

**Interreg  
Europe**



Co-funded by  
the European Union

# Peer review

**a fast track to  
policy solutions**



**Interreg Europe  
Policy Learning Platform  
expert service**

*The peer review was perfect with regard to the timing and the many interesting approaches that were shared.*

Daniel Hilligsmann,  
Head of Cabinet to the Minister  
President of Belgium's  
German speaking community

*Peer reviews are extremely important and there are far too few peer reviews. We can learn so much from each other.*

Dr. Philipp Nimmermann,  
State Secretary at the Ministry for  
Economic Affairs, Energy,  
Transport and Housing  
State of Hessen, Germany

*I was very impressed with the quality of the advice offered by the peers to the Bulgarian environment. And this is, of course, very important because we can't accept just any solution; they must be adapted to our regional and national context.*

Karina Angelieva,  
Deputy Minister of Education  
and Science (2018-2021), Bulgaria

*We warmly recommend the Interreg Europe peer review to all of those looking for inspiration and new ideas for their regional policies.*

Konstantinos Gioutikas,  
Vice Governor of Development  
and Environment,  
Region of Central Macedonia, Greece

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April 2023

Interreg Europe is an interregional cooperation programme co-financed by the European Union. With a budget of 379 million euros for 2021-2027, Interreg Europe helps local, regional and national governments across Europe to develop and deliver better policies through interregional cooperation projects and its Policy Learning Platform services. The programme promotes good practice sharing and policy learning among European regions in 29 countries – the EU27, Norway and Switzerland.

Interreg Europe contributes to the EU cohesion policy together with the other European Territorial Cooperation programmes known as Interreg.

[www.interregeurope.eu](http://www.interregeurope.eu)

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# Interreg Europe peer review – a fast track to policy solutions

Our countries and regions are facing increasingly complex challenges. To solve them, the Interreg Europe programme brings people from different regions together, to work in interregional cooperation projects or learn from each other through its Policy Learning Platform services.

Interreg Europe has a large community of practitioners and experts active in its projects or in its policy-learning activities. This community includes the managing authorities of Structural Funds programmes, the Interreg Europe project partners, public authorities and other policymakers involved in regional development policies. They come from almost every region in Europe. This gives us an immense pool of experience, as well as an array of solutions and ideas, to inspire better regional policies.

The programme has tools that enable practitioners to share good practices and to take part in policy learning. Our goal is to identify effective solutions and ultimately improve regional policies. Our peer review service is one of these tools. It helps local, regional and national authorities to team up with experienced peers from other regions to discuss a specific policy challenge in depth. Together, they develop recommendations to address this challenge.

The over 50 peer reviews conducted so far have shown that sharing experience and mutual learning really helps public authorities to identify solutions for their regions. The peer review meetings are structured and facilitated, which helps the host to explore their specific policy challenge with their peers in a comprehensive way and find inspiration in what they have achieved in their regions. Our simple methodology turns each peer review meeting into a shortcut to tailored solutions.

Whether a public authority is new to interregional cooperation or experienced, our peer review service offers a different kind of access to new ideas. It also builds capacities, which is one of Interreg Europe's key programme goals, and it can contribute to policy improvements in the participating regions.

If you are involved in regional development policies, the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform can help you access relevant knowledge, good practices, expertise, and peers from across Europe. I invite you to draw inspiration from this publication. Discover how many regions have already used the peer review service and find out how you can benefit from interregional policy learning.



**Erwin Siweris**  
Programme Director,  
Interreg Europe

# Interregional cooperation – the fuel for policy learning

Interreg Europe provides opportunities for sharing solutions and an environment for policy learning. Its goal is to help develop and deliver better regional policies across Europe. The programme offers public authorities two tools to achieve this goal:

1. Co-funding for interregional cooperation projects
2. The Policy Learning Platform's services

As in other Interreg programmes, Interreg Europe's core activity is supporting projects. Almost 90% of the programme's budget goes towards projects. This funding supports the sharing of experience and good practices between participating organisations. Our projects work on policies in various fields of regional development. They all involve organisations from different European regions with different levels of development. 90% of Europe's regions are represented in our projects. The variety and richness of knowledge that our projects accrue constitutes an exceptional source of experience and expertise that we are determined all regional development practitioners should be able to access.

More than 2,000 organisations from the EU, Norway and Switzerland have been involved in Interreg Europe projects. The participating organisations engage their local stakeholders in the exchanges and sharing activities. Each project identifies, on average, 20 regional development good practices, each with potential for transfer to another region. Altogether, our experts validated over 3,000 good practices.

Gathered and generated by our projects, this policy knowledge is the main fuel - and the unique strength of - the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform. Through a set of policy-learning services, the Platform ensures that the projects' knowledge is shared with all regions and to anyone interested in regional development policies.

One of the best ways to tap into the Platform's resources is the peer review service. Our experts draw on the Platform's knowledge base to prepare and facilitate every peer review. Each peer review is tailored and personalised according to the specific policy challenge defined by the peer review host organisation. The purpose of the peer review is to respond to the challenge and the questions with the help of peers who have relevant experience.

In short, a peer review is a fast track to tailored policy advice and practical recommendations on how to design and implement better regional policies addressing a particular challenge.



**Nicolas Singer**  
Head of Unit –  
Projects & Platform,  
Interreg Europe







# How it works

## 1 Apply

### Get in touch

Contact us to find out what the peer review service can offer your region. Our Platform experts will help you define the right questions and focus for the peer review.

### Apply

Submit a short online application to request a peer review.

## 2 Prepare

### Start to prepare

Discuss your peer review preparations with us and draft a 4-8 page thematic background document outlining your challenge and peer review questions.

**Select peers** from a list of 3-6 candidates prepared by us. The peers will be policy practitioners who have relevant knowledge and experience to address your challenge.

**Finalise your peer review agenda** in collaboration with your selected peers through an online meeting.

### Book a meeting venue

As a peer review host, you will be responsible for arranging the meeting in your region. Interreg Europe can cover catering and translation costs if needed. You can also organise a study visit to enhance the exchange and learning process.

## How to apply for a peer review

### Who can apply?

- Regional and local authorities, including city administrations and the managing authorities of European Structural Funds from the **EU, Norway or Switzerland** are eligible.
- Other public bodies responsible for **regional or local development policies** in the programme area can also apply.

### How to apply?

- First, join the **Interreg Europe community** to get access to the application.
- Then, briefly describe your **needs, motivation**, and the **policy challenge** to be addressed by your peer review (max. 2 pages).
- Our Platform experts can help you define the right **focus and questions** and assist you with your application.
- Submit the application **online**.

### When to apply?

You can submit an application **any time**.

Join the Interreg Europe community:  
[www.interregeurope.eu/user/register](http://www.interregeurope.eu/user/register)

Log in and submit your application at:  
[www.interregeurope.eu/peer-review/submit](http://www.interregeurope.eu/peer-review/submit)

### What can a peer review address?

- A peer review can address any **regional development policy challenge** at any governance level (local, regional or national).
- The challenge could, for example, be linked to policies on energy efficiency, new ways to support SME internationalisation, or digital rural mobility solutions.



### 3 Host your peer review

Make the most of the **two days** of exchanges with European peers, colleagues from your institution and the key decision-makers and stakeholders from your region. Our thematic experts will take care of the meeting moderation and facilitation.

**Day 1:** You, your stakeholders and your peers make presentations.

**Day 2:** You, your peers and our experts draft **policy recommendations** for your region and present them to the your region's key decision-makers for feedback and discussion.

### 4 Follow up

#### Plan the next steps

After the peer review, you will prepare a short report detailing the solutions that have been identified as well as the follow-up actions you intend to take. Where appropriate, these should be endorsed by the policymakers in your region. With your consent, we will share the report and the learning outcomes of your peer review on our website.

#### Follow up

A few months after the meeting, our Platform experts will contact you for a follow-up interview about the actions and changes being introduced in your region as a result of the the peer review.

### How your application will be assessed

Each peer review application is assessed regarding:

- the **relevance** of the challenge to local, regional or national development policies
- the **direct involvement** of the policy-responsible institution in the peer review
- the host region's **motivation** to participate in an interregional peer review
- the applicant's readiness to strive for policy impact and undertake follow-up actions by **involving local stakeholders** in the peer review
- the **clarity** of the application.

### Language considerations

- The application should be submitted in **English**.
- At least one contact person in the applicant organisation must speak English to facilitate the preparation and coordination of the peer review.
- The peer review meeting can be carried out partially in the local language and Interreg Europe can cover the interpretation costs.

### Post-selection steps

- If your application is selected, we will contact you within 3-4 weeks of your application.
- You choose the date for the peer review with us, bearing in mind the timing in terms of the phase of the policy cycle in question.
- It takes 2-3 months to prepare the meeting with our Platform experts. This work will involve drafting the background paper, identifying peers, preparing presentations, and ensuring the availability of key stakeholders.
- If your application is not selected, you will nonetheless receive tailored policy advice from our thematic experts.

# Towards a new green power centre

Vestland County in Norway teamed up with peers from five countries to apply the entrepreneurial discovery process (EDP) and link smart specialisation to the green shift. The peer review helped the region to take a step towards new green ambitions.



**Host:**  
Vestland County Municipality, with local stakeholders

**Peers:**

- Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece  
*In Interreg Europe project INNOVASUMP*
- Centre-Val de Loire Region, France  
*In Interreg Europe project BEYOND-EDP*
- Region Gävleborg, Sweden
- Northern Netherlands Alliance, Netherlands  
*In Interreg Europe project BEYOND-EDP*
- Metropolitan City of Bologna, Italy  
*In Interreg Europe projects RELOS3, START EASY*





In January 2020, two very different counties on Norway's west coast merged to form Vestland County. One was rural, the other strongly driven by the city of Bergen. This led to the question of how their separate development plans could be combined into a single smart development strategy that would benefit the whole region?

Vestland County was looking for ways to promote the restructuring of their oil-based economy, in line with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and new EU policy requirements. The County reached out to the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform for inspiration and a peer review on applying the entrepreneurial discovery process (EDP), linking smart specialisation to the green shift, and monitoring and evaluating progress with strategy implementation.

*We needed advice for our smart specialisation strategy, and we wanted to discuss it with people who had already done the same – so the peer review was perfect!*

Katrin Jakobsen, Vestland County Council

Five peers with experience in regional policy and innovation met the Vestland County Council and its key stakeholders for a two-day online peer review in September 2020. Together, they produced a clear set of recommendations, encouraging the region to bring regional stakeholders together and brand Vestland as the first CO2 neutral region in the world. The peers also came up with a motto for Vestland: 'you are small enough to do it, good enough to get it done, and big enough to make a difference!'

Vestland had identified 11 key value chains in strategic industries as potential drivers of green economic growth. The peers recommended focusing on priority areas and

projects rather than broad sectors. They also highlighted the need for dialogue, co-creation, and involvement of businesses and other partners, such as citizens, academics, and innovation platforms in the new development projects.

The advice from the peers contributed to a new entrepreneurial discovery process of 'Green Region Vestland' and its aim to reach net zero emissions by 2030 while boosting business by 24% and creating 16,000 jobs.

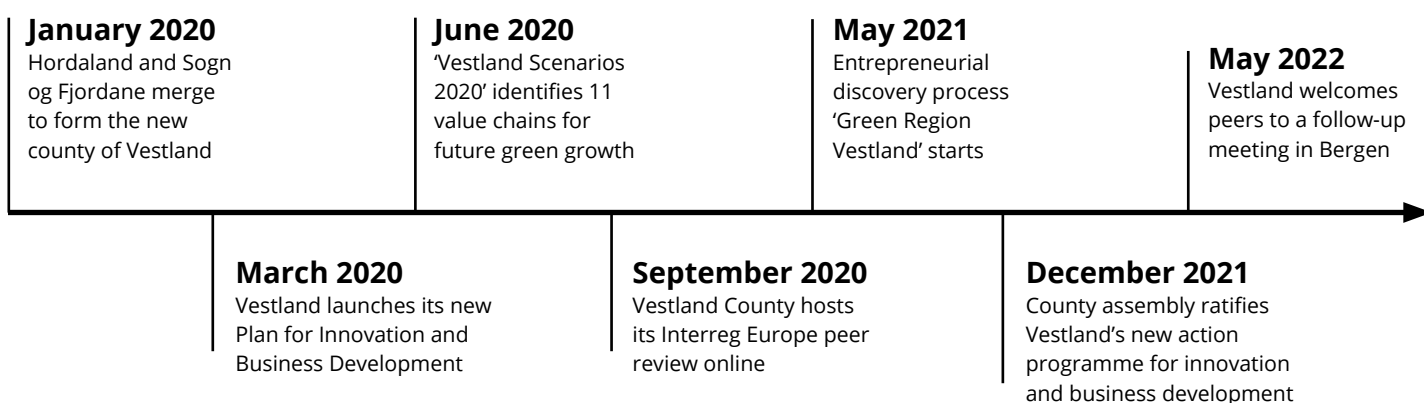
*Relatively small words of advice unblocked the whole process. It was useful. We were encouraged to consider smart specialisation as a part of the regional plan and a wider policy mix.*

Katrin Jakobsen, Vestland County Council

The peer review also helped Vestland define four 'must-win' battles that were officially approved by the regional parliament. For example, the region is striving to become a world-leading ocean region open to cooperation. It is building innovative green infrastructure. It is also aiming to build 16 cross-sectoral green hubs, grouping 250 major innovation projects applying circular solutions.

Dialogue between Vestland and the peers has continued since the peer review. In May 2022, Vestland invited the peers to an onsite follow-up visit in Bergen to take stock of progress and refine their recommendations. The new suggestions include improving stakeholder communications, testing new financing models, as well as using key indicators such as value creation, exports, emissions reductions and new green jobs to measure and monitor progress. Vestland will make use of these recommendations when they introduce their monitoring system in late 2022, with local companies sharing their own data.

## Key moments





# Transitioning to a circular economy

The Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship in Poland met peers from three other countries to discuss new ways of supporting circular economy in the region. The peer review recommendations contributed to the preparation of a new regional programme.

**Host:**  
Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship,  
with local stakeholders

**Peers:**

- ART-ER Regional Body, Emilia-Romagna, Italy  
*In Interreg Europe project TRIS*
- Regional Development Fund of Central Macedonia, Greece  
*In Interreg Europe projects CityZEN, eSMARTEC*
- ERDF Managing Authority Lombardy, Italy  
*In Interreg Europe project GPP4Growth*
- Deltaplan sustainability consultants, Slovenia





Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship in northeastern Poland had no circular economy policy in place. However, as it updated its socio-economic development strategy, the benefits of a more sustainable approach based on making, using, and reusing products became clear.

In 2020, the Voivodeship designed its new regional programme to allocate EU funds for sustainable growth in 2021-2027. It saw this as an opportunity to embed the concept of circular economy in its regional policy. The Voivodeship was therefore seeking ideas for action in areas such as sustainable waste management, eco-innovation, green entrepreneurship, product life extension, resource-efficiency, and cleaner energy production. For inspiration, the Voivodeship contacted Interreg Europe and requested a peer review.

*The peer review came just at the right time, for us and our stakeholders.*

Kinga Krupińska,

Marshal Office of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship

In September 2020, peers from Greece, Italy and Slovenia, together with the Interreg Europe Platform experts, gathered for an online peer review to advise Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship on how to shift to a circular economy. The peers shared examples and worked with the Voivodeship to draw up recommendations to help the Voivodeship's Regional Policy Department implement a circular economy policy.

The next step for the Voivodeship was to get a clear political commitment to the circular economy for the 2021-2027 programming period. In January 2021, the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship board adopted the key peer review recommendations and included circular economy and

related projects in the new regional operational programme. They were included under three of the five EU cohesion policy priorities (a smarter, greener, and a more social Europe).

The Voivodeship also began to work more closely with local businesses and residents, as well as municipalities. It prepared a targeted communication campaign for potential beneficiaries to bring about new circular economy projects that could be co-financed by the new regional operational programme. New projects could support the following: digitalisation to reduce energy and water consumption and reach CO2 neutrality; 'repair and reuse' actions like fixing electronic items; increasing circular economy awareness among public bodies, enterprises, consumers, and schools; and lastly, re-purposing former industrial sites.

Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship also shared their positive peer review experience with the neighbouring Pomorskie region, which decided to apply for and host their own peer review. Pomorskie's peer review took place in June 2022 and looked for solutions to boost local and regional participation in EU research and innovation programmes.

*Without the peer review, it would have been very hard for us to embed a circular economy approach in our new programme in such a comprehensive way, covering environmental, economic and social dimensions.*

Kinga Krupińska,

Marshal Office of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship

## Key moments

### January 2020

The Voivodeship kicks off preparations for a new regional operational programme for 2021-2027

### January 2021

Politicians approve the inclusion of circular economy measures in the new regional programme

### December 2022

The new regional programme is approved

### September 2020

Warmińsko-Mazurskie hosts its Interreg Europe peer review online

### March 2022

The European Commission receives the new regional programme with MEUR 57.5 for circular economy measures



# Talent attraction and start-up financing

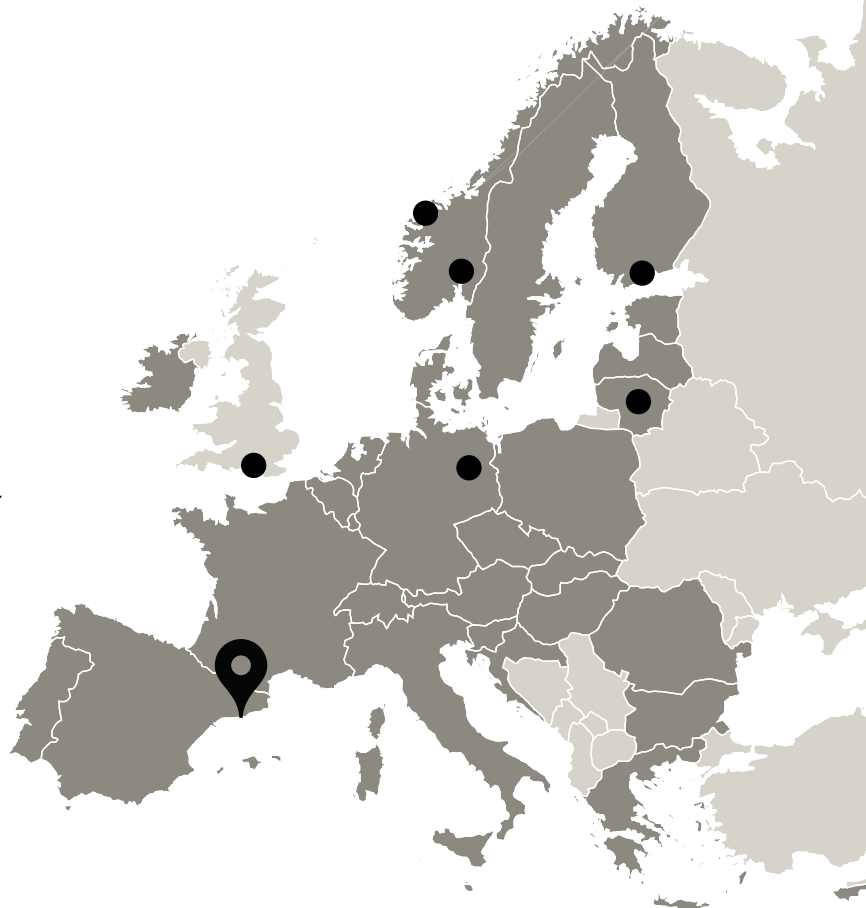
The Government of Catalonia, Spain, met peers from five different countries to explore new ways to attract talent and fund start-ups. The peer review recommendations helped to shape Catalonia's plan to set up a one-stop-shop for enterprise support.

**Host:**  
Enterprise and Knowledge Department  
(now Business and Labour Department),  
Government of Catalonia, Spain,  
with local stakeholders

**Peers:**

- Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Council, Finland  
*In Interreg Europe project iEER*
- Møre and Romsdal County, Norway  
*In Interreg Europe project OSS*
- Lithuanian Innovation Centre, Lithuania  
*In Interreg Europe projects FOUNDATION & START EASY*
- Startup Migrants AS, Oslo-Berlin, Norway-Germany
- WSX Enterprise business support, UK  
*In Interreg Europe project OSS*

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The Government of Catalonia launched their first one-stop-shop (OSS) implementation plan in 2011 as part of their strategy to digitalise and simplify support for local businesses. When preparing the third OSS implementation plan for 2019-2021, the Government's Business and Labour Department decided to ask peers from other European countries for advice on how to further improve their regional support for entrepreneurship.

Catalonia turned to Interreg Europe and applied for a peer review facilitated by the Policy Learning Platform. The peer review took place online in June 2020 and focused on talent attraction, alternative financing of start-ups, and monitoring.

Catalonia's Business and Labour Department team, along with their colleagues from other government departments and stakeholders from business, academia, and business support associations, met peers from Finland, France, Lithuania, Norway and the UK. Catalonia presented its local business support ecosystem to kick off the peer review. Then, the peers explained their good practices for retaining home-grown and international talent, creating the conditions for start-up grants, and harnessing other financing options, to name just a few. Despite representing very different regions, all the peers had tackled similar issues before and were able to present appropriate solutions.

*Sometimes it is not possible to copy the peers' solutions exactly, but it is interesting to hear their analysis and to avoid repeating their mistakes.*

Natàlia Cantero, Business Management Office, Regional Government of Catalonia

At the end of the online peer review, the peers with the Business and Labour Department team drew up recommendations for all local stakeholders on how to attract and retain talent in the region and administer better alternative financing for start-ups. The recommendations included connecting foreign students with locals and jobs, providing accommodation, healthcare, or administrative support to foreign nationals establishing businesses in and around Barcelona. The peers also helped to clarify the conditions applicable to grants and administrative procedures for start-ups in Catalonia and proposed exploring crowdfunding and other start-up financing options.

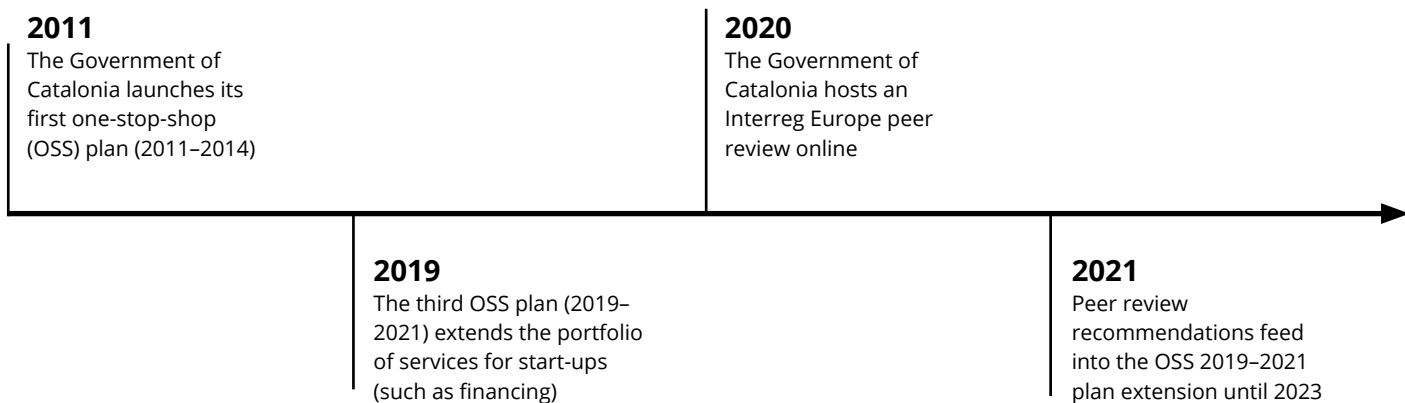
Thanks to the peer review, different departments of the Government of Catalonia began to work better together on improving entrepreneurship support in the region. Stakeholder relations with the City of Barcelona improved as well thanks to their shared goal of improving support to start-ups. Catalonia also continues to keep in touch with some of the peers.

On top of this, some of the peer review recommendations shaped the updated OSS implementation plan extended to 2023. For example, one of the new measures refers to specific tools for alternative start-up financing recommended by the peers, namely matchmaking grants.

*It was very useful to discuss our challenges and find out what other European regions are doing. After the peer review we made improvements and we now help our SMEs better.*

Natàlia Cantero, Business Management Office, Regional Government of Catalonia

## Key moments





## Phasing out coal

Bulgaria's Stara Zagora District met peers from three different countries to explore how to transition to cleaner energy in coal-intensive regions. The peer review kick-started constructive cooperation between local stakeholders with a view to phasing out coal in the region.

### Host:

District of Stara Zagora, Bulgaria &  
Stara Zagora Regional Economic  
Development Agency, Bulgaria

### Peers:

- National Technical University of Athens, Greece  
*In Interreg Europe project REMIX*
- PlanEnergi sustainable energy consultancy, Denmark
- Usti Regional Authority, Czech Republic
- Ministry of Regional Development, Czech Republic
- Joint Research Centre, European Commission





Stara Zagora district is at the heart of Bulgaria’s energy industry. It is home to vast open-cast mines, lignite-fired thermal power stations and enrichment plants, which produce about 38% of Bulgaria’s electricity. With Bulgaria’s aim to phase out coal by 2038, the District of Stara Zagora, together with the Stara Zagora Regional Economic Development Agency, started to look for ways to diversify and green their economy. In 2019, they turned to Interreg Europe and applied for a peer review.

In February 2020, the peer review on reducing the environmental footprint of power production took place. Peers from the Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, and the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, pooled their knowledge on clean fuel and renewable energy technologies and low-carbon strategies. They came to Stara Zagora to meet their host and share their expertise and experience.

*The peer review sparked very important changes in policymaking, perceptions of energy diversification, and the dynamics between stakeholders.*

Mihaela Dineva, Stara Zagora Regional Economic Development Agency

The peer review was also a unique meeting for key local stakeholders. The stakeholder group included the mining company and major coal power plants, local and regional authorities, as well as business and research organisations. With diverse stakeholders participating, the peer review format allowed for open discussions and paved the way for better mutual understanding and trust-building. The peer review showed that the just transition and coal phase-out would be unavoidable and needed to be prepared for. The peer review process also improved connections and relations between the local stakeholders.

The peers proposed practical solutions to diversify the economy and mitigate the employment and social impacts of the transition with clean tech alternatives such as solar, wind and hydrogen power and means of financing these. Inspired by the Czech good practices, Stara Zagora prepared a Green Deal regional committee, which is now included in Stara Zagora’s Just Transition plan. Stara Zagora also developed the Europa+ RESKILL project with the power plant and mining companies. This project aims to retrain employees in renewable energy technology. The first training programmes started in 2022.

*The peer review triggered a big change in attitudes toward the phasing out of coal in the region. It deepened expert discussions and allowed a broader audience to access reliable information about the just transition and the European Green Deal.*

Sofia Savova, Stara Zagora Regional Economic Development Agency

## Key moments



## A sneak-peek behind the scenes I

### An interview with a host region

Jan Nylander and the Gävleborg Region in Sweden hosted one of the first Interreg Europe peer reviews in 2019. The meeting focused on innovation governance.

#### What were your first steps with the Interreg Europe peer review service?

I was managing an electric road project as a part of Gävleborg Region's innovation policy. We were working on a system demonstrator to support the deployment of emissions free heavy logistic solutions (e-highway for freight transport). I reached out to Interreg Europe when the peer review service had just started. We requested a peer review to get support from international peers and to learn about their experiences.

We wanted to try fresh approaches in our e-highway pilot project and secure the long-term future of the approach. Our challenge was to consolidate collaborative leadership, and we needed to understand the barriers limiting the implementation of complex innovation processes in the field of transport and smart specialisation.

#### Which concrete solution popped up thanks to the peer review?

The peer review gave us momentum and provided the conceptual tools to help us make informed stakeholder-driven innovation investment decisions. It introduced the innovation window model to us, which helped us identify new windows of opportunity.

It got us going, revealed opportunities, and enabled us to go from policy design to implementation. Without it, we wouldn't have made this progress.



#### What happened after the peer review?

You sometimes feel alone with your challenges. The peer review changed that. We realised that there are many people like us in Europe, doing similar things. That is empowering.

Thanks to the peer review, our project gained visibility and momentum both in the region and internationally. Other European regions have started looking into similar electric road solutions, such as the electrification of heavy transport, which requires big changes to a complex ecosystem.

#### What motivated you to change the role and become a peer for other regions?

It's fun! And you learn too. As a host, you have the privilege of having smart peers in the room who question and advise you. That pushes you forward. Drawing on good examples implemented elsewhere can inspire new solutions. Hearing from peers that you are doing the right thing can also be really encouraging.

As a peer, you also leave each meeting with new ideas to take back home. And you establish contacts with other peers – carefully selected, experienced people, each of them an expert in their field. After the first contact during the peer review, it is easy to follow up with further exchange or cooperation. The chemistry and dynamics in peer review meetings are very unique and powerful.



*Bringing the right people together and making use of European skills and know-how, resources, and spirit can lead to changes that benefit the whole region.*

Jan Nylander,  
Consultant to the Region Gävleborg, Sweden

# A sneak-peek behind the scenes II

## An interview with a peer

Clyde Falzon Bouvett has been a peer in two peer reviews: the City of Burgas in Bulgaria in 2020 and the City of Greifswald in Germany in 2021. The peer reviews focused on waste management and on repurposing a landfill site.

### How did you start your journey as a peer?

I had been working in the Interreg Europe project COCOON and the Policy Learning Platform invited me to participate in a peer review to assist a municipality with waste management. It was in Burgas, in Bulgaria. The topic was interesting and very similar to my work, so I did not need much persuading. I also felt I could contribute and had knowledge and experience to share.

My second peer review was on the creation of an urban recreational space following the closure of a landfill in Greifswald in Germany. We discussed what to do with former landfill sites. I shared some of the lessons learnt from two projects implemented in the Maltese islands.

The peers and hosts came from different regions, but we had a lot to learn from each other. For instance, in Greifswald's case, a very large country, Germany, considered ideas from a smaller country, Malta. The host region was interested in the way we rehabilitate our landfills and how we ensure that the environment is safe to re-open as a public recreational area.

I learnt a lot from both peer reviews, from the other peers and experts and from the solutions they presented. It was also valuable to get to know the other peers. Even after the peer review itself, I knew I could always reach out to them and ask more questions.



### How long does it take for a peer to prepare for a peer review meeting?

I devote around three to four days for such an event. The Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform team is very professional. Once the peers have been selected, the experts organise a preparatory meeting to assign tasks and discuss the topics to be presented at the peer review. Together with the Platform experts, each peer prepares concise discussion inputs.

All peers get a background paper with details about the host region and their specific policy challenge in advance. As a peer, I made sure that I was prepared and fully aware of the topics and questions to be discussed. During the peer review, we all contributed to the final recommendations. It was also coordinated and facilitated by the Policy Learning Platform experts.



*Sharing your experience as a peer is interesting and exciting. Seeing the strong interest of the host region is encouraging and motivating.*

Clyde Falzon Bouvett,  
Waste management operator in Malta

*Clyde presented the transformation of a Maltese landfill into a family park with recreational facilities and leisure areas. We were very impressed by this project and how well it was adopted by the local population. We hope that we can transfer some of the ideas to the Greifswald landfill as well.*

Anke Krüger, City of Greifswald



## A sneak-peek behind the scenes III

### An interview with the Platform's Experts

Thorsten Kohlisch (TK) and Katharina Krell (KK) from the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform's expert team share their insights about preparing and facilitating the peer review process.



**Thorsten Kohlisch**  
Project Manager,  
Policy Learning  
Platform



**Katharina Krell**  
Thematic Expert,  
Low-carbon  
economy

#### How have you experienced the development of the peer review service since the beginning?

**TK:** Interreg Europe has been recognised as a source of funding for European cooperation projects for decades. With the Policy Learning Platform, the programme decided to break new ground, to go beyond funding and offer other easily accessible policy learning opportunities and services.

Since the launch of the peer review service in 2018, our Platform team has worked hard to deliver tailored advice to policymakers. From the very beginning, we have involved both the peer review hosts and the peers in the development of our services. We keep testing and improving our approach to respond to the evolving needs of public authorities.

**KK:** From the very start, I was convinced of the added value of an interregional policy-learning service facilitated by an expert team. Content is available everywhere. But it is so much easier to ask an expert to find the right information and the right peers to share their knowledge and insights directly. It has been an exciting journey since our first peer review pilot in Hauts de France region in France.

#### What should a peer review host keep in mind to prepare for their meeting with the peers?

**KK:** We only offer peer reviews on issues that are within the competence of the applicant (the 'host' region). This is an important eligibility check. So we first ask whether the peer review host is actually in charge of addressing the policy challenge they would like the peers to review. It is pointless to discuss renewable energy feed-in tariffs at a regional level when this is a national competence, for example.

My advice would be to focus the peer review on a few key questions. This makes it possible to explore the topic in sufficient detail during the two-day peer review and provide the host with real added value. More in-depth exchange is also more meaningful for the other participants.

#### What were your main considerations when developing the peer review methodology?

**TK:** We had no intention of reinventing the wheel, as we often say in Interreg Europe. We investigated existing peer-learning methodologies and considered the reality that local, regional, and national policy practitioners face: very busy



# An exercise in reflexive governance

Dr. Lieselot Vandenbussche, an expert in interpersonal dynamics in collaborative governance processes from Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands, talks about the value of peer reviews.

Interreg Europe's peer review service revolves around learning and reflecting on local and regional policy challenges together, with input from peers and experts. The peers share their practical experience, as well as academic and theoretical knowledge and advice.

The peer review is designed to stimulate an in-depth analysis of a policy challenge in an interactive setting. It incites participants to move from analysis towards action for better policies on the ground. Each peer review creates a community of commitment that enhances learning and reflection on a policy or practice, and improves the capacity of regional policymakers<sup>1</sup>. The peer review helps policymakers to take a more reflexive attitude to governing – or to govern reflexively, which is a powerful approach for dealing with complex regional development challenges.

Reflexive governance acknowledges that 'governing activities are entangled with wider societal feedback loops and partly shaped by the (side-)effects of their own working'<sup>2</sup>. The reflexive governance approach underlines the necessity of incorporating feedback and diverse knowledge in problem-handling processes to learn about appropriate problem definitions, targets and strategies for governing social issues. When facing complex policy issues, problem analysis and handling should be 'opened up' for discussion to reach an adequate appraisal of problems<sup>3</sup>. The peer review facilitates

1 Kofman, F., and Senge, P.M. (1993). Communities of commitment: the heart of learning organizations. *Organizational Dynamics*, 22(2), 5-23.

2 Voss, J.P., and Kemp, R. (2005). Reflexive Governance for Sustainable Development – Incorporating feedback in social problem solving. Paper presented at the ESEE Conference, June 14-17, 2005, in Lisbon.

3 Van Buuren, A., Vink, M., and Warner, J. (2016). Constructing Authoritative Answers to a Latent Crisis? Strategies of Puzzling, Powering and Framing in Dutch Climate Adaptation Practices Compared. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 18(1), 70-87.



open exchange by inviting peers to engage in a conscious, intentional and critical reflection on and evaluation of programmes or policies.

By organising the peer review in the region where the problem is located, peers get a first-hand, contextual understanding of the challenge in question. This helps to create individual, situation-specific and context-sensitive policy recommendations and actions. Peers take on the role of 'critical friends', asking provocative questions, offering critique and providing alternative perspectives, based on practical and theoretical experience.

A risk of reflexive attitude to governing is that it can lead to indecisiveness. No action may be taken at all if policymakers linger for too long in this reflexive attitude. At some point, action is needed. The peer review strikes a balance between 'opening up' the problem handling process and 'closing down' the reflection process for action. It is all about jointly exploring possible actions. The participants discuss together what may work best in the given policy situation, considering the resources available. Bringing those ideas together in co-authored recommendations in a final step is an empowering way to wrap up the peer review for all participants.



**Dr Lieselot Vandenbussche**  
Assistant Professor,  
Erasmus School of Social  
and Behavioural Sciences,  
Erasmus University  
Rotterdam, the Netherlands



# Learning through mock peer reviews

It's never too early for future policymakers to get to know the peer review process. Zuyd University of Applied Sciences in Maastricht, the Netherlands, has included the Interreg Europe peer review methodology in their European Studies curriculum.

Zuyd University of Applied Sciences aims to turn theoretical knowledge about regional policy issues into practical solutions, teaching 14,000 students communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills in undergraduate and master's degree programmes.

Zuyd had been running sessions on EU funding and project management for years. In 2020, the university decided to trial the peer review concept in a new EU Competitiveness course. After being briefed by Thorsten Kohlisch, the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform Project Manager, 79 students started preparing for their first mock peer reviews on regional policy issues.

The process follows the path of a real-life peer review. Students form small focus groups, each representing a specific regional authority in a different country. After researching their region and identifying relevant



stakeholders, the groups present their region's challenge. Then, drawing inspiration from Interreg Europe's good practice database, the students share relevant, workable solutions to address the identified challenge. And finally, each team drafts a set of policy recommendations proposing creative solutions adapted from other regions, as well as governance issues.

Since the first course, new groups of students have been taking part in the mock peer reviews each year. They have explored solutions to challenges ranging from future-proofing cultural and natural heritage tourism to improving public transport accessibility in a low-carbon economy.

As for those 79 pioneering students, they have already started applying their new skills, with internships in organisations such as the cross-border Meuse-Rhine Euroregion, the Limburg water board, European Diplomats, and the Dutch NGO Cross your borders.



## Other policy-learning services

Interreg Europe can help any interested policymaker and policy practitioner to connect with peers all across Europe. The programme offers opportunities for continuous policy learning, capacity building, and the exchange of good practices and innovative approaches. In addition to interregional cooperation projects, the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform supports regional policymakers to design and deliver better policies by finding inspiration and solutions in the policies of other European regions.

Peer reviews are about hands-on policy advice from practitioners to practitioners. As a tried-and-tested format and a personalised service, it is a unique way to get involved in cooperation and practical policy learning. More than 50 hosts have already benefited from a peer review and over 200 peers have shared their experience and knowledge during the peer reviews. The response from hosts and peers alike has been incredibly positive. The peer review can be a very rewarding experience for everyone involved. Most participants report an increase in their professional skills and capacities as a result of participating in a peer review. In a fast-changing world, the peer review is also a useful way to adapt to change and emerging trends.

The Policy Learning Platform offers other policy learning opportunities too, including inspiring policy solutions and practices, as well as services to support policymakers and practitioners. These include:

- **Access to knowledge:** Take a look at our online resources and explore our wide range of good practices, policy briefs, stories, news on EU regional policies, thematic reports and other sources of inspiration.
- **Access to people:** Meet like-minded peers at our workshops, webinars, and discussions (both online and in person).
- **Access to expertise:** For a more customised support, the Platform's experts can (a) address your policy challenges through a policy helpdesk, (b) put you in touch with policymakers and practitioners from other regions for a short matchmaking meeting, or (c) deliver a tailored peer review.

Continuous learning can help you build your knowledge and skills. Our services and the Platform team are there for you. Start your policy-learning journey now by joining our interregional cooperation community!



**Magdalini Anagnostou**  
Coordinator –  
Policy Learning  
Platform,  
Interreg Europe



## Three reasons to apply

1. Benefit from the expertise of carefully selected peers who will share their knowledge, provide inspiration and give feedback on your policy challenges in an open and constructive atmosphere.
2. Gather your local stakeholders around the table with international guests and spark new dynamics and active stakeholder involvement.
3. Experience an easily accessible turnkey service for better policymaking, facilitated by the Policy Learning Platform team from A to Z and centred on your needs.



**Elena Ferrario,**  
Thematic Manager,  
Interreg Europe  
Policy Learning  
Platform

*They were a very inspiring two days. I always have something new to bring home and reflect on. I already have several ideas that I will share with my organisation and hopefully implement in Andalusia.*

German Coca,  
Andalusian Ministry of Sustainability,  
Environment and Blue Economy, Spain –  
peer for the City of Greifswald

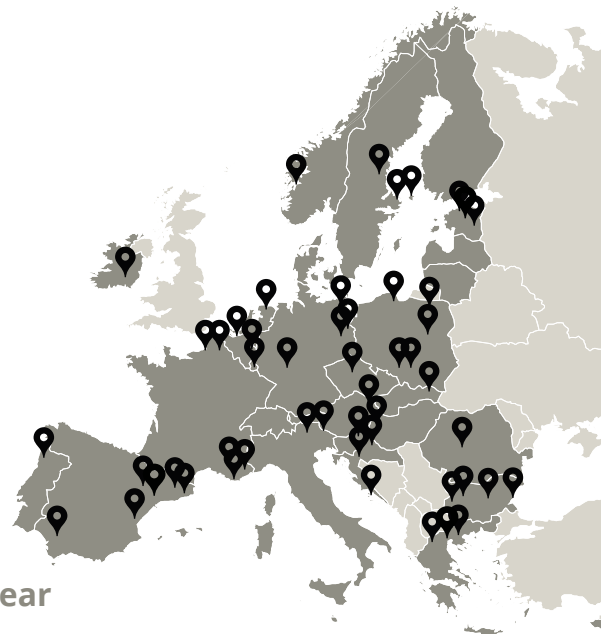
*When I heard about the peer review, I was sceptical. But these two days clearly proved the great value of peer learning. We looked at what others have been doing and we are now better equipped to tackle our own challenge.*

Erik Wilde,  
Head of the Urban Development Department  
at the City of Greifswald, Germany



# Challenges tackled to date

(March 2023)



## Beneficiary

### Austria

Austria Wirtschaftsservice (Austrian promotional bank).....

### Austria - Italy

EGTC European Region Tyrol – South Tyrol – Trentino .....

### Belgium

The Ministry of the German-speaking community of Belgium  
City of Antwerp .....

### Bulgaria

Executive Agency 'Programme Education', Bulgarian  
Ministry of Education and Science .....

Stara Zagora Regional Economic Development Agency.....  
Burgas Municipality .....

### Croatia

JURRA (Karlovac County Development Agency).....  
Zagorje Development Agency .....

### Czech Republic

City of Prague .....

### Estonia

City of Tartu.....  
City of Tallinn.....  
Estonian Environmental Investment Centre .....

### Finland

Åland Government.....

### France

Region Hauts de France .....

Region Sud.....

### Germany

Berlin Senate Department for Economics, Energy  
and Public Enterprises.....  
Ministry of Economics, Energy, Transport and Housing,  
State of Hessen.....  
City of Greifswald .....

## Topic and year

Trustworthy AI in business (2020)

Governance of cross-border mobility (2023)

SECAP governance and implementation (2019)  
Cultural heritage: fortress belts (2021)

- Set up of research infrastructures:  
Centres of excellence and centres of competence (2019)
- Technology transfer in research infrastructures (2021)

Economic diversification and clean power production (2020)  
Waste management (2020)

Establishing a regional competence centre for SMEs (2020)  
Digital transformation strategy (2021)  
Smart island and smart tourism (2022)

Green bonds (2022)

Green Deal accelerator and impact investment fund (2021)  
Smart city services (2022)  
Blue economy roadmap (2023)

Innovation and integration support for local businesses (2023)

- Energy efficiency in social housing and public buildings (2018)
- Strategic port development and smart ports solutions (2020)
- Corporate social responsibility and circular economy (2019)
- AI in health for RIS3 (2019)
- Students entrepreneurship (2021)

Start up internationalisation (2019)

SME digital transformation (2021)  
Rehabilitation of former landfills (2021)  
Green hydrogen (2022)

## Beneficiary

### Greece

Region of Western Macedonia .....  
 Regional Development Fund of Central Macedonia .....  
 Region of Central Macedonia .....

### Hungary

City of Szombathely .....

### Ireland

Kilkenny County Council .....

### Italy

Province of Trento .....

### Luxembourg

NaturePark Our .....

### Netherlands

Province of Fryslân .....

### Norway

County of Vestland .....

### Poland

Marshal Office of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship...  
 City of Warsaw.....  
 Upper Silesian Agency for Entrepreneurship  
 and Development.....  
 Marshal Office of the Pomorskie Voivodeship.....

### Portugal

LIPOR – Intermunicipal Waste Management Service  
 of Greater Porto.....

### Romania

Municipality of Rasinari.....

### Slovakia

Košice Self-governing Region .....

### Slovenia

City of Maribor .....

### Spain

Government Agency Catalonia Trade and Investment  
 Government of Catalonia.....  
 Regional Development Agency (IAF)  
 of the Government of Aragon.....  
 Municipality of Quart de Poblet (Valencia).....  
 The Andalusian Ministry of Sustainability, Environment  
 and Blue Economy.....  
 Municipality of Ascó .....

### Sweden

Region of Gävleborg.....  
 Swedish Environmental Protection Agency.....

## Topic and year

Energy efficiency: skills and SME programmes (2020)  
 Fashion and the circular economy (2021)  
 Designing open innovation calls (2023)

Economic diversification in the health sector (2021)

Sustainable urban mobility (2021)

Green communities (2022)

Governance and management of a Natura 2000 park (2020)

Resilient communities (2022)

Sector prioritisation and entrepreneurial discovery process  
 (2020)

Sustainable waste management in a circular economy (2020)  
 Urban logistics (2020)

- University-industry collaboration (2022)
  - Voucher schemes for SMEs (2022)
- Support for EU-funded innovation and research programmes  
 (2022)

Biowaste management (2022)

Governance and finance for protected areas (2022)

Circular economy and sustainable waste management (2020)

Engaging citizens in the circular economy (2022)

SME internationalisation support (2019)

Talent attraction and retention, start-up monitoring (2020)

Digitalisation in traditional economic sectors in depopulated  
 areas (2020)

River restoration and blue green infrastructure (2022)

Digitalisation of environmental permits (2022)

Local renewable energy communities (2023)

Innovation governance (2019)

Antimicrobial resistance in water (2022)

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Europe**



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