



**Interreg**  
Euregio Meuse-Rhine  
European Regional Development Fund



# Summary Interreg EMR 2021-2027

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Draft Programme

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## 1. Programme strategy: main development challenges and policy responses

### 1.1. Programme area

The Euregio Meuse-Rhine (EMR) was established in 1976 and constitutes one of the oldest cross-border cooperative ventures operating at cross border level in the European Union. In 1991, the partnership was institutionalised by the establishment of the EMR Foundation. The EMR is formed by five regions: the Dutch province of Limburg, the Belgian provinces of Limburg and Liège, the German-speaking community in Belgium and the German region of Aachen.

In previous Interreg programmes, these core members have been working with the Eifelkreis Bitburg-Prüm and the Landkreis Vulkaneifel. These seven regions together form the core area of the Interreg EMR programmes. Cross-border cooperation between these regions has offered new opportunities, that contributed to the quality of life of the over four million people living in the EMR.

Interreg V-A EMR 2014-2020 introduced privileged partnerships under priority axis 1/innovation with the Belgian district of Leuven and the Dutch COROP region Southeast Brabant. In addition, the Huy-Waremme district was considered a privileged partner for projects under the axes 3/social Inclusion and training, and 4/territorial cohesion. The strategic involvement of these areas has been of great value to address cross-border challenges.

The new Interreg period 2021-2027 is a critical moment to reassess joint characteristics, common challenges and development potentials for transnational cooperation. Leading principle for Interreg EMR is building upon the **functional area principle**. The partners of the programme consider it important that the existing connections and networks continue to contribute to an active economic and social development of the current border region.

Discussions are still ongoing on adding Duisburg and Düsseldorf as privileged partnerships to the programme area.

### 1.2. Road to a common strategy for the EMR

Through the implementation of five consecutive Interreg programmes, cross-border cooperation in the EMR is based on a long tradition. Numerous projects carried out in the border area have enabled the development and consolidation of good cooperation structures.

For the new programming period 2021-2027, the EMR is faced again with the challenge of setting priorities and objectives for the next seven years, based on concrete needs and societal challenges. The programme partners consider it important not to leave activities in the 2021-2027 programme to chance, but to be clear about the societal challenges where further development of the programme area should take place or where added value can be achieved. These societal challenges will receive special support with the help of Interreg.

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These include challenges relating to climate adaptation and innovative capacity, as well as challenges relating to the quality of life and cooperation in the programme area. Think about cross-border barriers in the labour market, healthcare, education, security and language use. For each topic, the aim is to bring together relevant actors at all levels in order to actively seek ways to reduce the barriers identified, or to facilitate the exploitation of the potential.

General starting points for the choice of the new priorities and (specific) objectives are that they:

- focus on leveraging strengths and opportunities with potential of the programme area to overcome weaknesses and threats,
- anticipate future cross-border challenges,
- effectively address the societal challenges in the programme area,
- are tailored to the needs of the actors and citizens in the programme area,
- attract many and new actors to cross-border cooperation and to involve their implementation.
- take into account the findings and recommendations in external sources such as the country-specific recommendations for Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands and the border orientation paper for the EMR of the European Commission, as well as the socio-economic analysis and SWOT,
- have been based on input from the programme partners, which has emerged in an iterative process.

This 2021-2027 programme for the EMR is the translation of the European objectives into the specific challenges of the programme area. It is the joint strategy of the partners to achieve key developments in the programme area over the next seven years and to guide the joint cross-border development of the EMR into one of the most intelligent, sustainable and inclusive regions of excellence in Europe.

Below is the route that leads to the joint development strategy, which is based on five grand societal challenges that the EMR 2021-2027 programme intends to focus on.

### 1.3. Main joint challenges in the EMR

#### (i) Economic, social and territorial disparities

The EMR is **typically a functional area** with a lot of cross-border interactions. It is also an internationally oriented region with many opportunities to develop into a leading knowledge economy, including through the presence of four renowned universities, several colleges, university hospitals, leading knowledge and research institutes, campuses and a wide range of relevant economic sectors. The EMR includes the ELA-triangle, a well-known and strong innovation region on European level, with leading knowledge in topics such as health and life sciences, photonics, biobased materials, etc. These 'knowledge factories and boosters' play a key role in the business climate and economic development of the region.

Overall, the EMR scores particularly well regarding publications (public or non-public) and R&D expenditure. Yet, the region scores significantly lower in terms of applications, so the valorisation of knowledge. The cross-border challenge here is to **increase the market uptake of innovation activities by SMEs, start-ups and scale-ups**. In this context, the EMR has a lot of potential and a

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wide-ranging network of companies and knowledge institutes that, together with their spin-offs and spin-outs, occupy a leading position in innovation. Moreover, this strong industrial base and supporting services companies and research institutes provides a great opportunity to develop current industries into 4.0 level companies.

In addition, the region has a **strong logistics infrastructure**, with (cargo) airports and multimodal ports and terminals. These regional characteristics are combined with a strong common historical and cultural base. The EMR is characterised by a special and exciting combination of urban and rural areas, factors that can strongly contribute to the attractiveness of the region for people and businesses. According to the Well-Being Index of the OECD (2016), the EMR especially scores higher than average on safety, civic engagement, community and life satisfaction. This indicates the region offers a **pleasant living environment** to its inhabitants and makes the region attractive to visitors. Cross-border cooperation shall support the development of the territory into a leading knowledge-based economy and at the same time better open up the territory as a whole.

Despite the fact that the EMR is a region with great strength and a pleasant living environment, the region is characterised by a number of disparities and it faces various challenges in the near future. From an economic perspective, the GDP per capita can act as an understandable indicator of living standards. Although the GDP per capita of the EMR regions is increasing, the EMR is **losing its comparative advantage** to the EU-28. This is due to the fact that the average productivity growth of the EU-28 has increased relatively more than in the EMR. This observation strengthens the regional partners' ambition to continue the development of an internationally oriented EMR into a **leading innovation region**, spurring new competitiveness, productivity and economic growth from which all sectors, businesses and income groups can benefit.

A crucial aspect within this joint challenge is to address the implications of **an ageing population** for the labour market across the EMR programme area. The potential labour force is declining, with an even faster increasing number of people in retirement age. The rapid decline of the potential labour force and loss of experienced workforce is a serious problem for employers in the near future. In short, **retaining and inspiring talented people** is key to ensure future economic growth and keep the employment structure healthy. A substantial part of the solution is to accelerate ongoing cross-border exchanges in various ways to **stimulate cross-border labour mobility** in the programme area. Additionally, there is a need of increased and focussed investments in educational systems and **life long learning** throughout the EMR.

Overall, the number of enterprises and start-ups in the programme area has increased in recent years, mainly as a result of the flourishing economy. The sectoral structure is fairly similar in the partner regions with wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, professional, scientific and technical activities, and financial and insurance activities as dominant sectors. This business climate represents an innovative, stable and healthy economy with low levels of unemployment. However, it is noticeable that there is an **underrepresentation of sectors such as ICT and business services**. These are the sectors that have shown the strongest productivity growth in recent years in metropolitan areas. It is supposed that ICT and business services will continue to be a driver of growth. For the programme area, it is therefore vital to not miss the boat in a forward-looking digital economy in which important jobs can be created and productivity can be improved. The recent COVID-19 crisis shows that the good economic position can also be quickly wiped out again, with rising

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unemployment and a rise in the number of bankruptcies. This presents the EMR with a major challenge to **revitalize the economy** and **develop new business models** to get back on a growth path.

In terms of mobility, the car accessibility of the EMR is well developed with travel times to the most neighbouring cities within a 30 to 45 minute car drive. Still, public transport remains an important area of concern. Although public transport is well organised within each country, **it takes too much time to travel across borders**. For example, it takes two hours by bus from Hasselt to Aachen, while the car drive is less than one hour. Different technical, political and administrative orientations of public transport means hamper further development of cross-border regional public transport. This lack of accessible public transport across borders is a constraint on the economic growth and social cohesion and shows in practice that the frontier between member states still exists. Accordingly, the programme area is highly motivated to continue to invest in better coordination of cross-border public transport and also in streamlining the ticketing system.

When it comes to renewable energy and greenhouse gases, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands are all three lagging behind on EU-28 average emission numbers. However, all three countries are making progress in the rise of the share of renewables and decline of greenhouse gases. Considerable efforts are needed to meet the commitments of the Paris Climate Agreement. Particularly in the border region, areas and local communities suffer from the presence of the border and potential cross-border synergies are not fully exploited. In order to further accelerate the energy transition on a regional scale, one of the biggest cross-border challenges is to ensure better cross-border interconnection of regional/national electricity systems to enhance security of supply and to integrate more renewables into energy markets. Besides a more efficient energy system, increased cross-border transmissions reduce overall system costs and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. This goes hand in hand with **energy efficiency** and improvement of **resource efficiency** as a boost to economic growth. More focused cross-border cooperation in this field is essential towards sustainable economic growth.

#### **(ii) Joint investment needs and complementarity EMR programme with other forms of support;**

During the preparation process for the new EMR 2021-2027 programme, the programme partners reflected on the future of their own regions and the programme area in general. They have the ambition to strengthen the region's leading position in knowledge and innovation, with the aim of generating societal and economic impact. Taking into account the provisions of the European (draft) regulations and the objectives of the partners, the Working Group 2021-2027 prepared a first programme outline. This programme outline was presented to the participants of the stakeholder conference "Working together across borders - Interreg EMR 2021-2027" on 24 October 2019. Participants were broadly invited, resulting in a broad representation of actors from the programme area. During the stakeholder conference, all participants were able to input and discuss their objectives and wishes.

Both from the partners and from the participants of the stakeholder conference the aim was expressed to concentrate the strategic objectives of the EMR 2021-2027 programme around a limited number of societal challenges in the border area, within which there would be room for a multisectoral approach with a focus on the core sectors of the area. In this respect, these grand societal challenges count as the profile, ambition and storyline of the EMR 2021-2027 programme to the outside world.

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The Working Group 2021-2027 has further elaborated and developed this in subsequent steps, by further discussing the formulation of the grand societal challenges for the EMR and also with the aim of further rationalising the number of specific objectives. An important follow-up step in this process is the creation of a matrix in which the menu list of Policy Objectives and Specific Objectives prescribed by the European Commission is set against the societal challenges for the EMR. In this way, the Working Group 2021-2027 has tried to achieve a further tightening of the number of topics and specific objectives of the EMR 2021-2027 programme as well as a high degree of consensus. In this process, thematic and content-related experts have also been consulted in order to sharpen the focus on what the main challenges are concretely for each topic and how they can be addressed.

This led ultimately to the selection of **five grand societal challenges** with a cross-border impact on the entire EMR and which also guides the allocation of resources from Interreg EMR 2021-2027.

- Industrial Transition;
- Towards a Green Society;
- Healthier Citizens;
- Tourism in a High-Quality Region;
- Live and Work without Borders.

#### 1.4. The joint Grand Societal Challenges in the EMR

Further elaboration of these five grand societal challenges follows below.

##### **Industrial Transition**

The process of industrial transition poses enormous challenges to the EMR and at the same time offers great opportunities to excel economically. However, to meet those challenges and seize the opportunities, substantial investments in advanced technologies and services, people's skills and talents, as well as research and innovation are required.

*Promoting Industry 4.0 and key enabling technologies to facilitate the economy's industrial transition*

Development and implementation of Industry 4.0<sup>1</sup> and key enabling technologies (KETs<sup>2</sup>) present enormous growth potential for businesses in the EMR. At the same time, these industrial developments have an economy-wide impact, challenging all sectors to a greater or lesser extent to reshape their processes and methodologies in a different, smarter way. It goes without saying that companies in the EMR have a lot to do with these challenges. The effective development and adoption of advanced technologies takes long R&D-processes and high investment needs, or put differently, it requires 'patient money' and a long-term effort, involving many risks. That is why the programme partners want to invest in boosting digital technology and KETs, and the integration of physical and digital systems. KETs such as advanced manufacturing, industrial data, automation/robotics, 3D printing, Internet of Things, blockchain technologies, artificial intelligence, photonics, biotech, nanotech and electronics offer a range of opportunities that will enable the EMR

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<sup>1</sup> Industry 4.0 is the ongoing automation of traditional manufacturing and industrial practices, using modern smart technology.

<sup>2</sup> KETs are a selected group of technologies that will allow European industries to retain competitiveness and capitalise on new markets.

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to conquer a leading position in the emerging markets for the products and services of the future. The application and valorisation of these KETs offer businesses across the EMR new business opportunities, improving their competitive advantage to take full advantage of advanced technologies or innovative business models.

#### *Advanced technologies and innovative businesses pave the way to a greener economy*

Enhancing research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies are key to modernizing EMR's industrial base. At the same time, this industrial transition offers scope to organise and shape production processes, products and services in a greener way. The industrial transition, by promoting the development and implementation of KETs, will inevitably lead to an increased uptake of renewable energy and greening of production processes. The EMR has strong regional clusters in the fields of battery technology, integrated PV, green hydrogen, carbon-free synthetic fuels, smart grids, electrification of industry and heat and storage solutions. Businesses working on renewable energy solutions should leverage their own strengths in combination with innovation capacity across borders. This will create new business opportunities for sustainable economic growth. In fact, it will contribute to rising the share of renewables and declining the share of greenhouse gases in the EMR.

#### *Impact on labour market, education and lifelong learning*

Industrial transition and demographic change will undoubtedly affect how people work and live in the EMR. These developments will make the labour market more dynamic and bring with them more diverse forms of work and new jobs, requiring new skills. To put it another way, innovation and industrial transition do not lead to fewer jobs, but to new forms of employment. In order to prevent a mismatch between qualifications of employees and the demands of employers, increased efforts are necessary to acquire, develop and utilize new skills (knowledge, talents and qualities). Matching based on skills is the future challenge, in order to develop the EMR towards a flexible labour market with equal opportunities. Moreover, the EMR has a strong potential for cross-border labour mobility. Such mobility can help to fill vacancies that are difficult to fill, reduce unemployment and skills mismatches and retain talented people for the long term.

On the demand side, skill requirements are changing rapidly, with enterprises, especially SMEs, struggling to find the talent they need. For industry, it is crucial to support new forms of education, as competition for in particular technically skilled talent will become even fiercer in the coming years. Therefore, education and training of sufficient technically skilled personnel is of paramount importance for the success of the industrial transition. On the supply side, knowledge and training institutions have to take responsibility to modernise their curricula, tailored to the needs of the industry. Reshaping curricula is a considerable challenge, implying complex decision-making processes and various administrative obstacles in the EMR. The new industrial age requires new ways of organising learning experiences of individuals and groups for Industry 4.0, in close collaboration between knowledge and training institutions and the industry. Also on the supply side, employees need to take personal responsibility for their learning trajectory and should be encouraged to embrace the concept of lifelong learning.

#### **Towards a Green Society**

Following the Paris Agreement and the Green Deal, Europe is increasingly seizing the opportunity to make a transition to a green society and economy, providing jobs and social benefits as well as protecting vital resources. However, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach for fostering greener

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growth. That is why the EMR requires a tailored approach to promote renewable energy, to address climate change, to increase the uptake of circular concepts, and to foster a 'greener' labour market and education.

#### *Increasing the share of renewable energy*

There is widespread support amongst programme partners for using renewable energy, which provide electricity without giving rise to any carbon dioxide emissions. Green entrepreneurs and renewable energy communities have to play a pivotal role in the transition towards a green society. These groups involve citizens, (social) entrepreneurs, public authorities and community organisations participate directly in the energy transition by jointly investing in, producing, selling and distributing renewable energy. Beyond the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, there are many benefits for the EMR's society and economy involved, including economic development, the creation of new jobs, cheaper energy, providing a greater share of EMR's own energy supply, community cohesion and energy security. In order to accomplish a fully green society in the EMR, the border region's challenge is to support the emergence of energy communities by providing financing, expertise and advice, and ensuring that regulatory issues can be easily understood and navigated.

#### *Addressing climate change and embracing a circular economy*

Climate change and natural resource scarcity pose new challenges to the EMR. Climate change is inherently transboundary in character, as climate change effects do not stop at man-made borders and cannot be dealt with merely at a local, regional or even national level. However, climate adaptation solutions have been, up until now, a predominantly domestic responsibility. The programme partners are determined to change these deeply ingrained attitudes in favour of more effective joint climate adaptation. In other words, an ambitious and more proactive EMR-level intervention is well warranted. Even when climate change adaptation challenges are often local and specific, solutions are just as often widely applicable on a cross-border scale. The same applies to circular economy. Challenge is to transform our economy into a circular one, and to make our energy supply more sustainable. We will have to learn how to continuously reuse natural resources and raw materials and reduce the production of waste until it (almost) no longer exists. The significant component of circular economy presents the creation of industrial symbiosis partnerships across borders on a (eu)regional scale, as a way of fostering economic development and enhancing environmental benefits for businesses. By using the best available technology and unused or residual resources from different production lines, one creates mutual economic, social and environmental benefits for all the companies involved, as well as the community.

#### *Establishing a better match between green labour demand and education supply*

Growing investments in the energy transition will go hand-in-hand with a substantially different labour demand in the EMR. New 'green' jobs are created in the renewable sector as well as in the circular economy. Some existing jobs are redefined and require upgrading of workers' skills. In order to seize the opportunities for the economy in the programme area offered by the energy transition and to make it possible to contribute to Europe's climate objectives, it is essential for the EMR to anticipate the changing needs of the labour market. Consequently, the role of education, training and lifelong learning should be rethought in responding to the transition towards a green society and economy. At the same time, the green transition will also lead to job losses and it is crucial to make efforts to safeguard inclusivity in the labour market. Tackling these challenges requires an integrated approach to the labour market and education, in which companies, employees, educational and

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training institutes, and public authorities have a responsibility for building a sustainable economy with future-oriented jobs and education, which will benefit more people in the EMR.

### **Healthier Citizens**

Inhabitants of the EMR are on average less healthy than other EU regions. It is vitally important to reverse this trend towards the average again, or even better, to a health level better than the EU-average. Cross-border cooperation is essential to address actual and future health challenges, and for joint development of innovative health solutions. This requires a multifaceted approach to increase the uptake of health innovations, to establish a better health labour market and education, and to improve the accessibility of healthcare services across borders.

#### *New collaborations to support health innovations and entrepreneurs*

As costs rise, resources shrink and inefficiencies abound in the European healthcare industry, a response of innovative technologies is emerging across Europe. In addition, healthcare plays an important role in the EU's economy, accounting for 8% of the total workforce and for 10% of its GDP, according to the European Investment Bank. As the EMR has a strong knowledge infrastructure on healthcare and life sciences, the programme area is particularly well equipped to put forward new solutions in the field of life sciences, health, therapeutics, diagnostics and medical devices. For example, pocket-size imaging devices, virtual reality that speeds healing in rehab and artificial intelligence spotting lung tumors. However, the valorisation and dissemination of this knowledge continues to be a problem in the EMR. Some examples of limiting factors are very long product cycles, regulation rigidity and pricing fluidity. That is why the programme partners are determined to support new collaborations across borders concerning new technologies, management models and further digitalisation in health care. This will bring groundbreaking benefits to patients and ensures universal access to high-quality and affordable health services in the EMR.

#### *Promoting cross-border coordination and continuous learning in healthcare*

There are specific challenges regarding the labour market when it comes to the health sector in the border area. Issues with diplomas and qualification certifications prevent health staff from one country to work in another country. More cross-border corporation and planning is required to achieve a more efficient health system in the EMR for the benefit of healthier citizens. In addition, there are specific challenges regarding the quality of education, training and lifelong learning in the health sector in the border area. Healthcare and cure are an ever-changing field of practice with advances in medicine, expanded evidence sources, new treatment options, and changing governmental regulations and models of care and cure. Continuous learning, education and lifelong learning is not an option in healthcare, it is required by healthcare students and workers to remain relevant and continue providing safe, effective patient care (also in a post COVID-19 situation). In fact, the lifelong learning movement in healthcare eventually provides benefit and welfare for everyone in society. Programme partners in the EMR are convinced that more cross-border cooperation between schools and universities contributes to a continuous, increased knowledge uptake of our future health workers.

#### *Ensuring access to quality, sustainable and affordable healthcare services*

Our health systems are under pressure. Europe and the EMR face the challenge of ageing populations and increasing demand for healthcare services, which can also result from non-demographic factors such as the emergence of new (often expensive) treatments. In addition, speed of change in society leads to problems of cognitive overload in people. Mental health problems lead

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to an increased demand for mental health services and thus increased costs for society. Furthermore, unexpected external shocks – such as the rapid spread of COVID-19 – put additional major pressure on our healthcare systems and show how vulnerable the sector is and, at the same time, how dependent we are on good healthcare. Against a background of rising demand for healthcare resources, and public budgets which are often under pressure, ensuring universal and timely access to high quality healthcare – whilst also guaranteeing the financial sustainability of health systems – is a challenge which requires increased efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the EMR's health systems. All in all, new joint initiatives across borders are required in the EMR to contribute to the improvement of care services, reduce costs, and to explore new ways to prevent or cure diseases.

### **Tourism in a High-Quality Region**

The EMR is a region with strong scenic qualities and a strong cultural heritage. Based on these strong tourist qualities, the EMR has a reasonably well developed and diverse leisure offer. The region is also popular with visitors from outside the region. However, the largest leisure movements and expenditures take place by residents of the EMR themselves (mainly day and shop tourism). The tourism and leisure sector in its narrow definition represents about 5% of total employment in the EMR (Eurostat, 2018). If sectors such as retailing, traffic, logistics and construction that benefit from tourism movements are included, the importance of the leisure sector is double-digit and shows its importance for the economy of the EMR. Traditionally, the tourism and leisure sector is a sector composed of heterogeneous activities, enterprises, organisations and thus occupies a somewhat diffuse position in the economy.

In response to the globalisation of tourism, a growing movement has emerged that emphasises the reduction of emissions and other harmful effects, i.e. greater attention to the environment. As a result, interest in undertaking tourist activities in one's own region is growing. The current COVID-19 period has inevitably provided an incentive for leisure activities in one's own region. Fortunately, the EMR still has plenty of tourist potential to grow.

The challenge for the tourism sector in the EMR is to (continue to) provide a high quality and distinctive offer. This means that it is important to invest in innovation and sustainability of the supply, both in breadth and depth. From an economic point of view, the challenge is to entice visitors and holidaymakers visiting the region to spend more on tourism during their stay, for example by presenting a more diverse euregional offer, or by extending the length of stay. This requires the development of new earning models. In addition, the branding and promotion of the EMR can be improved. At the moment, this can be characterised as ad hoc and without much coordination between the various sub-regions. By better cooperation between the various subareas and tourist hotspots, based on a joint strategy, the leisure offer of the EMR can be sharply and distinctively presented.

### **Live and Work without Borders**

This grand societal challenge is aimed at improving the quality of life for EMR residents in the broadest sense of the word, by reducing or removing border barriers and improving cross-border cooperation. It is about making the EMR more attractive and functional for its inhabitants, including topics like culture, public transport and public safety. This also includes improving the functioning of the cross-border labour market for those sectors that cannot be classified under the previous societal challenges. All the challenges outlined on both the demand and supply side of the labour market in

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the areas of education, training and life-long learning are relevant here. Another challenge that requires continued attention is mutual language learning, at a time when pupils in schools are increasingly learning only English as a foreign language. The importance of being able to communicate in each other's languages both in everyday life and in the professional context is evident.

*Improving legal and administrative cooperation*

Despite the successive implementation of five Interreg programmes, the initiatives that have been taken repeatedly confirm that differences in terms of legal systems, public and private services, education and the labour market still exist do not make cross-border cooperation easy. The challenge for the EMR 2021-2027 programme remains to reduce or overcome border obstacles with which actors in the EMR face, whether it be citizens, businesses or public authorities. These obstacles have a negative impact on the free movement of people, goods and services and thus hinder economic and social interaction across the border(s). The challenge is to achieve a better mutual cooperation, on topics like safety, climate, environment, etcetera, and to achieve a degree of cooperation that goes beyond the level of information exchange. Ultimately, this grand societal challenge is about making life in the EMR better and easier.

Other programmes such as the ESF, EAFRD, and the ERDF regional programmes pursue specific policies on the grand societal challenges that are important for the specific sub-regions within the EMR.

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