might not have had.

This active involvement not only demonstrated the value of such training but also showed, to the opinion of the project team, how EU Delegation staff can benefit from the course, not just as an introduction for national authorities staff but as a “refresher” for those officials who need to update **their knowledge** or **refresh their networking** with **accession country staff**. It allowed **EU Delegation staff** to see the practical **value for their work**, learning from real-life programming needs and challenges discussed during the course.

L7 Monitoring skills upgrades for future training efforts

While **evaluation forms** captured participants’ feedback and self-assessment on their learning, they couldn't fully measure the **upgrade** in skills. Although **entry/exit tests** were not introduced for this course, future training might implement them using the EU survey tool or Typeform.com.

Participants would complete an **entry test** before the course and an **exit test** online after the workshop, allowing them to reflect on the learning at their own pace, without the pressure of an intensive training schedule. This would better track skill development and improve the effectiveness of future training efforts.

4. Annexes

Annex 1 – Study visits reports

Annex 2 – Presentation of the Draft Final Report

Annex 3 – Training Handbook

Annex 4 – List of training participants

