

**Interreg**



Co-funded by  
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**Central Baltic Programme**

# **SHAPING THE FUTURE INTERREG TOGETHER**

**Consultation of stakeholders and citizens for post-2027**

Central Baltic Programme 2021 - 2027

# 1. Consultation of stakeholders

## 1.1. Main stakeholders consulted

Reaching different target groups on different levels of society has always been a priority for the Central Baltic programme. This was also reflected in the planning of the post-2027 consultation. The programme utilised available contact information regarding the current and previous project partner organisations, and also the networks of the National Contact Points and the Central Baltic Monitoring Committee were utilised. It was also clear that there would be several CBC programmes carrying out their consultations simultaneously, and cooperation possibilities with geographically overlapping programmes were checked. However, differences in timetables did not allow for concrete cross-programme cooperation on the consultation.

The target groups reached with the stakeholder survey included public authorities from national, regional, and local levels, higher education and research organisations, NGOs and other interest groups in different sectors, infrastructure and service providers, business support organisations and SMEs. There was also an effort to widen the survey scope with types of organisations that have not been so common as project partners. Thus, for example, student unions and youth organisations were also targeted.

All Central Baltic countries were active in answering. Most answers were received from stakeholders in Finland (29%) and Åland (23%), with Sweden, Latvia and Estonia following with 18%, 17% and 13% respectively (Figure 1 and 2). Almost half of all answers came from public authorities from different levels of society.

### Origin of Stakeholder survey respondents (in percentages)

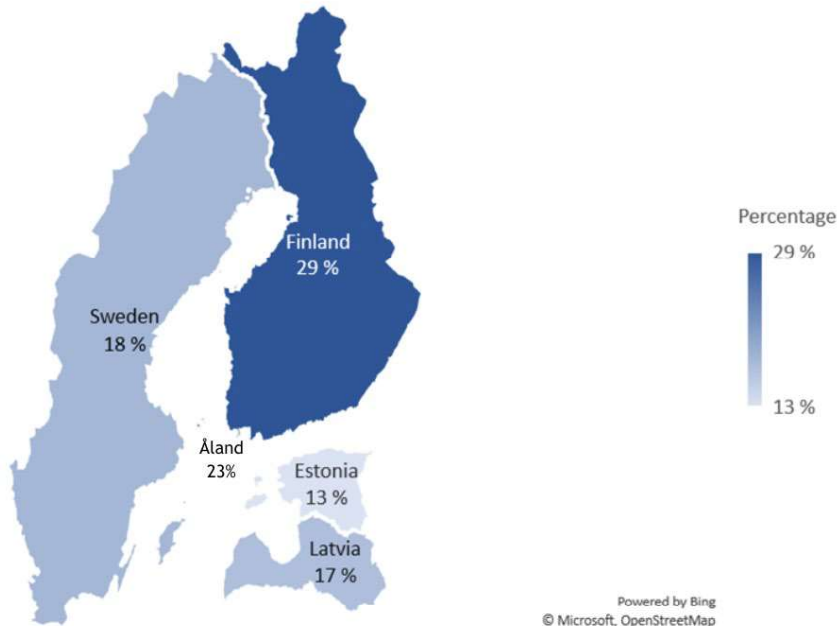


Figure 1 Origin of Stakeholder survey respondents

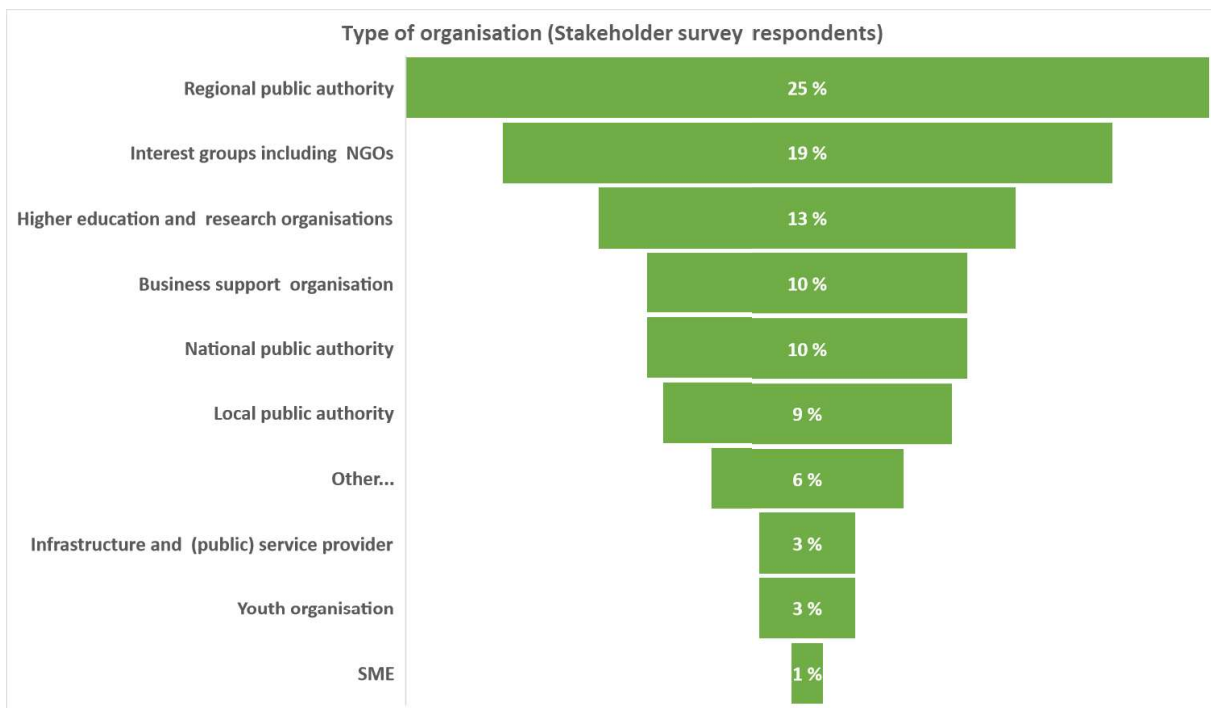


Figure 2 Type of organisation (Stakeholder survey respondents)

## 1.2. Methods of consultation

The consultation of stakeholders was carried out as an online survey, which was open on the website of the Central Baltic programme from the 6<sup>th</sup> of May until the 16<sup>th</sup> of August. News and information about the consultation was published on the Central Baltic website and distributed widely to the target groups via the programme newsletter (2347 subscribers) and social media channels on Facebook, X, LinkedIn and Instagram. The social media channels have altogether 3578 followers. The aim was to cover the whole programme area with collective communication measures. The total number of answers received for the stakeholder survey was 77.

The national contact points of the programme had a key role in informing about and promoting the consultations. Stakeholders were approached widely using mailing lists, personalised emails, NCP newsletters national websites and social media. They were also consulted face to face in various events around the programme area, where oral answers to the consultation questions were recorded. These events were for example the Viru Folk Festival in Estonia, the World Village Festival in Finland and the Tall Ships Races and an EU election-related event in Åland. Generally, the events provided a smaller contribution to the stakeholder survey, yielding more answers from the citizens.

The Monitoring Committee of the Central Baltic programme was consulted separately as a focus group on a workshop on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September. The members provided their insights as representatives of their organisations, not as member state representatives. The answers were integrated into the consultation results.

A session “Have your say on Interreg funding in the Baltic Sea region after 2027” was co-organised and co-hosted by the Central Baltic programme and the Baltic Sea Region programme at the EUSBSR Annual Forum in Visby, Sweden in October. It was well attended, drawing almost 60 participants. This interactive session offered a platform for discussing the results of recent stakeholder consultations on the future of transnational and cross-border cooperation in the Baltic Sea area.

Participants engaged with three central themes - security and resilience, green transition, and the Baltic Sea environment - providing inputs on statements from earlier consultations and outlining priorities for Interreg programmes beyond 2027. Key insights from participants included the importance of involving young people and communities in cross-border projects, as well as the need to focus on project capitalisation and to ensure lasting societal impact. When discussing cross-border cooperation for a better Baltic Sea environment, participants highlighted the need to measure impact even after an intervention has ended to ensure the spread of the most effective methods.

The points made will be used by both programmes in reports to the European Commission, presenting feedback from citizens and stakeholders of the region. The reports will be used as a basis for creating the legislative framework for Interreg programmes in the future.

## 1.3. Summary on the input on the key questions

### 1.3.1 Is living on a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

The respondents were guided to first answer either a) Opportunity or b) Disadvantage, and then elaborate on what kinds of opportunities or disadvantages they identified. They were also asked to indicate whether in their opinion there is a difference in cooperating over a land border compared to a maritime border.

Sixty-five respondents (84%) saw the border mainly as an opportunity and twelve (16%) mainly as a disadvantage. From the open answers it became very clear that many of the respondents concluded that regarding cross-border cooperation, it does not matter whether it is a land or a sea border. This was an expected answer, as there is already a long tradition of cooperation between the countries. Cooperation exists and is carried out regardless of the type of border.

A maritime border area is definitely a functional area. The origin of the division was unclear in general, and it was even seen as discriminative to separate between land and sea borders. For the Central Baltic area, the sea is a uniting factor, and having maritime borders brings new opportunities and widens the scope of cross-border cooperation with a variety of sea-related joint issues. Trust has been built over the programming periods, and the cooperation works well.

The most commonly identified challenge was that it might take a bit longer to travel or commute across a maritime border and to have face-to-face contact. Cultural and legislative differences were also mentioned. The identified opportunities were manifold, also reflecting the fact that the respondents rarely recognised any difference between maritime and land borders: Sharing knowledge and getting inspired by other people across the border, exchanging best practices, working, learning, and growing together, taking advantage of the differences to contribute to joint development.

It was also brought up that the Central Baltic programme helps to overcome any feelings of being distant from one's overseas neighbours. It was still identified that working across maritime borders naturally has different dynamics compared to land borders.

### 1.3.2 Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area?

Looking at the answers on a rough scale, environmental protection was identified as the top area for cooperation, with a focus on protecting the Baltic Sea and addressing climate change. Business development was seen as a relevant topic for cooperation, along with the potential to develop tourism, leveraging the unique maritime and cultural aspects of the region. Labour market and digitalisation were each identified by respondents as key areas for cooperation and joint development.

The majority of responses included more than one topic or sector where potential for cooperation is seen. The sectors are also very much interrelated, with for example tourism and green energy going hand in hand with business development, and issues such as social development, labour market and education also being strongly connected.

By far the most commonly mentioned sector was environmental protection in general, with a strong emphasis on preserving and improving the maritime environment of the Baltic Sea. This was brought up in more than half of the answers. The second most mentioned sector was business development with many nuances and sub-sectors mentioned. Innovative ideas in the sector are needed, and copy-paste -projects should be avoided. Labour market-related issues were brought up by many as potential cross-border cooperation topics, and they strongly included educational needs and digitalisation of the societies. Developing tourism received several mentions, and also things such as external border regions' needs, and maritime spatial planning were indicated more than once.

Some respondents wrote that all sectors of development are equally important and that there are needs and things that are necessary to be carried out across the thematic spectrum. The Baltic Sea could be used as a cross-cutting theme and a selling point, lifting it to a more prominent role in all Programme Objectives. Implementing international legislation in a harmonised way was also seen as important.

### **1.3.3 What currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced?**

Current cooperation successes include well-functioning networks (39%), joint services and projects of the programme (26%), provided funding opportunities (16%), and knowledge exchange (10%).

It was prominent in many answers that existing networks and projects are important in creating new initiatives, and that the motivation of organisations to find new solutions is strong. Networks should be preserved and extended. Services provided to the potential applicants by the programme were seen as important and it was hoped that the current level of services can be maintained. This also included networking. It was said that the level of co-financing is optimal and should be kept to keep the programme more accessible to smaller actors as well. The opinion of many respondents was that the implemented projects in different sectors work well and provide positive impacts, partly due to the strong result orientation of the programme. National contact points and the partner search platform were also credited.

A point was made that the things that currently work well are also interconnected, for example, fluent knowledge and experience exchange and learning from one another is facilitated by well-functioning and well-maintained networks, which, in turn, also lowers the threshold for contacting colleagues in neighbouring countries. Common themes offer a huge potential for development, and there is a readiness to tackle these together. The current mix of face-to-face and online meetings seems to be working well for most of the respondents.

### **1.3.4 What currently does not work well in this cooperation and should be improved?**

Some areas for improvement were noted, with 32% of respondents identifying communication and language barriers as major issues, 23% pointing out the need to harmonise laws and regulations, 19% stressing the importance of building more robust networks, and another 19% calling for better financial management and easier access to funding.

General issues related to communication such as different digital environments, struggles in making the cooperation visible and not having enough internal communication in some projects were identified by respondents. Cultural differences seem to affect communication, too. A large number of respondents wrote about challenging differences in laws and regulations, as well as in policies and practices between the countries. Several sectors were mentioned regarding this. However, the differences were also referred to as eye-openers to better understand each other.

For several topics, the stakeholder views differ. For example, the result requirements of the Central Baltic programme seemed too strict for some respondents, while others called for continued or even strengthened result orientation. Likewise, more investment possibilities have been requested as well as argued against. They were sometimes seen as not relevant for cross-border cooperation programmes, but rather a focus for mainstream or sectoral funding instruments.

The programme was criticised for not being flexible enough when it comes to reacting to emerging challenges in the programme area and beyond. Greater outreach towards potential new partners was called for. The bureaucracy related to projects was also said by some to impact negatively project implementation and the willingness of potential partners to join projects.

Facilitating more effective sharing of data between the countries was wished for. Sharing project results more effectively would also be needed. Some respondents mentioned that real cross-border impact may be hard to realise with the activities of a single project.

### **1.3.5 What do you see as the main obstacles for good cross-border cooperation in your area?**

The main obstacles for good cross-border cooperation include language issues (23%), legislative differences (19%), lack of funding knowledge (19%), cultural differences (13%), and lack of time and motivation among stakeholders (10%). Additionally, 10% mentioned administrative burdens and other challenges.

It was mentioned that there is still a language barrier, which may sometimes lead to struggles in communication with potential partners. Cultural differences were also brought up on a general level.

The knowledge transfer across regions is sometimes limited to persons/organisations that have previously been involved in common initiatives and it is difficult for new organisations to find and join new networks. Further network-building was still seen as needed by many respondents.

Lack of seed funding, lack of vision what comes to the real benefits of cross-border cooperation, and the lack of knowledge about funding opportunities were presented as obstacles by several stakeholders. Having a separate position in the programme dedicated to cooperation between the macro-region countries was presented as a concrete proposal.

### 1.3.6 Are there things that you would like to do under the Central Baltic programme framework, but cannot?

Half of the respondents concluded that there are things they would like to do, but they are not possible within the current programme. Some proposed to extend the scope of existing Programme Objectives to achieve more impact. Different focus areas for the future programme were proposed.

Many spoke of the need for more and bigger investments, for example in maritime traffic and transport. It was foreseen that wider investment possibilities as a part of development projects would lead to more concrete regional development. There were wishes to work and cooperate more beyond the designated Central Baltic programme area to improve the impact of projects. For the same reason it was hoped that more continuation projects could be carried out. It is currently a strong requirement that the impact from projects must always come to the programme area.

A need for more “qualitative” cooperation was expressed, presumably meaning a stronger focus to softer projects instead of needing to always define quantitative goals for them. On the social and educational side several topics such as youth cooperation, career development and job shadowing, gender equality and refugees were mentioned. Some respondents would like to see tourism back as a programme funding option. Safety and security issues raised their head as an interesting and potential new focus area.

### 1.3.7 What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Central Baltic programme?

Respondents expressed a desire for certain improvements in the Central Baltic Programme, 33% wanting increased investment opportunities or more infrastructure-related initiatives, with 29% calling for simpler procedures, 19% emphasising the need for better networks and 13% suggesting enhanced communication strategies.

Wider investment possibilities and infrastructure elements were wanted by several respondents. This was foreseen to attract a wider range of actors. This, in connection with having a strong developmental aspect in a project, would be optimal according to many answers. Some respondents would like it to be possible to carry out more risky projects where innovative solutions would be tested. With these, more flexibility in project implementation would also be needed.

It was concluded that the administration and reporting procedures of the Central Baltic programme are quite heavy. Thus, less, or simpler reporting would be needed. The respondents would like to see less bureaucracy and simpler procedures overall, faster funding decisions and quicker payments.

Seed money or pre-financing was seen as important, the latter, especially for smaller partners. More information on the funding opportunities, consistency in call frequency and contents and more overall budget flexibility were mentioned as potential novelties. The big time gap between the application and starting of project implementation was criticised. However, it was also mentioned that programme procedures have kept developing towards a positive direction.



### 1.3.8 Is there a need for some infrastructure projects?

A slight majority (64%) of respondents indicated that there would be a need for investment projects within the Central Baltic programme framework. Investments were seen as important especially by local and regional authorities and NGOs, but also many higher education and research organisations were among those who answered 'Yes' to this question. Small scale investments are supported by the Central Baltic programme in the 2021 - 2027 period, but pure investment projects are not funded.

In general, investments were seen as an important tool to achieve a concrete impact on the development of the regions. There is definitely a demand for them within the stakeholder groups. Investments got support as a part of the programme, but it was emphasised that there must be a strong cross-border aspect in them. They would need to be strategic and carefully chosen, have wider impact and very tangible results. Investments could be used for pilot activities and testing of solutions, and it could be considered to allow implementation of proven solutions in other places with programme funding. However, the programme budget dictates that big investments are not something to focus on. It is also important to consider synergies and complementarities with neighbouring programmes.

The identified specific investment needs were prominently related to environmental issues such as structures to help improve the state of the environment and to mitigate climate change. Wastewater treatment and related networks, drainage, establishing wetlands and buffer zones, mitigating sea flooding as well as renewable energy were mentioned as potential investment fields. Investment needs for physical and digital connectivity, related to both tourism and residents, came up in many answers. Investments to circular economy development in different contexts was brought up, and green transport was also mentioned.

### 1.3.9 What should be done to better facilitate/enable the work in your sector with your counterparts/colleagues in another Central Baltic programme country?

The need for improved networks and possibilities to meet other organisations was very prominent. Involving and mobilising relevant actors, improving and complementing existing networks, including the macro-regional level, and keeping and developing the partner search tools were brought up in many comments.

As concrete measures, thematic seminars, regional meetings, and exchange programmes as means of further networking were presented as potential improvements to facilitate more effective cooperation.

### 1.3.10 What would be the cross-border cooperation project of your dreams?

As expected, there were almost as many different answers to this question as there were respondents. Many of the answers named several dream projects. However, some topics that clearly popped up more than a couple of times were environmental or green projects, touching topics such as the marine environment, safe and secure maritime traffic, circularity, and the climate.

Other mentioned things were related to joint business development among SMEs and different kinds of labour market interventions such as job shadowing and network building. Cultural projects were mentioned, and young people were proposed as a more frequent target group. Some very concrete dream projects were proposed under the topic of connectivity; a fixed link between Åland and Sweden was called for, as well as realising the Helsinki-Tallinn tunnel plan.

Words like ‘together’, ‘solution’, ‘practical’, ‘innovative’ and ‘exchange’ were often mentioned in the answers. Cooperation and networks were held in high regard. These nicely reflect the nature of Interreg as a means to bring together people and organisations for development and exchange for multilateral benefits.

## 1.4. Interesting quotes

“Our experience is that location on the border region creates an excellent environment to learn and exchange best practises, to cooperate and develop together.”  
-Finland-

“There is a positive common will among the program's regions to cooperate and find joint solutions.”  
-Sweden-

“It is the border itself that makes cross-border cooperation relevant and important. Differences in culture, language, business life and regulations make opportunities to explore huge.”  
-Åland-

“In 21-27 CB, the indicators are very concrete and often it is impossible for a project which is cross-border, to contribute to these indicators. Even if the topic and collaboration would be very relevant, it often cannot achieve the indicators that are required and that would better suit mainstream programmes rather than Interreg.”  
-Estonia-

“Sea borders allow to include topics which cover also sea & water environment issues. The CB programme is highly important also to connect the region for common development and to overcome "feeling" that the overseas neighbour country is far away.”  
-Latvia-

“One area that does not work well in this cooperation is the bureaucratic complexity and lengthy approval processes for joint projects. These can delay important initiatives and discourage participation.”  
-Åland-

“Legislative differences as well as different work mentalities sometimes delay projects but are often to be solved with patience and expertise.”  
-Sweden-

“The Baltic Sea itself could be more as a centre of the programme, as it is in some Programme Objectives. The Baltic Sea should be the specific point to which the programme refers back to. The Baltic Sea should be our selling point.”  
-Focus group-

“All good ideas need people who are well connected, understand each other, trust each other”.  
-Estonia-

“We need a combination of environmental education, innovation and nature conservation between youth around the Baltic.”  
-Finland-

“Increased job opportunities are more common in territories on the very border (for example Valka, Valga etc.) Land borders give more opportunities to actually share talent. Sea borders widen our experience sharing opportunities.”  
-Latvia-

## 2. Consultation of citizens

### 2.1. Main citizens consulted

In the consultation the citizens were asked to define their nationality, choosing one of the programme countries or Åland, or 'Other' for any other countries. The majority of respondents were from Estonia (48%) Finland (18%), followed by Åland (17%) Latvia (11%) and Sweden (6%). Most respondents are over 29 years old (around 80%), with a smaller percentage being 29 or under (20%) (Figure 3 and 4).

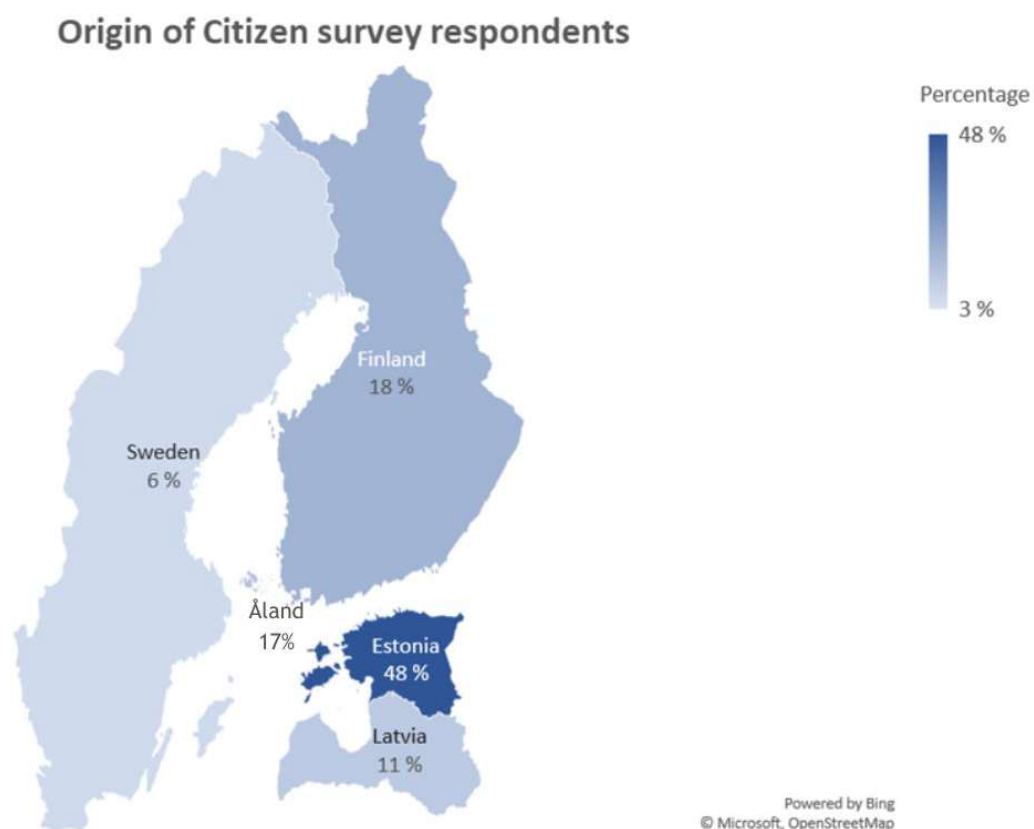


Figure 3 Origin of citizen survey respondents

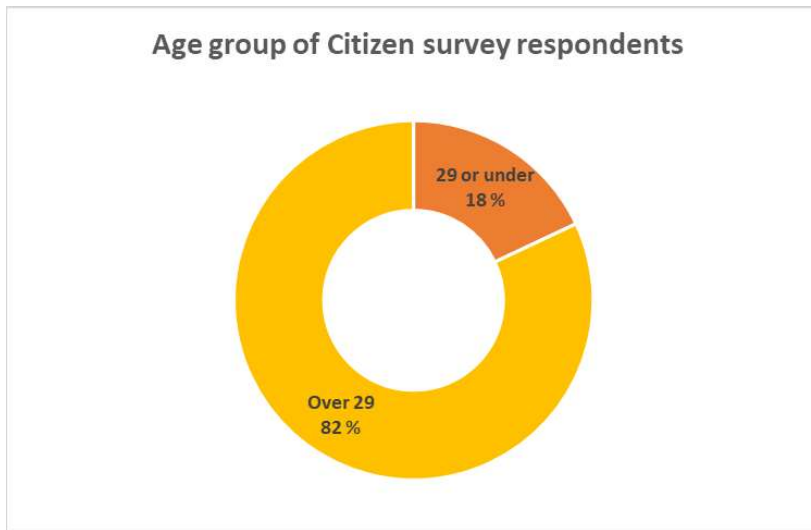


Figure 4 Age group of Citizen survey respondents

## 2.2. Methods of consultation

The consultation of citizens was carried out as an online survey, which was open on the website of the Central Baltic programme from the 14<sup>th</sup> of May until the 16<sup>th</sup> of August. News and information about the consultation was published on the Central Baltic website and distributed widely to the target groups via the programme newsletter (2347 subscribers) and social media channels on Facebook, X, LinkedIn and Instagram. The social media channels have altogether 3578 followers.

The national contact points of the programme had a key role in informing about and promoting the consultations. Citizens were approached widely using mailing lists, national websites, and social media as well as direct contacts. They were also consulted face to face in various events around the programme area, where oral answers to the consultation questions were recorded. These events included for example the Viru Folk festival in Estonia, the World Village Festival in Finland and the Tall Ships Races and an EU election-related event in Åland.

## 2.3. Summary of the input on the key questions

### 2.3.1 Is living on a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

Many respondents saw living close to the border as an opportunity due to increased job opportunities, better cross-border cooperation, and enhanced cultural exchange. Some respondents noted disadvantages such as complicated transportation and environmental concerns.

The results were quite similar for younger people 29 years of age or under and people older than 29. Out of the young people who responded to the survey, about 75% saw the border as an

opportunity. Out of all citizens who responded, 67% saw the border as an opportunity, so younger people were slightly more positive about this.

### 2.3.2 In the place where you live, what are the main topics where cooperation is needed?

Environmental protection emerged as the most significant area for cross-border cooperation, with approximately 30% of respondents emphasising its importance. Respondents highlighted the need for joint initiatives to preserve unique ecosystems and promote eco-friendly tourism. Specific concerns included reducing environmental pollution in the Baltic Sea and improving the state of the Gulf of Finland. Collaborative efforts in environmental protection and sustainable development are seen as essential to address these issues effectively.

Transportation was identified as a critical area for cooperation by around 25% of respondents. Improving transportation infrastructure and public transport services is crucial for enhancing connectivity between regions. Respondents mentioned the need for better road networks, cycling routes, and public transport services. Enhancing connectivity between regions, such as between Åland and mainland Finland, was seen as vital for facilitating movement and economic activities.

Cultural exchange was highlighted by about 20% of respondents as an important area for cooperation. Enhancing cultural exchange and cooperation in cultural events and tourism was considered essential for promoting cultural understanding and integration. Respondents emphasised the importance of joint marketing campaigns and collaborative cultural projects to foster a sense of community.

Economic development was emphasised by approximately 15% of respondents as a priority for cross-border cooperation. Attracting investments in infrastructure, technology, and sustainable energy is seen as vital for boosting the local economy and creating jobs. Respondents highlighted the need for supporting entrepreneurship and business development across borders to enhance economic opportunities and growth.

Social issues were mentioned by around 10% of respondents as an area needing cooperation. Addressing social issues such as healthcare, education, and integration requires a collaborative approach. Respondents emphasised the importance of sharing best practices and developing comprehensive solutions to enhance social services and support systems through cross-border cooperation.

Among the younger generation, equal opportunities and harmonisation of development were brought up in several answers. On a more practical level, for example, aligning the taxation practises for improved opportunities to work in other countries were mentioned. Better logistics would also be needed for this, and for the cooperation to be more effective. Environmental issues were also high on their agenda, along with related practical things such as improving cycling opportunities, public transport, and waste sorting.

### 2.3.3 Can you name an Interreg project that you find useful in the place where you live?

The responses highlighted several Interreg projects that have been implemented in the programme regions. They also gave some information on the level of awareness and engagement of the citizens with these projects.

As expected, the awareness of Interreg projects varied significantly among the respondents. Approximately 40% of them were able to name one or more Interreg projects that had been implemented close to where they live. Some of the respondents named several projects. Around 50 different projects were indicated by name, and some respondents were able to name a topic around which they knew a project had been implemented. Most named projects were those funded by the Central Baltic programme, but also other projects were mentioned.

Some respondents mentioned their direct involvement in these projects, either as project partners or participants from the projects' target groups. For example, one respondent was a project leader for a Central Baltic project, while another mentioned involvement in different projects. A majority of respondents either did not know of any Interreg projects implemented in their region or could not recall specific project names.

Projects mentioned by respondents covered a wide range of topics such as environmental protection, cultural heritage, tourism development, transportation, economic development, and innovation as well as social cohesion.

The geographic distribution of the named projects was also diverse, with mentions of projects in the whole Baltic Sea region in addition to the Central Baltic countries. Projects funded by other Interreg programmes were also mentioned. This reflects the broad reach of Interreg initiatives and their potential to address regional challenges through cross-border cooperation. Respondents over 29 years of age were able to name a project slightly better than those of 29 years or under, but the difference was small.

### 2.3.4 In your daily life, what are the biggest difficulties for cross-border cooperation?

The responses highlighted several key difficulties that impede cross-border cooperation, including regulatory differences, logistical challenges, funding issues, and cultural and language barriers.

Regulatory differences were identified as a significant challenge by approximately 25% of respondents. Navigating different laws and regulations between regions was indicated to complicate business operations, investments, and personal matters like healthcare and social services. Respondents emphasised the need for streamlined tax regulations and better alignment of legal frameworks to facilitate smoother cooperation.

Logistical challenges were mentioned by around 20% of respondents. Due to geographic locations, transportation and communication between regions can be difficult, impacting the efficiency of cross-border business, access to services, and the movement of people. Respondents highlighted the need for improved transportation infrastructure and better connectivity to overcome these challenges.

Acquiring funding and resources was cited as a major obstacle by approximately 15% of respondents. Securing adequate funding and resources for joint projects can be challenging, requiring careful planning and negotiation. Respondents noted that coordinating financial investments from different jurisdictions can delay the implementation of important initiatives. The need for “bridge funding” solutions to support civil society’s participation in projects was also emphasised.

Cultural barriers were identified by about 15% of respondents as a hindrance to cross-border cooperation. Differences in language, communication styles, and cultural practices can create misunderstandings and hinder collaboration. Respondents mentioned the importance of overcoming these barriers through better cultural understanding and integration efforts.

Lack of awareness and engagement was highlighted by around 10% of respondents. Many people are not aware of the cross-border opportunities and funds available, and there is often a lack of interest in participating in collaborative projects. Respondents emphasised the need for better communication and outreach to inform citizens about the benefits and opportunities of cross-border cooperation.

Technological integration was mentioned by approximately 10% of respondents as a challenge. Ensuring compatibility and integration of technological systems and infrastructure between regions can be complex. This affects areas such as digital services, environmental monitoring, and transport logistics.

Other challenges included political obstacles and differing priorities and needs between regions. Respondents also mentioned the difficulty of finding suitable partners for collaboration and the impact of geopolitical tensions on cross-border cooperation.

Respondents aged 29 years or under saw language issues as the prominent difficulty in cooperating with neighbouring countries. They also did not feel that they have sufficient networks for cross-border cooperation, which is understandable for persons in a fairly early stage of their career development.

### **2.3.5 What would be the cross-border cooperation project of your dreams?**

The responses included a diverse range of dream projects, focusing on areas such as environmental sustainability, cultural exchange, economic development, and social well-being.

Environmental sustainability emerged as a prominent theme, with approximately 35% of respondents envisioning projects aimed at protecting and enhancing the natural environment. Respondents proposed specific initiatives such as the establishment of a Sustainable Innovation Corridor between Åland, Finland, and Sweden, focusing on green infrastructure, renewable energy, and eco-friendly transport solutions. Other suggestions included projects for marine conservation, pollution control, and sustainable forestry and agriculture practices to combat climate change and biodiversity loss.

Cultural exchange and cooperation were highlighted by around 25% of respondents. These dream projects included cultural and educational exchanges, joint cultural events, and tourism development initiatives. Respondents emphasised the importance of fostering cultural understanding and integration through collaborative projects that celebrate the unique heritage

and traditions of each region. Examples included cross-border festivals, music events, and educational programs for youth.

Economic development was a key focus for approximately 20% of respondents. Dream projects in this area included initiatives to boost economic growth through investments in infrastructure, technology, and innovation. Respondents proposed the creation of joint innovation and research centres, support for entrepreneurship, and development of sustainable business practices. Projects aimed at enhancing trade and transport links between regions were also mentioned.

Social well-being was emphasised by about 15% of respondents. These dream projects focused on improving social services, healthcare, and education through cross-border cooperation. Respondents highlighted the need for collaborative efforts to address social issues such as youth engagement, gender equality, and community development. Projects aimed at enhancing social cohesion and providing better support systems for vulnerable populations were also suggested.

Other themes included projects related to security and defence, digital infrastructure, and public services. Respondents mentioned the importance of joint efforts to improve safety, enhance digital connectivity, and provide better public services across borders.

The dream projects for young people tended to be more on a practical level, consisting of for example joint cultural projects and enhancing youth participation into different societal functions.



## 2.4. Interesting quotes

"The Baltic Sea is close to my heart. My hope is that we can unite all the coastal states to work together for its benefit." Over 29, Finland

"Various border obstacles, and tax-related issues exist between the regions, and pensions earned in different countries become problematic to access in the end. On Åland, the tax border is also an obstacle and discriminatory, as companies refuse to ship goods to Åland due to the bureaucracy". Over 29, Åland

"The cooperation of my dreams is centred around tourism. There are high expectations for the potential of tourism in our region, but even after years of development, the industry has not yet reached the scale we have aimed for." 29 or younger, Finland.

"I would like to cooperate with nature and environmental organisations and nature conservation authorities in Estonia and Latvia to develop a modern and resource-efficient agriculture and forestry with the least possible climate impact and loss of nutrients." Over 29, Sweden.

"My dream project is to support a project arising from the community's own initiative, so that it becomes a reality in cooperation with neighbours who have similar interests." Over 29, Estonia

"The dream project would be cooperation between Baltic countries in terms of Baltic space, how life near the sea affects the ways of seeing the surroundings, gaining knowledge etc. and how do we see the life development near the coastline." 29 or younger, Latvia.

"My dream project is one led by young people, designed to help other young people get more involved in society." 29 or younger, Finland.

"Business development, integration (for both people and services) and climate mitigation". Over 29, Åland.

"Collaboration is a key factor in any industry. Powerful initiatives and projects are born in cooperation. From the point of view of the fields, one direction should be focused on developing the entrepreneurship of young people (girls) and breaking down barriers. Another topic that we would like to focus on in the joint project is the involvement of young people at the local level. Get to the point where the local level understands what value a partnership with a young person offers to both sides." Over 29, Estonia.

"The main topics should be determined in cross-border stakeholder forums and surveys - they may differ from county to county. From the citizens' point of view, it is important that all services are available, that economic activity is active and that citizens participate in decision-making." Over 29, Latvia.

“Currently it is the ferry traffic between Åland and Sweden that is affecting my everyday life the most” Over 29, Sweden.

“More shared technical solutions are needed. That would make cooperation smoother. I would like to see more daily cooperation to make everyday things smoother.” 29 and younger, Estonia.

“One of the aspects could be the effective management of human resources - currently, in fields such as health, the social field suffers from a lack of specialists, which essentially also affects the development of fields, including the implementation of innovative solutions. And considering that cooperation is a great way to adopt good practices, the introduction of new solutions in effective human resource management would be a good topic for cooperation implementation.” Over 29, Latvia.

“I would like to see a festival or music event organised across borders with our neighbours that would bring together music and culture from all countries. I would especially emphasise youth music at the festival, as young people are the future of our countries.” 29 or younger, Estonia.

“The cooperation project of my dreams is the establishment of a Sustainable Innovation Corridor between Åland, Finland, and Sweden. This ambitious project would focus on enhancing economic growth, social well-being, and environmental sustainability through cross-border collaboration.” Over 29, Åland.

“Cultural activities, environmental questions and issues promoting peace” Over 29, Sweden.

“I'd say most important are social inclusion, greater participation of all people in social life - this could be the place where the shoe squeezes and where cooperation could be helpful. And also support mental health services and opportunities” Over 29, Estonia

“My dream cooperation project would be developing essential services for residents as human-to-human interactions alongside digital services. Through collaboration, we can find ways to provide these services without significantly increasing costs.” Over 29, Finland.

“Collaboration in infrastructure for cycling/hiking routes (with good side roads, not just marked routes through woods); joint public transport services, opportunities to share expertise on both sides - like teachers in formal or nonformal education.” Over 29, Latvia.

## 3. Recommendations for post-2027

### 3.1. Topics to be covered by the Central Baltic programme

The respondents were generally happy with the topics covered by the Central Baltic programme. The only new proposal was to include topics of safety and security, especially to mitigate the risks of potential military aggression from outside of the region. According to the survey answers, environmental and business development issues should stay on the programme agenda with labour market-related topics including education and social development. It was proposed by many that tourism development should be brought back as a programme topic.

When discussing the niche of Central Baltic cross-border cooperation, several things came up. Cooperation and division of work with other programmes was seen as important. Sea and water-related issues, including archipelagos and islands, are a clear niche. Result orientation seems to be descriptive of the Central Baltic programme as well. It was appreciated that Central Baltic works on a somewhat smaller scale and closer to people than transnational programmes. This could be emphasised even more by for example empowering people and caring more for the sparsely populated areas. Cross-border collaboration and maintaining networks must still be strengthened.

### 3.2. Geography of the Central Baltic programme

The Central Baltic programme area has remained quite similar from the 2014 - 2020 period. The addition of the Latgale region from Latvia and the region of Etelä-Savo from Finland was done during 2023. This development followed the suspension of the eastern border regions' cooperation programmes that included Russia or Belarus. Thus, the presence of external border regions is more prominent in the current programme setup.

There was no specific question related to programme geography in the surveys, and it was not specifically commented on in the answers to other questions either. It was mentioned in some answers that improved cooperation possibilities beyond the programme area would be appreciated. Partners from outside of the programme area are already allowed in the projects during the 2021-2027 period. The current programme also includes possibilities of involving other regions in different forms, mainly in the context of dissemination or capitalisation activities, or as potential target markets for business development projects.

The maritime nature of the Central Baltic programme area was very clearly seen as an opportunity. Cooperating across maritime borders is well-established and natural in the region, and it does not differ from cooperating over land borders in any way. On the contrary, it widens the scope of possible cooperation topics, and increases the unity of the region.

### 3.3. Implementation of the programme and its projects

The survey results from both stakeholders and citizens indicate a strong interest in cross-border cooperation in general. Environmental protection, business development, and tourism were the most prominent topic identified for potential cross-border cooperation in the future. Many other topics were also mentioned, some new and some that are already included into the programme intervention logic. The received feedback will be considered in the future programming processes.

There were also significant challenges identified. They were related to communication issues, legislative differences, and different procedures of applying for and receiving funding. Addressing these issues through simpler procedures, better networks, and increased investment opportunities could enhance the effectiveness of the Central Baltic Programme.

Practical proposals included for example a seed money for project planning. Reducing bureaucracy in the application and project implementation processes in general was proposed. Quicker payments were called for. It was also mentioned that funding possibilities should be communicated towards potential applicants even more, and that the contents and timing of the calls for project applications should be more uniform and predictable.

Extended possibilities for investments were very much wished for. While small-scale investments are currently possible in some Programme Objectives, due to programme design they are not prominent in very many projects. Especially the stakeholders were hoping for opportunities to have bigger investments inside the funded projects. These answers stem in part from the external border regions, where the recently terminated funding programmes have been more investment intensive.

Ambition to get new and especially smaller organisations involved as project partners was presented. The programme has facilitated this by allowing for small projects with a lower threshold for participation. This part of the programme can be further developed to be even more attractive to smaller organisations.

There is a good number of projects being implemented in the 2021-2027 period already, and results are starting to emerge. The division of work between transnational and cross-border programmes is working quite well. New applicants are needed all the time, and information about the programme must be spread effectively. Many times, the same “professional” applicants are continuously active and get a lot of funding. Result orientation is appreciated, and an even more practical approach could be applied.