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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Permanent Representatives Committee

Subject: Preparation of GAC: draft Council conclusions on 25 years of Interreg: its contribution to Cohesion Policy goals

- Exchange of views
- Adoption

1. With the occasion of the Interreg anniversary of 25 years, the Luxembourg Presidency has initiated a political debate on Interreg and its contribution to Cohesion Policy goals.
2. In preparation of this political debate, the Luxembourg Presidency jointly organised with the European Commission and INTERACT a conference on the 25 Years of Interreg on 15-16 September 2015 to celebrate this anniversary, consider the most effective implementation of related 2014-2020 programmes and begin the discussion about the longer-term future of European Territorial Cooperation. The Presidency also prepared a background document entitled "Looking back on 25 years of Interreg and preparing the future of Territorial cooperation".

3. In this context, the Luxembourg Presidency presented draft Council Conclusions on "25 years of Interreg: its contribution to Cohesion Policy goals", which were examined by the Working Party on Structural Measures at several meetings on 6 October, 27 October and 5 November.
4. At its last meeting on 5 November, the Working Party on Structural Measures finalised the text, as set out in ANNEX I to this note, leaving open a limited number of issues, referred to in paragraphs 12, 18 and 19. More specifically:
 - some delegations consider that the results of the (informal) conference on the 25 Years of Interreg should not be reflected in the (formal) draft Council Conclusions (paragraph 12). The compromise text proposed by the Presidency has therefore been reformulated as to clearly express that the Council only takes note of the lessons learnt about Interreg, as expressed by participants at the September 2015 conference.
 - as far as paragraph 18 (text in brackets) is concerned, one delegation opposes the reference to possible support through Interreg programmes in response to challenges related to migration.
 - as for paragraph 19 (text in brackets), some delegations consider that there is no need for a common statistical approach in the field of European territorial Cooperation.
5. The Permanent Representatives Committee is therefore invited to:
 - examine the remaining open issues with reference to the above points (as indicated in paragraph 4 above) in preparation of the discussions among Ministers responsible for Cohesion Policy on 18 November 2015,
 - recommend to the Council (General Affairs Council meeting on 18 November 2015) to adopt the draft Council conclusions, as set out in Annex I to the present note.

Draft Council Conclusions
25 years of Interreg: Its contribution to Cohesion Policy goals

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION:

- (1) RECALLING the aims of strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion, as set out in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and the objectives of the European Structural and Investment Funds to achieve these goals;
- (2) STRESSING that achieving economic, social and territorial cohesion is particularly challenging in border regions;
- (3) STRESSING the significant contribution that European Territorial Cooperation (ETC), also referred to as Interreg, can bring in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds and as an integral part of cohesion policy;
- (4) RECALLING that Interreg exists for 25 years, and that the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and INTERACT organised a conference on 15-16 September 2015 to celebrate this anniversary, and consider the most effective implementation of 2014-2020 programmes and begin the discussion about the longer-term future of European Territorial Cooperation;
- (5) WELCOMING the initiative of the Luxembourg presidency which allowed for the first time to have a formal political debate on Interreg;
- (6) WELCOMING the Commission's EU-wide public consultation on the remaining obstacles to cross-border cooperation, launched on 21 September 2015 on the occasion of the European Cooperation Day¹;

¹ European Commission - Press release IP/15/5686

- (7) TAKING NOTE of the results of a first-ever Eurobarometer survey conducted by the Commission in 2015 to identify and map attitudes of citizens living in the border areas with a view to arriving at more targeted EU interventions²; STRESSING in that respect that efforts have to be done to enhance the visibility of Interreg.
- (8) TAKING NOTE of the declaration of the Committee of the Regions on "25 years of Interreg: new impetus for cross-border cooperation" of 2 September 2015³;
- (9) STRESSING the positive role that cross-border, transnational and Europe-wide cooperation of Interreg, can play in enhancing regional integration in larger functional areas and in supporting, where appropriate, a successful delivery of existing and future EU Macro-regional Strategies, as well as other EU-wide sectoral strategies.
- (10) HIGHLIGHTING the particular role of Interreg in outermost regions and in sparsely populated areas in the northernmost regions as an important tool for strengthening their regional integration; HIGHLIGHTING also the important role of ENI and IPA programmes sharing the benefits of cooperation with candidate countries and third countries.
- (11) CONSIDERS that the 25th anniversary of Interreg offers an opportunity to review its achievements, assess its impacts through rigorous analysis of past performance and start the discussion about its future;
- (12) TAKES NOTICE of the lessons learnt about Interreg, expressed by participants at the September 2015 conference:
- a) the socio-economic and sustainable development added value, initiating additional joint approaches, cooperative development processes and solutions, supporting the development of the Internal Market and tackling problems crossing national borders, such as connectivity, environmental, health and climate change related problems;

² Flash Eurobarometer 422. Cross-border cooperation in the EU.

³ COR-2015-04462-00-00-DECL-TRA (EN)

- b) the cultural and institutional added value, establishing a cooperation culture between organisations and individuals from all-over Europe, introducing a European perspective into the day-to-day activities of public administrations at all levels, initiating new practices of cooperation between regions and local authorities from different EU and non-EU countries, which allows building up a considerable stock of new knowledge and enhances a better understanding across cultures and communities in Europe;
 - c) the political added value, supporting peace, stability and regional integration within the EU and outside, in the framework of the enlargement and neighbourhood policy, and across the world, as illustrated at the Conference on cases in Latin America and West Africa;
 - d) exploring factors for any successful cooperation on which Interreg can build, such as: trust building, communication, reputation, fairness, enforcement, "we-identity" and reciprocity;
 - e) the EU-wide diffusion of innovation through Interreg's character as a "laboratory" for experimentation and innovation, including social innovation;
- (13) INVITES the Commission, the Member States and all other actors in their different roles to ensure adequate visibility, communication and awareness raising about the objectives and results of Interreg programmes, and to enhance synergies with other Cohesion Policy programmes whilst promoting better capitalisation of territorial cooperation results by transferring them into national and regional policies and programmes, where appropriate;
- (14) REITERATES the relevance of the main elements of the Cohesion policy reform agreed for the 2014-2020 programming period and the role, which Interreg can play in contributing to the priorities of the Europe 2020 strategy;

- (15) REITERATES in particular its strong support for the new concept of “results-orientation”; UNDERLINES that it is important that Member States gather and process, with the technical support of the Commission, national, cross-border and transnational data to contribute to reinforcing the results-orientation of Interreg programmes; and INVITES the Commission and the Member States, in cooperation with Interreg programme managing authorities, to assess how results-orientation can be better implemented and targeted at the specificities of the European Territorial Cooperation objectives and its way of working;
- (16) STRESSES the significant role of Interreg programmes in enhancing the economic, social and territorial potential of regions, and in particular border regions, and in reinforcing their competitiveness, notably by fostering synergies between smart specialisation strategies, cluster collaboration, the development of innovation networks and of new industrial value chains across borders;
- (17) ACKNOWLEDGES the efforts done by the Commission to provide more flexible governance tools for the current programming period and INVITES the Commission, in cooperation with Member States, to consider the implementation challenges and complexity of Interreg programmes and to propose solutions, inter alia in the context of the findings of the High Level Group of Independent Experts on Monitoring Simplification for Beneficiaries of ESI funds; and therefore INVITES the Commission and the High Level Group on Simplification set up by the Commission to consider examining with particular attention the specificities of the Interreg programmes;
- (18) [CONSIDERS that Interreg programmes, even though operating with a medium and long-term perspective, may support, where necessary and justified, and in complementarity with other appropriate funding streams, to help respond to migration related challenges within the framework of existing programme priorities and agreed intervention logic. RECOGNISES the potential role for the ESPON and the INTERACT programme within the scope of their agreed objectives of providing territorial evidence (ESPON) and supporting Interreg Managing Authorities and other programme bodies (INTERACT) in this;]

- (19) CALLS on the Commission and the Member States to initiate a structured multi-stakeholder debate on EU level on the future of Interreg, providing wider attention to Interreg in the framework of the debate on the future of Cohesion policy, investigating, [based on a common statistical approach,] the effectiveness of Interreg programmes, taking into account the previous and current programming period results and evaluations, the evidence generated for example under the ESPON programme on long-term trends and EU-wide developments, the revision of the Europe 2020 strategy and the discussions on the scenarios for the development of the EU territory;
- (20) REITERATES its recommendation that a regular debate in the **General Affairs Council** takes place among relevant ministers to discuss on the implementation and results of the ESI Funds⁴ and REMAINS COMMITTED to discuss European Territorial Cooperation issues as an integral part of Cohesion Policy in the framework of **General Affairs Council** sessions dedicated to this policy.
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⁴ General Affairs (Cohesion) Council Conclusions, Brussels, 19 November 2014