

**Interreg**



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**Lithuania – Poland**

**HARVESTING REPORT FROM  
CONSULTATIONS  
WITH STAKEHOLDERS AND RESIDENTS FOR  
INTERREG LITHUANIA-POLAND  
POST 2027**

Vilnius 2024

## INTRODUCTION

This report is dedicated to preparing for the future INTERREG Lithuania-Poland (INTERREG LT-PL) programme beyond 2027, considering the overall objective of the INTERREG LT-PL programme: to enhance the well-being of border communities through cross-border cooperation and the sustainable use of cultural and natural heritage in the border regions of Lithuania and Poland. Between 2013 and 2027, over €216.11 million from the European Regional Development Fund has been invested in regional cooperation between the two countries under this programme.

In preparation for the new programme period beyond 2027, consultations were conducted in Lithuania and Poland with stakeholders and local communities. The objectives of these consultations were to: 1) Assess the implementation of the INTERREG LT-PL programme in the LT-PL border regions, to identify challenges, and to explore potential improvements. 2) Determine the needs of the border regions for the programme beyond 2027. 3) Formulate relevant priority directions and propose thematic areas for cooperation, taking into account emerging challenges and opportunities in the border regions.

To achieve these goals, the Managing Authority of the INTERREG LT-PL programme, the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania (Mol), in July and August 2024, developed the consultation methodology, questionnaires, meeting and event plans and questions for in-depth interviews. Consultation events were organized in Lithuania and meeting spaces were provided by regional development councils and municipalities. Public entity Project Management Agency of the Ministry of Interior (Mol PMA), which performs the functions of the Joint Secretariat of the INTERREG LT-PL programme, supported the organization of consultations and surveys in Lithuania. In Poland, consultations were organized and conducted by the Regional Contact Points (RCP) of the Podlaskie and Warmian-Masurian voivodeships, with support from the Mol PMA. Information about the surveys was disseminated through official and unofficial channels, including the websites of the Mol and Mol PMA, and via the RCPs. The best participation results were achieved by contacting potential participants individually and inviting them to take part in the surveys, in-depth interviews and consultation events.

In September and October 2024, the consultation process took place across the regions:

- Meetings were held with policymakers from 4 Lithuanian Regional development councils: Alytus, Marijampolė, Tauragė and Vilnius.
- A series of 7 consultation events was organized, covering the regions of Alytus, Kaunas, Marijampolė, Tauragė and Vilnius in Lithuania, as well as the voivodeships of Podlaskie and Warmia-Masuria in Poland.
- 13 in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of stakeholders and youth groups. Surveys were carried out online and in person, with 262 questionnaires completed in Lithuanian and Polish, of which 257 were valid. A total of 140 respondents participated in the stakeholder survey, while 117 residents participated in the public survey.
- In total, more than 400 participants took part in the consultation events in Lithuania and Poland. The collected data was processed and analysed, and a report was prepared in November and December 2024. The findings were shared with regional stakeholders and residents who participated in the events. During the consultations, a large dataset was collected; this report highlights only the main results and insights. In preparing the consultations and the report, the

European Commission's document [Guide for Shaping Together the Future INTERREG. INTERREG post 2027 \(EC Guide\)](#) was followed.

# 1. STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS

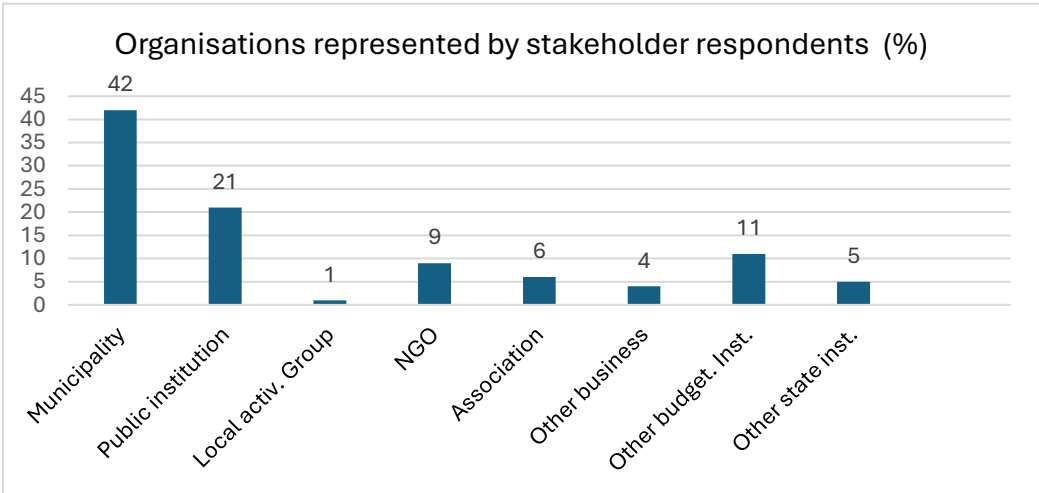
The following stakeholders were invited to participate in the consultation process:

- **Regional and municipal policymakers** (representatives of marshal offices and members of regional development councils) were engaged to familiarize them with the achievements of the INTERREG LT-PL programme, consultation objectives and expectations. A significant portion of organizations involved in projects receive funding based on municipal decisions. Consultations, surveys and meetings were conducted within municipal territories and included organizations subordinate to municipalities. The primary goals of this engagement were to secure political support, increase programme awareness and ensure continued backing for the programme.
- **Applicants of the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 INTERREG LT-PL programmes**, regardless of whether their applications received funding or not.
- **Potential participants in the INTERREG LT-PL programme**, including those interested in participating in the 2021-2027 programme or future iterations, as well as individuals or organizations considering involvement and seeking information about the programme. The consultations included the participation of:

Stakeholder Organizations	Number of Participants
Members of the councils of Alytus, Marijampolė, Tauragė, and Vilnius regional development boards	62
Representatives of marshal offices from the Podlaskie and Warmian-Masurian regions	4
Current and potential programme participants, including 26 representatives from municipal administrations, as well as representatives from organizations subordinate to municipalities in Lithuania and Poland—such as cultural, arts, and sports centres, hospitals, schools, transport companies, firefighting organizations, also higher education institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), consulting firms and local action groups (LAGs)	362

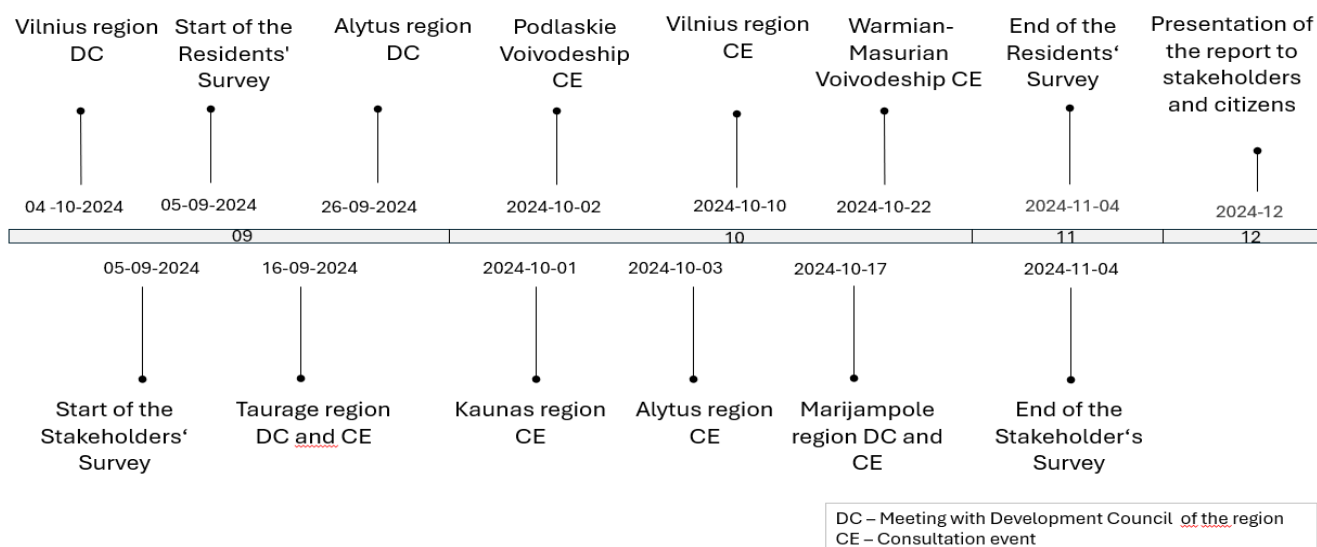
In the stakeholder survey, the organizations represented by respondents were predominantly municipalities, public institutions (PI), and budgetary bodies — comprising 74% of all respondent organizations (Table 1).

Table 1



The INTERREG LT-PL consultations took place in September and October 2024, with the presentation of the consultation results occurring in December 2024. The consultation timetable is provided below.

#### TIMETABLE OF INTERREG LT-PL CONSULTATIONS



During the consultations with stakeholders for the INTERREG LT-PL programme post-2027 the following methods were employed:

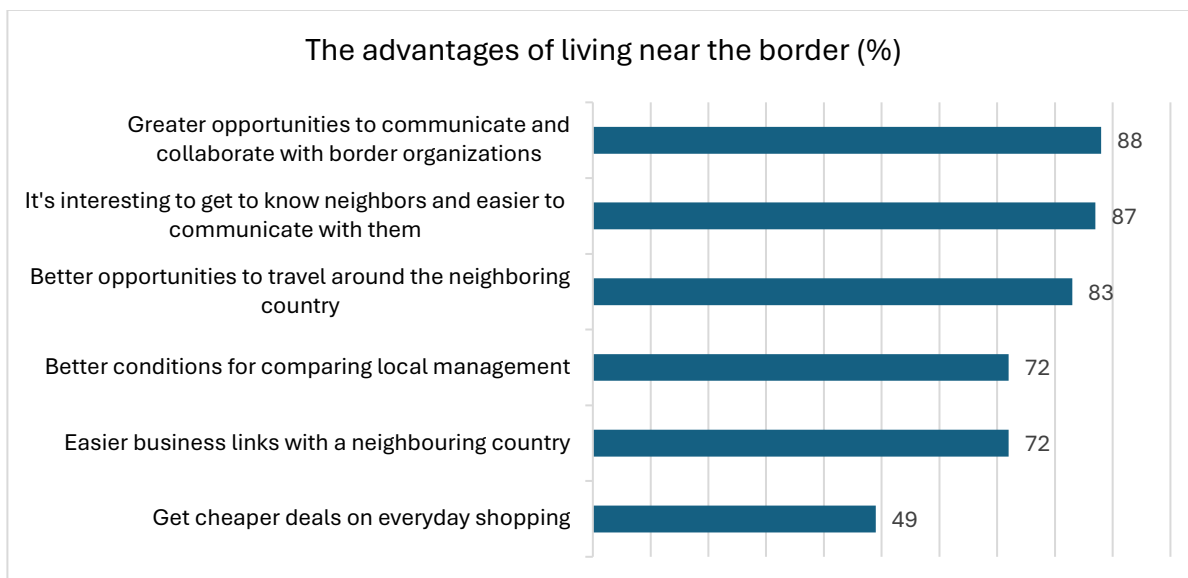
- **Presentation of the INTERREG LT-PL programme's Key Context:** Delivered remotely or in person, providing policymakers with an overview of the consultation process.
- **A Series of Seven Consultation Events Across INTERREG LT-PL Regions:** These were held in Alytus, Kaunas, Marijampolė, Tauragė, Vilnius, Białystok and Olsztyn. Each region's events focused on discussing local and municipal needs, achievements, shortcomings, comments and recommendations relevant to the INTERREG LT-PL programme participants.
- **Seven In-Depth Interviews with Regional Stakeholder Representatives:** Conducted using a standardized methodology. Each focus group consisted of 6 to 12 participants representing organizations that had submitted applications, participated in INTERREG LT-PL projects, or intended to participate in the future.
- **Online and Distributed Surveys in Lithuanian and Polish:** A 27-question survey, developed on recommendations from the *EC Guide*, was disseminated. Invitations were sent to 298 potential and current stakeholders, resulting in 140 valid responses.

**After analysing and summarizing the data from surveys, discussions, and in-depth interviews, a comprehensive dataset was compiled to address the questions outlined in the *EC Guide*.**

Before presenting responses to the questions specified in the *EC Guide*, it is important to highlight that stakeholders in both Lithuania and Poland view the INTERREG LT-PL programme indisputably positively. According to 90% of respondents of both countries, the programme is considered highly valuable in multiple dimensions: it fosters the development of border regions, strengthens local organizations, expands targeted collaboration and addresses critical challenges faced by regions and organizations.

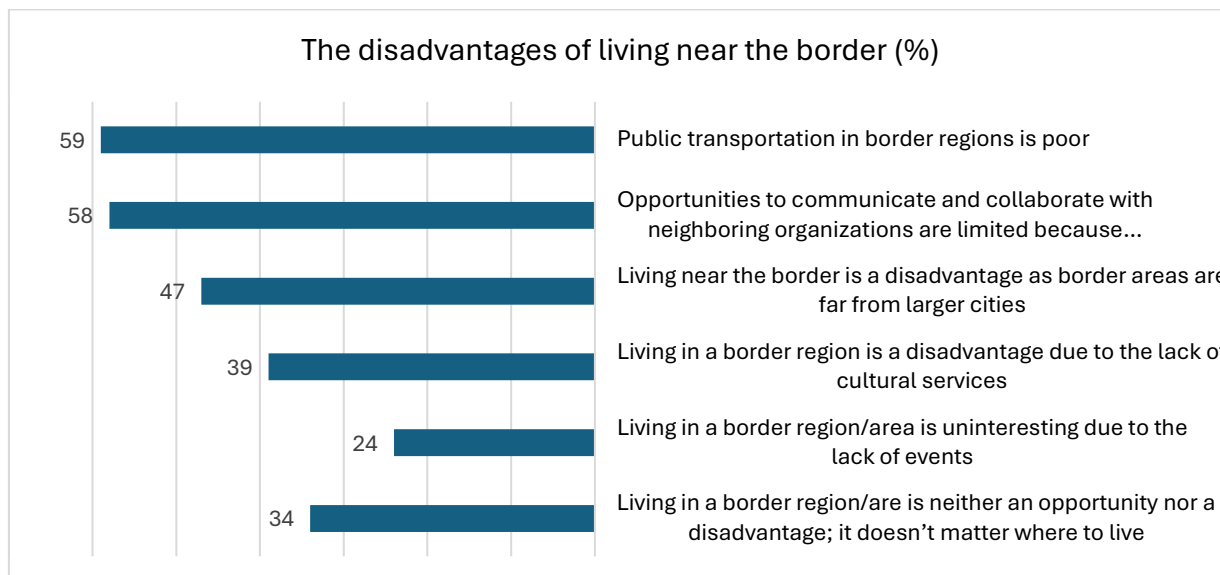
**Q 1.1. Is living near the border an opportunity or a disadvantage?** Survey results indicate that the majority of respondents view living near the border positively. Advantages were mentioned 1.5 times more frequently than disadvantages. The most significant advantage cited was the opportunity to communicate and collaborate with similar organizations in the neighbouring country (88%). This was followed by the interest in getting to know and interact more easily with neighbours (87%) and improved opportunities for travel to the neighbouring country (83%) (Table 2).

**Table 2**



The disadvantages of living near the border are most commonly associated with poorer access to healthcare, transportation, and other public services. (Table 3)

**Table 3**



**Q 1.2. Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation?** When assessing the greatest potential for cooperation within the programme area, respondents primarily considered the pressing issues in their region, their fields of activity, and the potential importance of these issues on both sides of the border. The following themes were mentioned:

<b>Security and Civil Protection</b>	Emphasis on cooperation in border security, improvement of civil protection infrastructure, and preparedness for critical situations and threats (e.g., military, cyber threats).
<b>Infrastructure:</b>	Focus on water supply, wastewater treatment, infrastructure improvement (bicycle paths, roads), waste management, and sustainability projects
<b>Business and Innovation</b>	Development of the textile and creative industries, economic cooperation, support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and promotion of social innovation
<b>Social Inclusion and Communication</b>	Efforts to combat discrimination, promote gender equality, foster community integration, enhance citizen interaction, and improve mutual understanding.
<b>Research and Technology:</b>	Development of research and innovation, with the inclusion of higher education institutions to address regional challenges

The issue of security, frequently highlighted in the proposals, is currently of particular importance to the border regions of both countries, especially those bordering Russia and Belarus. However, when asked how they would evaluate the cooperation between their locality and Lithuania/Poland in the field of security and civil protection within the INTERREG LT-PL programme, the responses from surveys, in-depth interviews and discussions showed some variation.

	Poland (%)	Lithuania (%)
I would evaluate such cooperation very positively	18	68
I would evaluate such cooperation positively	20	21
I would evaluate such cooperation neutrally (neither positively nor negatively)	60	10
I would evaluate such cooperation negatively	2	1
I would evaluate such cooperation very negatively	0	0

Cooperation in the field of security was frequently emphasized during consultations, in-depth interviews with stakeholders and in the proposals for future collaboration both from stakeholders and residents. Its significance became particularly evident during the consultation event in Poland's Podlaskie Voivodeship, where discussions on the INTERREG LT-PL programme followed a session on the Poland-Ukraine INTERREG cooperation programme. The latter highlighted challenges in ensuring not only the health but also the safety and lives of project participants.

During the discussions, it was also suggested that the issues of maintaining and strengthening security in border regions might require higher funding programmes or the establishment of a separate programme. However, within the INTERREG programme, there could be a priority focus on small-scale security infrastructure or joint preparedness initiatives, including training for residents.

**Q 1.3. What currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced?** Collaboration between the border regions of Lithuania and Poland is successfully taking place in the areas of healthcare, tourism development, social integration and infrastructure. Cooperation under the priority of fostering physical, emotional and cultural well-being received the most favourable evaluation (37%) from respondents in both countries. During consultation events, joint amateur and mass sports projects were particularly highly

rated. The success of other priorities was also positively assessed but less emphatically: improving border region infrastructure (18%), enhancing environmental quality (17%), strengthening border region security and civil protection (15%), and fostering cooperation among local businesses, organizations and enterprises in border areas (8%).

**Q 1.4. What currently does not work well in this cooperation and should be improvement?**

Key problematic areas identified by stakeholders from both countries, which hinder effective cooperation and project implementation, include partnership challenges, language barriers, differing legal and cultural environments and issues with administration and organization.

*Note: Throughout the text, responses are presented in the respondents' original wording without corrections.*

Topic	Challenges
<b>Partnership Challenges</b>	Difficulty finding partners; lack of partner engagement and accountability in reporting; issues in locating new partners; reluctance of potential partners to participate in smaller projects; having to complete work on behalf of partners, particularly those with lower funding; differing needs of partners on both sides of the border
<b>Language Barriers</b>	Language differences; inadequate English proficiency among partners; reluctance to use English for communication; guidelines in English that are difficult to understand.
<b>Legal and Cultural Differences</b>	Different work cultures; differing legal requirements and regulations between countries; need for additional legal consultations for all partners.
<b>Administrative and Organizational Issues</b>	Delays in submitting documents; lack of administrative skills; partner unreliability; lengthy and challenging public procurement processes.
<b>Other</b>	Logistics challenges related to partner communication, particularly during the pandemic; issues with equipment production due to the pandemic.

Other obstacles to effective collaboration, frequently mentioned in survey responses from Lithuanian and Polish stakeholders — regardless of organizational type — as well as in discussions during consultation events and in-depth interviews, include the following:

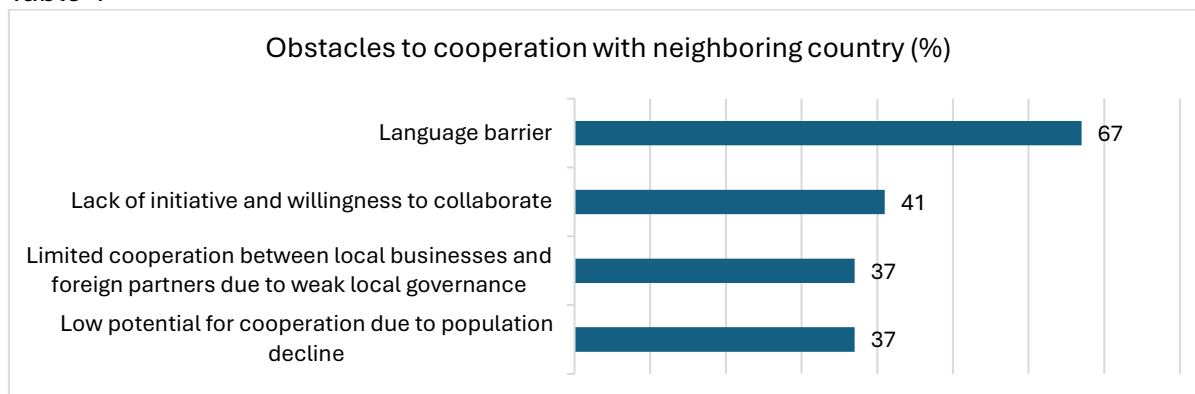
1. **Excessive Administrative and Bureaucratic Burden:** This is the most significant challenge in both countries. Many respondents emphasize the complexity and redundancy of application, reporting, and administrative documentation requirements, citing bureaucracy and the large volume of paperwork. Responses mention phrases like "excessive requirements in applications," "high administrative burden," and "overly demanding documentation processes." These obstacles complicate project administration, requiring substantial time and resources.
2. **Lack of Advance Funding and Financial Challenges:** Financial difficulties, such as complex funding rules, slow disbursements and the absence of advance payments, were highlighted by many respondents. This issue is particularly critical for smaller organizations and NGOs, which often lack sufficient funds to implement projects before receiving reimbursements. Respondents mentioned concerns like "problems with financial transfers, financial contributions, especially for NGOs," "lack of own contributions; no advance funding," and "complex funding rules."
3. **Lengthy Reimbursement and Application Evaluation Periods:** Respondents frequently highlight the slow pace of fund reimbursements and the lengthy evaluation process for applications, reports, and payment requests. This creates challenges, particularly for smaller organizations that rely on working capital to sustain their activities. Comments include: *"Reporting is very complex, and the evaluation process takes an excessively long*

time; the period from project implementation to receiving funds is extremely lengthy," and "Long reimbursement deadlines."

**Q 1.5. What are the major obstacles for a good cooperation in your area?** Although the question in the survey focused on cooperation, the responses were more oriented toward issues of interaction and communication.

The key obstacles to cooperation with the neighbouring country in the respondents' local area are the language barrier, lack of engagement and willingness to cooperate, limited collaboration between local businesses and foreign partners due to weak local governance, and reduced cooperation potential caused by population decline. (Table 4)

Table 4



Obstacles such as "Negative attitudes toward neighbours" (10%) and "Cultural differences" (12%) were deemed to have relatively low significance based on response weight.

When assessing cooperation obstacles, stakeholders highlighted challenges in finding partners, particularly new ones. Difficulties in identifying new partners and refusals to participate in smaller-scale projects were explained with reasoning such as: "We lack the time and sufficient human resources to participate in small-scale projects, especially when we are already managing multi-million-euro projects funded by our government."

In addition to the above, obstacles related to differing work cultures and legal discrepancies between the two countries were also mentioned.

**Q 1.6. Are there things you would like to do under the INTERREG but cannot? Why?** Most responses to this question indicate that the needs identified are already supported or funded by the INTERREG LT-PL programme. However, the demand for investments in the following areas persists:

Themes proposed by stakeholders from Poland and Lithuania

**Tourism and Cultural Development:** An integrated cross-border tourism promotion system; development of cultural activities using modern technologies; Joint water and border tourism routes; Adaptation of cultural heritage for tourism

**Social and Health Projects:** The necessity to improve healthcare equipment and foster social innovations, such as the "Social Hostel Chata"; To develop infrastructure aimed at improving the quality of life for older adults, along with the expansion of green spaces and neighbourhood services.

**Infrastructure and Recreational Infrastructure Development:** Development of infrastructure in smaller communities; Investments in recreational areas, trails, and cycling paths

**Cultural Heritage and Communities:** Development of community's cultural centres; Renovation of buildings in small towns; Renovation of cultural centres

**Preferences of Polish Stakeholders**

**Preferences of Lithuanian Stakeholders**



<b>Youth Engagement:</b> The need for cultural exchanges and mutual learning between Lithuanian and Polish youth.	<b>Digitization and Modernization:</b> Digitizing documentation.
<b>Health and Education Partnerships:</b> Experience exchange between health and education institutions.	<b>Safety and Preparedness:</b> Preparing for emergencies and providing specialized training for residents
<b>Demographic Studies:</b> Research on demographic changes and trends to better understand regional needs.	<b>Skills Development:</b> Enhancing management skills for employees of public sector institutions and organizations.
<b>Water Treatment Projects:</b> Learning from Lithuanian expertise in water treatment	

**Q 1.7. What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future INTERREG?** Stakeholders consistently mentioned the following changes across all consultations, including events, discussions, surveys, and in-depth interviews (listed by the frequency of mentioning):

<b>Improving Administration and Financing Efficiency:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Less Bureaucracy:</b> Simplified rules reduced administrative barriers, and fewer restrictions on "soft" activities.</li> <li>• <b>Advance Payment Options:</b> Introduction of advance payments, especially for smaller NGOs and new partners.</li> <li>• <b>Simplified Application Requirements:</b> Streamlined criteria and clearer, more straightforward application processes.</li> <li>• <b>Shorter Evaluation Periods:</b> Faster evaluation of applications and quicker signing of support agreements.</li> <li>• <b>Increased Funding:</b> More funded projects, higher financing per project, and greater resources for infrastructure projects.</li> <li>• <b>Transparent Project Evaluation Criteria:</b> More transparent allocation of funds.</li> <li>• <b>Improved Idea Selection Process:</b> Clearer criteria for idea selection and greater transparency in evaluations.</li> <li>• <b>Simplified Project Implementation:</b> More flexible implementation conditions and easier reallocation of savings for project needs.</li> <li>• <b>Reducing Language Barriers:</b> Allowing applications to be submitted in native languages.</li> </ul>
<b>Strengthening Partner Search and Communication:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Encouraging New Partnerships:</b> Incentives and benefits for forming new partnerships.</li> <li>• <b>Partner Search Events:</b> Organizing partner search fairs, networking meetings, and conferences.</li> <li>• <b>More In-Person Meetings:</b> Events, gatherings, and meetings to build and strengthen partnerships.</li> <li>• <b>Fairer Collaboration Between Partners from Both Countries:</b> Equitable project budget allocation, addressing the reluctance of partners to participate in more than one project due to limited individual budgets.</li> </ul>
<b>Strengthening Intercultural Communication:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Improving Cross-Cultural Interaction:</b> Preparatory joint events and training sessions to help understand partner cultures and the value of collaboration.</li> <li>• <b>Language Learning:</b> Courses in Lithuanian, Polish, and English, encouraging the learning of neighbouring languages in border regions.</li> </ul>
<b>Enhancing Communication and</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Increased Promotion and Awareness:</b> Disseminating program information through various local channels, including outreach at the municipal level.</li> </ul>

**Information  
Dissemination:**

- **More Information Events:** Conferences and presentations focusing on program opportunities and priorities.
- **Greater Support During Application Preparation:** Assistance with application writing, more consultations, and conferences on application preparation, moving beyond the limitation of just 1–2 promotional events.

**Q 1.8. Is there a need for some infrastructure projects?** The issue of infrastructure was raised by participants at every consultation event. Two groups of stakeholders emerged: one advocating for infrastructure over "soft" activities, and the other favouring various partnership activities over infrastructure. Representatives from all Lithuanian and Polish municipal administrations without exception emphasized the necessity and importance of infrastructure in future projects, advocating for its continuation and increased funding. The importance of infrastructure was also highlighted in speeches by regional policymakers during meetings. Conversely, representatives of other participating organizations—NGOs, hospitals, schools, cultural and sports centres—favoured prioritizing collaboration and joint activity projects.

**Q 1.9. What should be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in another country (governance)?** Based on the survey results, the primary recommendations from stakeholders for improving the effectiveness of cooperation focus on measures such as simplifying project preparation and administration, promoting partnerships, ensuring greater transparency, and fostering inclusivity. Suggestions received include:

Direction	Measures
<b>Strengthening of program communication and capabilities</b>	Increase program promotion, presentations, and conferences; enhance outreach to NGOs and municipalities; organize more partnership-building events; ensure regular communication about the program at the local level and engage local communities; provide more project preparation training and integration meetings; increase the number of calls to encourage partnerships and more intensive cooperation; organize joint events and training in various areas, from education to infrastructure development.
<b>Supporting the cooperation beyond project boundaries</b>	Strengthen ongoing dialogue between local authorities and communities in both countries; focus on continuous cooperation activities that go beyond the project timeline.
<b>Establishing permanent entities, groups, and platforms</b>	Create entities to assist with partner searches; establish joint working groups to address specific local challenges, such as border region security, tourism, and business promotion; create cross-border regional councils; develop a dedicated platform for small projects to collaboratively generate ideas for addressing challenges through cooperation
<b>Increasing transparency and inclusivity</b>	Allow the public to vote on project ideas for the program
<b>Simplifying administration and enhancing efficiency</b>	Reduce bureaucratic requirements for applications and project implementation; revise reimbursement processes to allow for simultaneous project preparation and implementation within the same project; avoid rigid frameworks; simplify administrative rules; ease project submission requirements; reduce the emphasis on the uniqueness of "soft" activities during evaluation; promote more soft activities that engage the community and create value; simplify administration, provide

	advance payments, expand the program's territorial scope; allocate funds for project preparation and organize more in-person meetings; minimize paperwork—there is already less in Lithuania
<b>Expanding opportunities to participate in the program</b>	Ensure every municipality has the chance to implement at least one project; increase the number of funded projects; finance more projects to encourage the inclusion of new partners, as funding often goes to the same applicants from the same areas.

**Q 1.10. What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?** Respondents listed over 90 ideas of their dreams. Majority are in line with current thematic priorities, but others are original. The dreams were grouped according to the frequency of mentioned ideas.

<b>Tourism Development and Infrastructure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>New Tourism Routes:</b> Implementation of a Nemunas and Vistula water tourism route; connecting waterways via the Nemunas to Augustów canals. A joint tourism project catering to travellers with diverse interests. Aviation tourism: expanding the number of aviation enthusiasts and related service businesses at local airfields.</li> <li>• <b>Improving tourism Infrastructure</b> Enhancing activities for active leisure, new interactive exhibits, and improving public city spaces to accommodate visitors. Promoting sustainable tourism. Developing centralized water and wastewater infrastructure for all LT-PL border settlements, connecting villages in the border zone. Creating cycling paths.</li> <li>• <b>Tourism and Cultural Projects:</b> A large-scale cultural education and tourism project, including educational activities. Researching and showcasing the shared history of Lithuania and Poland through exhibitions about shared heritage, eternal borders, and the lives and daily lives of people.</li> </ul>
<b>Healthcare and Social Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Acquisition of Medical Equipment and Transport:</b> Procuring new medical apparatus and transportation, including emergency vehicles and mobile care facilities. Collaborative healthcare projects with Polish hospitals.</li> <li>• <b>Services for People with Special Needs:</b> Support for individuals with disabilities and special needs, as well as war refugees. One-stop services for young people with disabilities and workshops for individuals with intellectual disabilities.</li> <li>• <b>Psychological and Emotional Well-Being:</b> Activities aimed at improving psychological and emotional health. Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and discrimination. Senior day camps or community centre activities. A rehabilitation-cardiology centre with a basement shelter.</li> </ul>
<b>Education, Youth Engagement, Culture and</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Youth Collaboration and Entrepreneurship:</b> Establishing a joint LT-PL enterprise for youth (ages 14-29) in the border region to create high-value-added products. Engaging youth in collaborative activities. Launching a joint higher education institution and business startups.</li> <li>• <b>Shared LT-PL History Routes and Trails.</b></li> <li>• <b>Education and Training Projects:</b> Attracting multi-generational teachers to form an international consortium of experts. Launching a pilot project to improve cross-border education services. Creating interactive and virtual reality classrooms for students. Establishing an educational centre for astronomy, physics, and inventions.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Development of Culture and Creative Industries:</b> Collaboration among professionals in the creative industries. A large-scale cultural education and tourism project, including educational activities. Reviving the idea of the Commonwealth of Both Nations through cultural projects.</li> </ul>
<b>Security and Civil Protection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Improvement of Security Infrastructure:</b> Upgrading security and civil protection infrastructure, including warning systems, shelters, and bunkers.</li> <li>• <b>Emergency Preparedness Training:</b> International training for police officers simulating emergency situations. Joint training programs for Lithuanian and Polish police officers, featuring real-life emergency scenario simulations.</li> <li>• <b>Integrated Projects with a Security Component:</b> Comprehensive projects combining culture, sports, and security elements.</li> </ul>
<b>Infrastructure Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Enhancing Regional Infrastructure:</b> Long-term cooperation for sharing experiences and modernizing infrastructure. Improving the infrastructure of regional institutions and fostering collaborative activities within them. Focus on extensive infrastructure projects with fewer “soft” activities.</li> </ul>
<b>Innovation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Technology and Digitization Projects:</b> Digital connections such as video bridges and portals using modern technologies. Digitization of processes.</li> </ul>
<b>Energy and Innovation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Sustainable Energy and Technologies:</b> Establishing a sustainable energy centre to help both countries reduce dependence on fossil fuels. Development of hydrodynamic vehicles</li> </ul>
<b>Sport and Wellness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Expansion of Sports Infrastructure and Activities:</b> Developing sports facilities and hosting joint competitions. Collaborative sports and wellness projects.</li> <li>• <b>Promotion of Active Leisure:</b> Activities for active leisure, new interactive exhibits, and improving public city spaces.</li> </ul>
<b>Community and Cultural Integration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Strengthening National Communities:</b> Establishing a centre for national communities to unite border regions. Researching and showcasing the shared history of Lithuania and Poland through exhibitions.</li> <li>• <b>Social Innovation and Inclusion:</b> Expanding the "Social Hostel Chata" initiative to address social housing issues innovatively.</li> </ul>
<b>Agriculture and Rural Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Exchange of Agricultural Best Practices:</b> Sharing agricultural best practices with Lithuanian partners</li> </ul>

**Interesting observations shared by stakeholders:** "More openness and transparency, simplicity, processes described more clearly and in easier language, and less protectionism. It would be great if the program could recognize potential and select more diverse projects rather than organizing the same events year after year, such as festivals, archaeology events, or purchasing uniforms and vehicles for firefighters and police officers, along with their endless training exercises. We hope to see some futurism, a vision for the future (even in civil protection—drones, solar panels, generators, modular shelters, or transformable medical points, etc.), digitization, universal design in infrastructure, education and training aspects, and joint or broader marketing efforts"; "When writing applications, we feel like we are participating

in an essay competition rather than an idea competition—it's about who writes the best application text, not who has the best or most relevant idea. We propose reducing the length of descriptions in applications"; "The programme needs to move away from what has been done in the past and embrace innovation"; "The programme's priorities and intended outcomes should be relevant to the region, as it often happens that the region needs one type of investment, but the program pushes for something entirely different"; "Social support systems: develop joint mechanisms between the two countries for providing social support, especially for vulnerable groups such as pensioners, people with disabilities, or those living in poverty. These social aspects could deepen connections between Lithuanian and Polish citizens and communities, fostering mutual understanding, solidarity, and joint social solutions"; "Allow the public to vote on project ideas for this programme"; "Increase the number of calls to encourage the creation of partnerships and intensify collaboration"; "Stop forcing everyone into rigid frameworks".

## 2. RESIDENT CONSULTATION

Consultations with residents took place in Lithuania and Poland during September and October 2024, as shown on the timeline on page 4. Residents from all regions were invited to participate via personal email addresses and through local organizations. They were encouraged to complete surveys, attend consultation events and, in the case of youth, join in-depth interview groups.

Consultation methods:

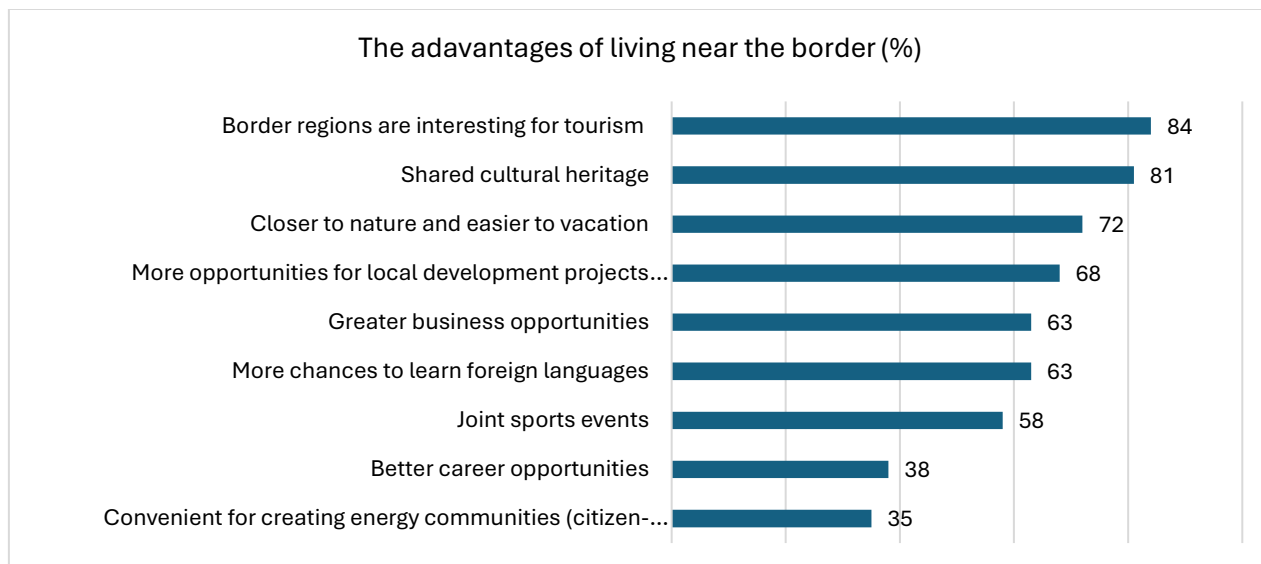
- **Online and Distributed Surveys:** The majority of residents were reached through online channels (via communities and local government institutions) and distributed surveys available in Lithuanian and Polish. An 18-question questionnaire was prepared on recommendations from the *EC Guide*. Invitations to complete the survey were sent to 412 recipients, resulting in 117 valid responses. Invitations to complete the survey were sent to the compiled list of addresses of local action groups (LAGs) in all regions, youth organizations, youth councils and NGOs representing resident groups. The main requirement for respondents was that they should not have participated in the INTERREG programme and should answer the questions as individual persons.
- **Consultation Events:** Residents were invited to participate in a series of 7 consultation events held in INTERREG LT-PL regions—Alytus, Kaunas, Marijampolė, Tauragė, Vilnius, Białystok, and Olsztyn. However, resident attendance at these events was low, with participation primarily limited to individual representatives of LAGs.
- **In-Depth Youth Interviews:** Six in-depth interviews were conducted (except in the Podlaskie region, where a youth interview did not occur) using a standardized in-depth interview methodology. Each group consisted of 5 to 8 participants, representing high school seniors and post-graduation youth, with a total of 39 participants.

**Q 2.1. Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?** The majority of residents perceive living near the border as an advantage. For example, 76% of Polish residents consider life in border regions to be beneficial, compared to only 37% of Lithuanian residents. Meanwhile, 21% of Polish residents and 10% of Lithuanian residents view it as both an

advantage and a disadvantage. Additionally, 43% of Lithuanian residents indicated that it is difficult to answer this question, as their region does not directly border Poland.

The main positive assessments from residents are based on arguments such as the following: border regions are interesting for travel and exploration (84%), the shared cultural heritage is significant (81%), proximity to nature and better vacation opportunities (72%), more opportunities for local development projects through collaboration (68%), greater business opportunities (63%), and other reasons specified in Table 5.

**Table 5**



**Disadvantages of Living Near the Border.** Residents evaluated the disadvantages of living near the border in a similar manner to stakeholders, focusing on public services. Key concerns included poor public transportation connections (62% in Poland, 23% in Lithuania) and inadequate healthcare services (40% in Poland). Additionally, Lithuanian residents highlighted the distance from larger cities offering better services and opportunities (34%). During in-depth interviews, the disadvantages of living near the border were discussed more extensively and included a broader range of issues.

**Perceptions of the challenges in the border regions of Lithuania and Poland**

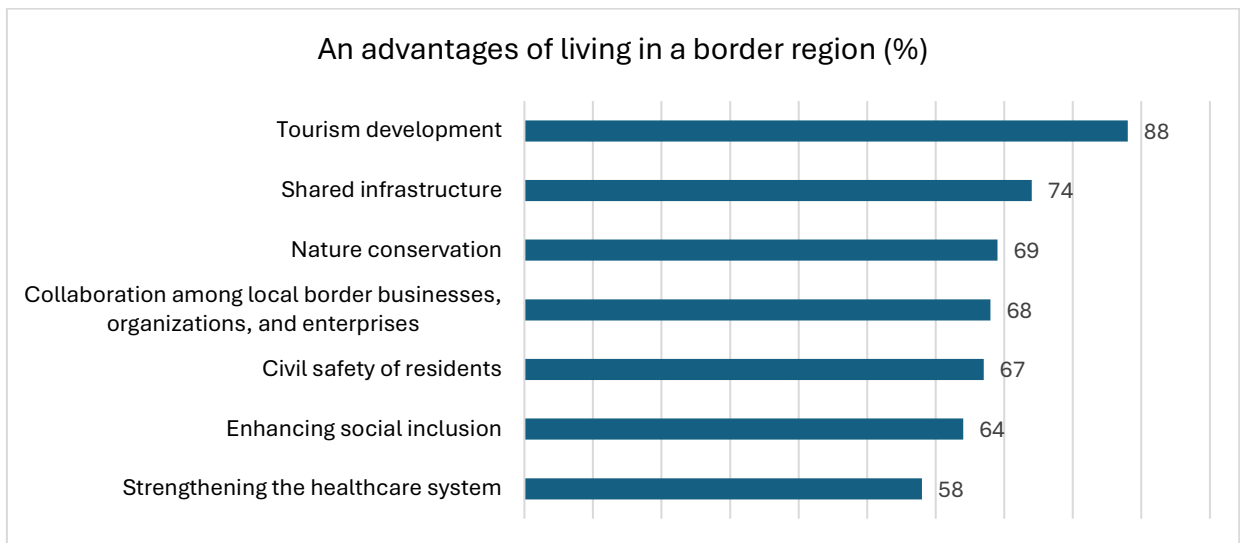
Lithuania	Poland
1. Infrastructure deficiencies	1. Economic and social challenges
2. Healthcare issues	2. Lack of social connections and community integration
3. Employment and economic challenges	3. Infrastructure and transportation shortcomings
4. Lack of social and cultural activities	4. Environmental and climate issues
5. Transportation shortcomings	5. Security concerns
6. Environmental problems	6. Limited cultural and recreational opportunities
7. Education and youth-related issues	
8. Administrative and governance inefficiencies	

**Q 2.2. In the place where you live, what are the main topics where cooperation is needed?**

The primary areas of cooperation agreed upon by residents of both countries include

tourism, shared infrastructure, environmental protection, and collaboration between local businesses, organizations and enterprises in the border region. (Table 6)

**Table 6**



**Youth Perspectives on Cross-Border Cooperation.** Youth groups in both countries view cooperation with the neighbouring nation particularly positively. Participants enthusiastically generated ideas for potential collaboration projects, citing numerous arguments in favour of youth cooperation. Key points included: The developmental stage of youth fosters a greater need for collaboration and shared activities, which are especially appealing to this group; Both Lithuanian and Polish youth find it easy to communicate in English; They express interest in exploring shared Lithuanian-Polish history, which includes numerous ambiguously interpreted and imprecise historical facts; Identity exploration, a characteristic of this life stage, was noted during in-depth interviews as something that could be pursued through joint activities with peers from the neighbouring country; Youth groups also highlighted challenges they face, including education-related issues (Lithuania), emigration and significant psycho-emotional health concerns (as reported by youth in Vilnius, Alytus, Olsztyn and Marijampolė regions); Participants emphasized the value of international exchange programmes and the importance of joint cultural events. They proposed prioritizing youth cooperation between the two countries as a distinct focus within the INTERREG LT-PL programme to further strengthen cross-border collaboration.

**Q 2.3. Can you name an INTERREG project that you find useful in the place where you live?**

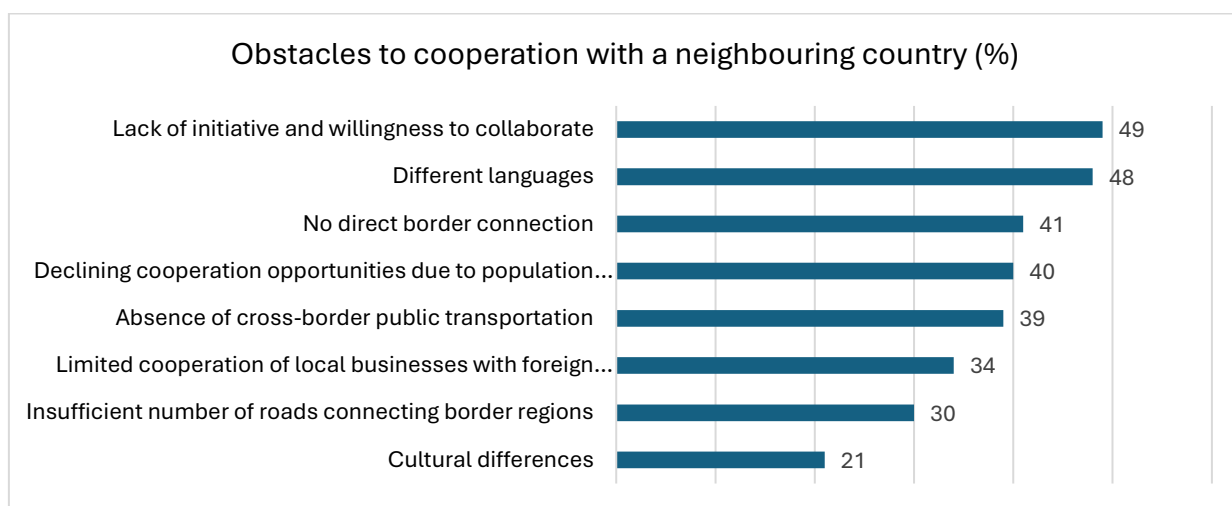
In surveys, 28% of Lithuanian and 45% of Polish respondents mentioned areas in their localities that have been improved through INTERREG or other EU-funded projects, either by hearing about them or directly benefiting from them. Residents of both countries highlighted several initiatives supported by the INTERREG programme, including: Improved infrastructure; Training programmes for police officers; Construction of pedestrian paths; Acquisition of medical equipment; Establishment of children’s day centres; Restoration of Vilkyškiai Manor, Kėdainiai Regional Museum, and Kalvarija Regional Museum; Implementation of health programmes; Creation of new tourism routes; Installation of children’s playgrounds; Introduction of senior transportation services in Punksk; Purchase of civil protection equipment; Health services in Sejny; Acquisition of a fire engine; Renovation of local roads, among others.

However, over 50% of respondents indicated that they had not previously heard of INTERREG projects and learned about them for the first time upon receiving the survey or invitations to consultation events.

Youth groups participating in in-depth interviews in Alytus, Marijampolė, Tauragė, Kaunas, Vilnius and Olsztyn were generally unfamiliar with the INTERREG programme and reported not noticing promotional materials or project signage.

**Q 2.4. In your daily life, what are the biggest difficulties for cross-border and transnational cooperation?** Discussions with residents about the main challenges of transnational cooperation in their local areas revealed both subjective and objective obstacles. The most significant barriers identified: *Lack of initiative and willingness to cooperate* (49%); *Different language* (48%). In addition to insufficient initiatives to strengthen community ties and overcome language barriers, other factors hindering cross-border cooperation included population decline and weaker local governance, which fails to encourage collaboration among local businesses or organizations. Furthermore, inadequate road connections between border areas were highlighted by 30% of respondents.

**Table 7**



*Cultural Differences as a Barrier.* Cultural differences were the least mentioned obstacle, and their significance slightly varied between the two countries—25% of respondents in Poland and 17% in Lithuania identified this as a challenge.

**Q 2.5. What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?** Residents proposed over 60 ideas for dream cooperation projects. Some of these suggestions were similar to concepts from existing projects and those proposed by stakeholders. In the surveys, 62% of Lithuanian and 44% of Polish respondents shared their visions for dream projects. Below is a table summarizing project ideas generated during the surveys and in-depth interviews.

Proposals from Lithuanian Residents	Proposals from Polish Residents
<p><b>1. National defence, security and civic engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiatives focused on national defence and fostering civic engagement and patriotism among youth.</li> <li>• Collaboration to strengthen the security of both countries.</li> </ul>	<p><b>1. Joint cultural events and exchanges</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A major project to organize cultural and other events.</li> <li>• Polish and Lithuanian film screenings – cinema under the stars.</li> <li>• Polish-Lithuanian ultramarathon.</li> </ul>



- Promoting the learning of neighbouring languages in border regions.
- Enhancing cooperation between Lithuanian and Polish scouting organizations.

## **2. Tourism development**

- Developing regional tourism, especially in smaller settlements.
- Promoting railway tourism, linking the municipalities of Trakai (Lithuania) and Giżycko (Poland).
- A comprehensive project to boost tourism, preserve traditions, and protect local culture.
- Establishing cross-border hiking and cycling trails.

## **3. Infrastructure**

- Improving road conditions in border regions.
- Expanding transportation connections, public transport routes, and shared cycling paths.
- Creating infrastructure for youth recreation and cycling paths for local residents.

## **4. Cultural and social exchange**

- Cultural exchange projects in theatre, art, and music.
- Promoting knowledge of each other's culture, languages, and traditions.
- Organizing a Dzūkija cultural festival to unite Dzūkija communities in both Lithuania and Poland.
- Family workshops, elder storytelling workshops, and historical education initiatives.
- Programs to enhance historical literacy and offer language education.
- A family exchange program enabling families to host one another over weekends or during school holidays.

## **5. Comprehensive, multi-regional, and multi-dimensional projects**

- Large-scale projects covering several localities and various aspects of life.

## **6. Economy, Business, and Innovation**

- Establishing science and innovation centres.
- Developing youth entrepreneurship and creating new job opportunities.
- Empowering young people to create jobs for others.
- Projects supporting collaboration among individuals with disabilities and integrating Ukrainian refugees.

## **7. Healthcare and social services**

- A medical exchange program for sharing expertise in healthcare.
- Joint healthcare projects.
- Integration services for individuals at risk of engaging in criminal activities.

## **8. Education and youth integration**

- A Polish-Lithuanian rural spa network: saunas, herbal treatments, forest walks, and bathing.
- Youth and senior centres fostering both Polish and Lithuanian traditions, featuring joint events and social projects.

- Establishment of shared cultural and educational institutions.
- Senior homes accessible to residents from both Poland and Lithuania.
- Programs to enhance cultural knowledge and cooperation among Polish and Lithuanian residents.

## **2. Tourism and infrastructure**

- Polish-Lithuanian water and cycling tourism routes with rental options.
- Development of joint tourism products for Poland and Lithuania.
- Creation of educational cycling trails and skateparks.
- A cycling path around Galadus Lake near the border.
- Trails and protection of natural landmarks, highlighting local sites and monuments.
- Promoting the attractiveness of Polish and Lithuanian regions to draw tourists and investors.

## **3. Education and cultural awareness**

- Bilingual schools in every region in Poland and Lithuania with shared investments in cultural initiatives.
- Learning Polish and Lithuanian languages and cultures, fostering understanding of traditions.
- Improving the overall quality of education on both sides of the border.
- School and educational projects targeting young people in both countries to enhance learning quality and promote language studies.

## **4. Environmental protection and nature conservation**

- Promoting regional tourism, nature conservation, and improving road conditions.
- Joint efforts to protect the environment and showcase protected areas and natural landmarks.
- Collaboration for animal and nature enthusiasts, including shared policies for stray animal protection, particularly dogs and cats.

## **5. Joint social and healthcare services**

- High-quality joint medical services with no barriers.

- Creating spaces for youth with fewer opportunities.
  - Organizing joint camps for young people.
  - Encouraging the learning of Polish and Lithuanian languages.
  - Shared healthcare and crisis management programs.
  - Senior exchange projects offering opportunities for cultural and linguistic experiences.
- 6. Infrastructure improvement**
- Protection of roads and cultural heritage.
  - Upgrading border roads and expanding cycling paths.

### Proposals from Youth Groups

1. Development and implementation of joint programmes to support the psycho-emotional well-being of youth on both sides of the border.
2. The establishment of joint historical discussion clubs and the organization of shared cultural events involving scientists and artists from both countries, including younger participants.
3. Initiation of broader cultural exchange and cooperation projects that extend beyond entertainment, incorporating historical, ecological, and artistic activities.

## 3. Recommendations for the Post-2027 Period

Consultations have become an important tool for promoting and supporting the INTERREG LT-PL programme, providing participants with the opportunity to better understand the programme's goals and outcomes. These discussions revealed that participants hold high expectations for the programme, plan to actively participate, and aim to implement ideas and projects fostering cross-border collaboration in the region.

Recommendations below are formulated by summarizing suggestions and observations of the participants of consultations.

### 3a. Suggested themes for the INTERREG LT-PL programme

Considering the feedback from consultations and the current Lithuania and Poland situation, the theme of **Security and Civil Protection** was proposed. The proposal is focused on creating or maintaining joint civil security management programmes using innovative tools and strengthening of the overall preparedness of residents in both countries.

Another theme was **Youth Cooperation, Health, Inclusion, and Entrepreneurship**, for promotion of youth collaboration through wellness, arts, and volunteer initiatives; to improve youth psycho-emotional health and engage them in exploring and shaping shared intercultural history.

Another frequently mentioned topic was **Innovations**. Implementing innovations in the LT-PL border region, despite challenges such as unequal levels of settlement development, limited English proficiency, and issues with basic public services like healthcare, transport, and education, can indeed be worthwhile. Innovations can address deficiencies in public services, reduce regional disparities, and foster cross-border collaboration, enhancing healthcare (telemedicine), education, and transport. Considering the entire INTERREG LT-PL region, it would be more appropriate to focus on capacity building and infrastructure development as a preparation for implementation of the innovations.

**Current Focus Areas.** Maintain the existing direction of **enhancing physical, emotional, and cultural well-being** (strengthening healthcare systems, developing tourism, increasing social inclusion, and promoting language and communication learning). Recommendation is to expand this by introducing subthemes on **shared cultural-historical heritage** and **healthy lifestyle promotion**, including joint sports and wellness activities.

Consultation results indicated the need to retain two types of project calls within the programme:

**1 type. Complex-Systemic Projects.** These correspond in some sense to the current operations of strategic importance and should include multi-component activities to achieve integrated, long-term outcomes with greater cross-border effects. This type would be ideal for integrating and unifying project fragments created during implementation of the previous programmes. It would be productive to apply a performance-based approach.

**2 type. Small-Scale Projects.** Targeted at small NGOs and budgetary institutions to foster new partnerships and adapt activities to local needs. Results are more visible in daily life and allow for stronger direct engagement with residents. Would be useful for piloting experimental ideas.

### **3b. Programme Geography / Area**

Stakeholders were asked whether the current INTERREG LT-PL programme territory should be adjusted. While there were isolated suggestions (e.g., excluding regions without direct borders, adding individual cities, or including coastal or capital cities), most participants advocated keeping the current geography unchanged. Expanding of the programme's scope in Polish territory was a relatively popular idea among Lithuanian stakeholders. The main arguments were that already established long-standing project partnerships between the two countries make finding new partners increasingly challenging. However, given the untapped potential of the current border regions—such as Łomża and other areas—the recommendation is to maintain the existing geography without changes.

### **3c. Programme and Project Implementation**

Proposals to enhance Lithuania-Poland cooperation in the INTERREG LT-PL programme, and achieve greater efficiency and sustainable outcomes are as follows:

**1. Optimizing Funding:** 1) Introduction of advance payments. 2) Simplification of financial reporting processes. 3) Creation of a mechanism allowing project implementers to manage risks and ensure flexibility in spending. 4) Assurance of a feedback mechanism that allows project participants to share their experiences and suggestions for improvement the funding process.

**2. Streamlining Administrative Processes.** 1) Clarification and refinement of application evaluation criteria. 2) Simplification of the application form by reducing the number of additional documents and descriptions. 3) Development a continuous project monitoring system to evaluate progress in real-time and ensure proper fund utilization. 4) Maintenance of the geographical balance across the regions.

**3. Technology Integration in Project Management.** 1) Digitalization of reporting processes and automate workflows, including tracking, report generation, and communication. 2) Investment into project management software and analytical tools. 3) Integration of technology to streamline and enhance transparency in project evaluation processes.

**4. Enhancing programme communication in the regions.** 1) Maintenance of continuous dissemination of the programme information within the programme's territory 2) Promotion outreach within various levels of regional organizations. 3) Active engagement of potential applicants in preparatory activities. 4) Wide publicity of achieved results to raise awareness and increase interest in the expansion and further development of achieved results where applicable.

**5. Ensuring the Sustainability of Project Results.** 1) Integration of project outcomes into local, regional, or national strategic documents and plans. 2) Collaboration between government institutions to ensure legal and financial continuity of the results. 3) Involvement of local communities in sustaining project activities. 4) Trainings and seminars for project participants to ensure their acquisition of the necessary skills to utilize and further develop project results. 5) Establishment of knowledge-sharing networks among projects' partners and communities to maximize impact and sustainability. 6) Fostering of the networking between partners and other stakeholders to share best practices and resources. 7) The creation of a technical assistance mechanism to ensure the sustainability of project results. 8) Organization of regular meetings or conferences to discuss the continuity and outcomes of completed projects. 9) Encouragement of long-term initiatives to sustain activities after project funding ends.