September 2025

Communities of practice in the Adriatic-Ionian region

The untapped contribution to the EU integration of the Balkans

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This paper was made possible thanks to the grant "Il contributo delle comunità di pratica per l'integrazione europea dei Balcani CoP-CTE" of the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) and was supported by a Marie Curie Staff Exchange within the Horizon Europe Programme (grant acronym: ORCA, no: 101182752).

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Osservatorio balcani e caucaso transeuropa | CENTRO PER LA COOPERAZIONE INTERNAZIONALE

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With the support of:

Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale

Co-funded by the European Union

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1. Introduction

The perspectives of the European Union (EU)'s enlargement to the Western Balkans (WB) countries were defined by the Thessaloniki Summit back in June 2003. Since then, only one country from the region has joined the EU, namely Croatia a decade later. The other six WB countries are, at different stages, in the accession process, but their hopes to achieve the goal have been constantly decreasing, with a growing distrust and dissatisfaction on the part of both institutions and citizens spreading across the EU and the WB.

The prolonged uncertainty about the timing and the real prospects for accession has weakened the EU influence over the region. At the same time, the countries of the region have shown serious endogenous difficulties in adequately responding to the EU accession requirements, mostly due to institutional weaknesses, which also affect economic opportunities (Bieber 2011; Noutcheva and Aydin Duzgit 2012; Minović et al, 2021). Lacking the strong incentives to reform with the enlargement dragging on, the WB have further slowed down the difficult reforms they had started and have plunged back into nationalism and democratic backsliding (Renner and Trauner, 2009; Coletti, 2018; Džihić, 2017). In the accession process, candidate countries need indeed to adapt their administrative and institutional infrastructure to the EU, bringing their national legislation in line with the EU in 35 chapters of the so-called acquis communautaire. In this framework, the European Commission assists WB governments in the process of legal harmonisation and supervises their implementation of the reforms.

While the contribution of civil society is often invoked as a last resort to resolve the stalemate, its role remains, mainly, that of external monitor of the ongoing process. Sometimes, in the case of think tanks, it includes that of ideating new solutions to overcome the impasse, but overall the process remains intergovernmental in nature (Chiodi et al., 2021). However, notwithstanding the fact that governments are the protagonists of the relations between the EU and WB countries, they are not the only agents in the EU integration process and more generally in the relations of the EU with its neighbourhood.

A role in this framework is played by actors involved in territorial cooperation (Scott, 2011; Coletti and Chiodi, 2025).

The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) has included since the very beginning (2007) a component of cross-border and transnational cooperation, among the WB countries and crossing EU external borders, the latter jointly supported by internal and external EU funding instruments. Territorial cooperation in the framework of IPA is an instrument for capacity building in the light of EU membership goal, as well as an instrument of reconciliation in border areas internal to the WB region.

Moreover, in 2014, the EU Macro-regional Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) was launched. The strategy initially included four EU members and four EU non-member countries (Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia). North Macedonia joined the group in 2020 and San Marino formally in 2022. Italy has been at the forefront in supporting the conception of the strategy, in the framework of its long-lasting national strategic projection towards WB countries (Solly and Berisha, 2021; Coletti and Chiodi, 2025).

The EUSAIR focuses on five specific pillars (blue growth, connecting the region, environmental quality, sustainable tourism, and a social pillar since 2025), which represent common challenges in the macro-region. The strategy can pursue the development of the macro-region through concerted actions among different stakeholders at national and sub-national scale and by coordinating different sources of funding to achieve commonly defined goals.

The value added of the EUSAIR with respect to European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg) lies in the multiple scales involved in the macro-region, that goes from the local to the national and supra-national, offering a platform to upscale problems and solutions that come to be tackled within territorial cooperation. The EUSAIR builds around Thematic Steering Groups (TSGs), connected with the pillars of the strategy. The TSGs represent transnational spaces where different actors can meet, discuss and agree on challenges and measures to be undertaken in the macro-region.

Against this background, the aim of the paper is to explore the role of Interreg and EUSAIR in the enlargement process, in particular in a current long lasting period of enlargement fatigue.

The relations across the Adriatic and Ionian space have been explored through the lenses of the “Community of Practice” (CoP). This concept originated in sociological studies of organization, but is also used in the study of International Relations and European studies.

The focus on CoP allows to study the role of decentralised transnational networks – among regional and local authorities and civil society – and if and how they contribute to the enlargement process. From this point of view, the research builds on the findings of previous research activities that have already emphasised the actual and potential contribution of local networks to the enlargement process (Chiodi et al, 2021; Coletti and Chiodi 2025).

The document is structured as follows: the next section presents the literature review of the concept of CoP, exploring the definition and added value of the concept and focusing on its application in a territorial cooperation framework. Section three illustrates the methodology and the approach that was followed for the study. Section four and five present the results of the interviews; finally section six presents some conclusions including a list of policy recommendations.

1.1 Literature review

1.1.1 *What is a community of practice*

As already mentioned in the introduction, the concept of CoP first developed in sociological studies of organization, in particular in learning theory. The first use of this concept emerged at the end of the 1980s - beginning of the 1990s. Over time, it evolved from a more descriptive to a more prescriptive concept (Cox, 2007). Social scientists have used the concept in a variety of situations, including governments, education, associations, social sector, the web, and increasingly in the field of International Relations (Wegner, 2011).

According to Adler (2008), CoP can be defined as groups of professionals who: think alike or share a concern, set of issues, or passion about a topic; are informally and contextually bound to a shared interest; interact on an ongoing basis in learning and applying a common practice.

Similarly, according to Pyrko et al (2017), CoP can be defined as groups of people who share a common interest in real-life problems, and collaborate regularly to learn together; from this point of view, the authors highlight that CoP cannot simply be set up, but must emerge organically through meaningful interaction.

Also Wegner (2011) emphasizes the regularity of meetings and exchange as a crucial characteristic of a CoP: “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1).

Wegner, moreover, defines CoP as the result of the combination of three elements:

- The domain: A CoP has a specific identity, defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership implies a commitment to that domain, and a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people;
- The community: In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other, but they do not necessarily work together on a daily basis.
- The practice: Members of a CoP are practitioners. Consequently, they develop a shared repertoire of experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice.

Following Hoadley (2012), we can distinguish two main approaches to the definition of CoP. The first, which is “feature-based”, emphasizes the role of CoP in solving problems: knowledge is not something that is produced by experts and then transmitted to others; rather, learning is situated in problem solving. Knowledge and learning are thus embedded in cultural practices. The second approach, which is “process-based”, emphasizes the constant process of legitimate peripheral participation that characterises CoP. “With legitimate peripheral participation learners enter a community and gradually take up its practices” (p. 290-291). The reproduction of knowledge is thus based on a process of joining and identifying with a CoP, which are not crystallized and unchangeable structures.

With respect to knowledge, Pyrko et al (2017) highlights the importance of the process of “thinking together”, which enables tacit knowledge to be shared through collective interaction and help members to develop practical competences. Knowledge is “recreated” by community members through practical interactions, and not simply “transferred”. Consequently, within a CoP, learning is a process that involves identity transformation, and the negotiation of meaning through shared experience.

1.1.2. ***What is the added value of a community of practice***

According to Hoadley (2012), CoP have specific characteristics if compared with other knowledge communities, that represent part of their added value. First, they are not only endemic phenomena that occur naturally; rather, they can be explicitly created and fostered. Consequently, they can be based and rely on specific and explicit rules and objectives. They are different from "knowledge-building communities", that are characterised by the explicit goal of learning and building knowledge; in the case of communities of practice, the explicit aim is to exchange experiences on a domain of common interest. From this point of view, other kinds of communities, such as "communities of learners", "communities of interests" or "knowledge networks" do not catch the specificities of the communities of practices.

Wagner (2011) identifies a number of contributions that can be offered by a CoP, including, first of all, that of knowledge management: CoP enable practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need. This approach recognizes that practitioners are in the best position to manage their own knowledge, leading to more effective knowledge sharing and retention. Second, CoP allow linking learning and performance, as members often belong to both CoP and formal teams or business units, allowing them to apply what they learn directly to their work. Third, CoP offer a powerful tool to address not only explicit but also tacit (unwritten, unspoken) knowledge. Fourth, CoP are usually not limited by formal organizational structures. Consequently, they allow for cross-boundary connections, connecting people across different departments, geographic locations, and even organisations. This fosters collaboration and innovation by bringing diverse perspectives together. Fifth, CoP enhance problem solving, as collaboration, sharing experiences, and seeking advice from peers, can lead to more effective and innovative solutions to challenges. Finally, they can support a cultural change: strengthening a culture of continuous learning, collaboration, and knowledge sharing.

1.1.3 *Communities of practice in International Relations*

As already mentioned, the concept of CoP has overcome the boundaries of organisational studies, and has been largely used in other fields, including that of International Relations (IR) (Adler et al, 2024). In this frame, due to their shared practice and mutual engagement, CoP are considered vital for promoting and innovating practices in challenging and uncertain conditions (Bicchi, 2022). The concept has acquired a growing relevance in the field of IR; indeed, it has been proposed even as a general framework for the analysis of global ordering (Bueger et al, 2024).

Bicchi (2022) highlights that CoP are a useful lens to analyse the role of informal politics in international relations, complementing more traditional approaches such as institutional and network analysis. According to the author, a CoP has the potential to transform practices around formal boundaries, thanks to three main features: sense of timing, sense of placing, and sense making. The sense of timing refers to the fact that CoP may help identify the "right time" for actions, which is shared within the group. The sense of placing refers to the fact that members share an understanding of where practices are most effectively enacted, shaping their physical and social contexts. Finally, sense making is crucial in maintaining community cohesion and re-centering focus on practices.

Not just the functioning of community of practice has been analysed in academic literature, but also the phase of definition and set up: Bicchi (2024) interrogates on the process of creation of a community of practice, focusing on the founding practices as a crucial moment for their effectiveness.

Graeger (2024) interestingly introduces the concept of different scales, focusing on the relationship between international, high and low politics, by examining the emergence of long-term everyday border crossing practices between Norway and Russia, in a situation of tension or conflict between the West and Russia. The analysis highlights how the social dynamics at the border have contributed to confidence-building and to low tensions, also beyond the specific border on which they take place.

From the same perspective, CoP have been explored as crucial mechanisms in the functioning of the EU (Bremberg et al 2018), including in the dimension of its external action (Bicchi 2011; Hofius 2022).

The focus on the everyday and informality, which is implicit in the concept of CoP, may offer a crucial contribution in understanding how international relations work beyond formal structures.

1.1.4 *Territorial cooperation and macro-regional strategies as communities of practice*

The literature review presented in these pages allows us to identify a number of features and characteristics of a CoP. Based on these characteristics (the common domain, the community, the participation of practitioners and the sharing of practices, the not-natural character, the shared learning and thinking, among others), and on the potential of CoP for the study of IR (including focusing on the relation between high and low politics), we believe that the concept offers a valuable tool to explore relations that are established in the framework of European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg) projects and macro-regional strategies. Interreg projects across the Adriatic and Ionian seas as well as the TSG of the EUSAIR represent settings where CoP can be created around different themes and topics, favouring the exchange of knowledge and experiences and ultimately supporting the enlargement process of WB countries involved in those activities.

Interreg projects require the participation of partners coming from the different involved territories; they have to define clear, common objectives and activities with a cross-border relevance. Consequently, territorial cooperation projects offer frameworks and financial support to different kinds of territorial actors to cooperate, exchanging knowledge and practices to tackle common or similar problems or opportunities. In doing so, these projects support the creation of transnational CoP in different topics and areas of interest of local territories.

A similar role is played by the TSGs of the EUSAIR. The EUSAIR has a complex governance structure based on a Governing Board (GB) and one TSG for each pillar of the strategy. The EUSAIR Facility Point supports the functioning of these managing bodies. Moreover, the EUSAIR has at its disposal a Stakeholder Platform aimed at facilitating the involvement of the different stakeholders. The TSGs are relevant areas of transnational interaction, where good practices are exchanged and where it is easier to find common solutions to issues that might arise. From this perspective, the EUSAIR offers an important opportunity for creating CoP that could be better exploited through the continuity and stability of the national representatives that participate in the meetings (Chiodi et al 2021).

Both the frameworks of Interreg programmes and EUSAIR are based on the involvement of practitioners at different scales (from national to local) and from different backgrounds (from public entities to private actors) that are embedded in different territories. These frameworks thus offer the opportunity to build transnational CoP, where actors involved in different national and territorial strategies and settings can share problems and solutions.

The transnational networks are created within EU funded (Interreg) or EU supported (EUSAIR) frameworks; consequently, they are built around priorities which are EU driven, or at least shared by EU member states. From this point of view, the creation of transnational communities allows to share - between EU and WB partners - strategies which not only take into account EU norms and procedures, but also tackle EU priorities or relevant issues. Moreover, in particular in the framework of EU territorial cooperation, management rules are based on EU Cohesion Policy (the framework of Interreg programmes); CoP can be created also with respect to the practical management rules of the projects, allowing for a transfer of knowledge from EU and non-EU partners in this field. The extent to which these different kinds of CoP support the enlargement process in the perception of stakeholders is discussed in the following sections.

1.2 **Methodology**

This paper addresses the following research question:

To what extent do the Communities of Practice, emerging from the work on European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) projects and/or of EUSAIR activities, can contribute to fostering the European integration process in the Western Balkans?

To pursue this aim, our activity followed different steps that can be summarised in: literature review, elaboration of the questionnaires for interviews, mapping of stakeholders, qualitative interviews, analysis of the results and final reporting. Each of these steps will be briefly described in this section, in order to give account for the methodology that was adopted for the analysis.

The first step was a review of the academic and grey literature on CoP, in order to identify their main characteristics. Specific attention has been dedicated to previous employment of the concept in the framework of IR.

Based on the literature, two different sets of questions were elaborated: one for the participants to Interreg projects across the EU and WB region; another one for participants to EUSAIR's TSGs. While certain questions overlapped, we believe that the different mechanisms and aims of the projects and the TSGs also called for differences in how they were addressed. Both questionnaires are available in Annex 1.

We then moved to the identification of stakeholders. On the one hand, this was based on previous activities and research conducted in the Adriatic and Ionian space (Chiodi et al 2021); moreover, preliminary interviews were conducted with relevant actors who we deemed able to help us in the process. In particular, an online meeting was organized with the managing bodies of the Interreg Adrion programme. The Interreg projects that we identified for the interviews mostly dealt, or are dealing, with the following matters: marine pollution, blue growth, social development, environment and climate, infrastructure development.

We then conducted 20 qualitative interviews with stakeholders from 8 countries of the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region. The interviews were then analysed with the aim of exploring the role of CoP in supporting the enlargement process. The main findings are discussed in the next section, supported by the (anonymized) direct voice of the interviewees. The table of the interviews is available in Annex 2.

2. Analysis

2.1 Communities of practice in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region

The first element that emerged from the 20 interviews we conducted for the research is the shared awareness among stakeholders of the existence of networks across the Adriatic and Ionian region, that we consider and analyse as Communities of Practice.

CoP have in particular materialised in sectors like agriculture, sustainable tourism, digitalisation, biodiversity and environment. In the words of the interviewees, the connections between practitioners emerge on the grounds of shared interests: "*That's where community is created, on the basis of shared interests and a common language, that of the profession*" (n.7).

2.1.1 *Added value of communities of practices*

The interviews have shed a light on the main advantages deriving from CoP, in the perspective of those actively involved. First, interviewees made reference to the capacity building, the experience sharing and the mutual learning among the participants. As one interviewee said: "*These opportunities from collaboration and participation in this project give you an opportunity to do some short training there or sharing experience by meetings etc. [...] We learn how they work and learn about methodology and how they implemented the law, how they implemented the different protocols, how they strengthen capacity*" (n.1).

Secondly, these communities are deemed capable of creating a space for advancing personal relationships and mutual trust. It is not rare among the interviewees to express personal appreciation of being part and contributing to the consolidation of such communities, which often develop also into personal relationships. "*As always happens when you work with people, you get to know each other and therefore the ideas also develop along the way, so many of these partners, these partnerships, are updated and declined, but then also maintaining relationships that are personal relationships*" stressed an interlocutor (n.3).

Thirdly, the closer relations developed within the CoP are recognised by several interviewees as a relevant contributor to creating new stimuli and building synergies for further cooperation. The consolidation of collaborative networks can encourage drafting of new joint project proposals, or even common strategies on how to tackle given complex challenges: "*More or less everyone's tendency is that, if possible, to involve partners I've already worked with because I know them, [...] they are reliable, [...] we've had a good experience before and that mini communities are created anyway*" (n.13).

The interviews show that there is an awareness and consensus on the general need to further enhance transnational collaboration between the members of the community, as said also in the words of an interviewee: "*We came to realise that many things can't be done without collaboration*" (n.4).

It is the commonality of the challenges as well as the affinities in the context that stimulates the expansion of collaborations: "*We have a very good collaboration between EU countries and non-EU countries, especially in agriculture, because in agriculture in the region we have almost the same problems with Italy, [...] because we cultivate the same cultures, olives, vineyards and vegetables*" commented one interviewee (n. 1).

Basically, our interlocutors see the Adriatic and Ionian region as a functional area, applying an academic term. They see the commonality of problems to tackle but also they share cultural sensitivities that facilitate the collaboration. As an interviewee pointed:"*Most of us have some common backgrounds, so it is easy to communicate [...] having Greece, Italy, Albania and mainly the former Jugoslavia means all of us have some common background and it is easy to understand the mentality of these countries outside the EU*" (n.14).

2.1.2 ***Collaborations among EU member and non-member states***

One aspect that we investigated is the identification of any perceived differentiation in the cooperation between partners based in EU and non-EU countries. Almost all the interviewees confirmed that no substantial differences have been noted in their respective project experiences. As one interviewee commented: "*I have not noticed any major differences or difficulties in cooperating with countries that are not yet an integral part of the EUcompared to those who are already part of it. In the end, so to speak the challenges are more or less the same*" (n.13).

What emerges as different is the availability of resources among the non member states as compared to EU members. This is something evident also among the interlocutors belonging to EU countries, where one reported for instance the "*limited financial resources, staff shortages, and an often limited organisational structure*". At the same time there is the awareness that "i*t is precisely in this context that cooperation projects play a fundamental role*" (n.17).

In terms of cooperation obstacles, some interviewees suggest that the first burden is bureaucracy in their daily work and it is not directly attributable to the lack of EU integration. Indeed the different administrative and regulatory frameworks in place in EU and non-EU countries, followed by the political and administrative borders, condition the outcome. But as highlighted by an interviewee, there are also national-based challenges, for instance even the collaboration among municipalities of the same country should not be taken for granted: "*I know that from the beginning it will be a problem because those two municipalities are completely different. And they cannot accept having a joint MPA [marine protected area] because of who will do what. So this is yes, usually complications*" (n.12).

Although the practitioners working the field are aware of the enlargement process, they tend to see their work as something specific and more concrete that is somehow distant from the wider political framework of the EU accession. This is why they do not see their initiatives of collaboration compromised by the different status - EU or non EU member states - of the countries their partners come from: "*I would not say that there is a difficulty or difference between European Union countries or not. Perhaps this difficulty will come at the moment when we will work with documents [...] since the differentiation between EU and non-EU may be observed in terms of legislation and it will be a little difficult, but I do not believe that it will be impossible*" (n. 20).

2.1.3 ***Funds as an enabling factor***

The awareness of the importance of jointly addressing the many complex challenges in the Adriatic and Ionian region predated the end of the cold war. As an interviewee put it, in the Adriatic, under the Austro-Hungarian empire, the scientific cooperation for instance in the field of marine biology was already significant and not even the cold war interrupted the collaboration between the two shores: "*Relations between universities and public institutions existed even before the Cold War and were well established, and they remain so today*" (n.3).

However, thanks to the EU programmes, collaborations were substantially enhanced and could have more policy implications as compared to the past: "*The big difference, in my opinion, is that small cooperative research structures and the companies themselves, through Interreg projects, have been able to find the resources to apply these experiences on a different scale. These experiences were already well established at university level but perhaps did not have a concrete impact on the productive sectors*" (n.3).

European territorial cooperation in particular has provided opportunities to local professionals from state and non-state entities to forge transnational bonding, advance cooperation and tackle mutual challenges. As argued by one of our interlocutors: "*These [international cooperation] experiences strengthened [...] [our] awareness of the strategic value of cross-border cooperation, especially in addressing environmental challenges that transcend political boundaries*" (n.17).

In practical terms, the EU territorial cooperation supports the collaboration between experts, professionals, public authorities, academia and non-state actors also in the Adriatic and Ionian region. The funds made available by Interreg IPA Adrion facilitate the exchanges between these actors and provide new opportunities to take common action on specific issues.

There is a wide consensus among the interviewees on the financial resources as the engine to set transnational relations in motion in the Adriatic and Ionian macro-region. The EU funding has been supportive of the bonding among the stakeholders at the transnational level and contributed to advancing the work of the CoP: "*If it weren't for European funding, this thing would never have happened. So, no one is definitely taking a swipe at their plate. That said, creating communities, in my opinion, means lowering the bar compared to a certain type of very high ideal, which no longer fools anyone*" stated one interlocutor (n. 7).

Accordingly, the majority of our interlocutors expressed appreciation of the projects they implement thanks to the EU interreg programmes. One interviewee convincingly claimed that they have "*a huge impact*" on the ground (n.9) and for this reason lamented their limited dimensions in terms of budget: "*If the Interreg would have ten times more budget than you have now, it would do miracles. Because if you look at the whole cohesion funds, it's a really, really tiny, small amount of money. But [still] the results for the integration process are enormous*" (n.9).

Indeed what the Interreg project can do is pilot projects and then it is to other major funds to guarantee larger investments. It is the cohesion funds for member states and the pre-accession funds for the candidates that can finance large initiatives.

In addition, when discussing the availability of funds it is clear that there is also a difference between EU member states and non member states. As some interlocutors underlined, the level of economic development in the region is inversely proportional to the availability of EU funds (n.9).

In some fields the difference in opportunities is particularly evident. This is the case of the funds available to work on climate neutrality and emission reduction: "*I'm talking now about our EU climate package and European Green Deal, in that sense, I felt what it really means to be part of the EU because for some activities, especially infrastructural projects, which are of huge importance for us, you don't have the means to be part of it because you're not part of the European Union*" (n.11).

Tourism-related projects demand for less funding than infrastructural ones, since they own a more local dimension and demand for less expertise, which in turn facilitates also the implementation stage (n.2). While clearly, connectivity is at the opposite end due to the high costs that they imply. As the list of priorities in the region is very long, in the field of connectivity, Interreg IPA Adrion "*can do little [...] mostly finance pilot actions, such as the projects [...] to speed up border crossings through the development of technologies*" (n.2).

2.1.4 *The potential of the EUSAIR*

The solution should be that each partner draws larger resources from the different funds at its disposal and then they coordinate with each other to achieve the common results. A complex coordination between different administrations and budget lines is necessary to obtain results when projects have a clear cross-border or even macro-regional dimension.

The EUSAIR should be the place where such coordination takes place; many efforts have indeed been made by EU member and non member states for "embedding" EUSAIR flagships projects and priorities in the programming of different typologies of funds, in order to stimulate the coordination from the bottom up, in particular in light of the 2021–2027 programming period.

However, as one interlocutor stressed, EUSAIR is still not able to move from preliminary projects to fully fledged ones, mobilising resources of the international financial institutions. This is why, according to some of the interviewees, in 2024 the Marche Region organised a conference aimed specifically at gathering forces to attract public and private funds to give concreteness to all the projects jointly elaborated by the EUSAIR. The complexity of the endeavor, the limited financial resources and weak technical capacities at the national level did not yet allow it to happen. As one interviewee stressed there is still the need to "bridge a gap in skills and knowledge" (n.2).

What was stressed, however, is that the EUSAIR is not the venue of decision-making but that of "consensus-building". It cannot compete with other fora: "Macroregions can be used to build consensus and share data, but real decisions are made elsewhere, and our goal is to reach a binding decision that can be implemented" (n. 18).

Yet, a few see the rationale behind a macroregional strategy also in terms of political cooperation in an area still bent by political animosities: "Positive examples exist when one identifies projects that effectively solve a common problem. These solutions, above all, put aside political or ethnic reasons, which are still deeply felt in some cases, and reason in concrete terms, that is, we reason about the projects, about the solutions that these projects and these critical issues can offer" (n. 2).

Another aspect that was mentioned as important is connected to the capacity of the EUSAIR to engage stakeholders, something that in our understanding come to constitute CoP: "*We used a stakeholder engagement approach that involved the ministries of infrastructure and transport of all the countries participating in the strategy in discussions on investment priorities. This was a very useful and important exercise, not only for the drafting of the plan, but also because these discussions gave rise to new ideas or, in any case, new critical issues, new needs to be met, one of which is what you mentioned, namely the fact that in cross-border connections*" (n.2).

Nonetheless, returning to the issue of resources, as some interlocutors lamented, the EUSAIR is clearly weakened by the fact that it does not have its own funds. Some of our interlocutors recognise its value in as far as: "*The macro-region is an incredible vehicle for integration*", "*Because anyway people meet, talk, become familiar with each other*". Therefore, "*it should be supported, sustained, financed, and embraced*" (n. 4).

2.2 Is there a policy impact of cooperation?

As discussed in previous paragraphs, cross-border cooperation programmes in the Adriatic-Ionian region have proven effective in promoting CoP. However, when it comes to the power of these communities to generate a political spillover, our findings suggest that it is rather limited. When asked about their ability to translate project results or good practices into public policies or political priorities, most of our interviewees expressed some degree of dissatisfaction with their engagement with the political and institutional level.

The majority of our interlocutors recognise that interacting with decision-makers is a necessary step, if the goal of cross-border cooperation is to find solutions to shared regional problems: "*Collaboration with policy-makers is important for several reasons, because engaging with policy-makers ensures that policies are practical and aligned with the needs and interests of various stakeholders. I think that stakeholders should work together, because it is a way for better coordination and support for implementing policies*" (n.15).

CoP's experts, researchers, practitioners and civic actors often see their role as that of generating the knowledge necessary to inform decision-making. As one interview pointed out: "*Political decisions must always be based on results and scientific truth, [...] In our role we deliver our data to the relevant Ministry, and then of course from there it ends up with the decision-makers [...] Sometimes we have our own experts at the technical tables, who are then the ones who send the recommendations to the decision-makers*" (n. 10).

In WB countries, for example, it is quite common that environmental data used by decision-makers comes directly from EU-funded projects managed by NGOs or research institutes. As one expert noted: "*I think that 50% of the data they have about the protection of the marine environment [...], they get from our projects. They did not investigate on their own because they don't have the capacity*" (n.12).

Yet, some practitioners lament the fact that political leaders often do not recognise them as partners, a situation which makes the interactions rather distant and difficult. As one expert explained: "*The bottom-up approach is something that is very nice and very promising and full of ideas. But nothing happened until the direction from above came. They are very suspicious about the ideas of the NGO sectors and things like that, you know, so they are not very open to collaborate. I must admit that*" (n. 12).

The same expert noted that political leaders seem to be more open and willing to take their input more seriously into account when there is an external push to do it, for example when it comes to the respect of obligations enclosed in European or international agreements: "*They won't listen to us. But if somebody came from outside and said 'you must do that', then probably they will do it. So when the EU says, 'you should do that', then they will start to listen to us*" (n.12).

EU incentives and international pressure seem to at least help to ensure a minimum of dialogue at the national level, strengthening the leverage that practitioners and other civic stakeholders may have vis-a-vis decision-makers.

Some of our interlocutors underlined how cross-border projects, especially in the environmental sector, may take years before showing their results and generating a concrete change, which means that it generally takes a long time for policy-makers to realise the added value of working on transnational projects and the contribution they can give to public policies: "*The effects of territorial cooperation are not visible at the moment (...) So sometimes this is why it's difficult to prove that this is a really important tool. And that really has effects on the integration*" (n.9).

Moreover, one difficulty for practitioners to establish a lasting relationship with the political sphere is due to the frequent turnover in institutions and political leaderships: "*When the administration changes, the president changes too, and often many other things change. So there is no continuity, unlike with researchers or university professors*" (n.3).

Sometimes, dialogue is easier with technical staff within ministries or local administrations, who can act as a mediator and transmit project outcomes upwards to decision-makers: "*I think the technical staff can be a bridge between us to the decision-makers. And I'm sure they […] will know how to explain to policy-makers the benefits of this project, especially on the realization of some obligations aimed at reforms in the energy sector, which we undertake as a candidate for the EU*" (n.15).

"*We liaise directly with officials from the Veneto Region, rather than, say, the municipality of Venice or various local councils, and we rely on them to ensure that there is the possibility of adding, at a political level, any strategic guidelines or tools that we believe could be helpful*" (n. 13).

As observed, the EUSAIR could be the platform that connects practitioners with political decision-makers. Yet, most of our interviewees reported that they rarely explore it as communication often flows in one direction only - from the political to the technical level - rather than being a genuine dialogue and collaboration on public decisions and policies (n. 19).

All in all, in our finding CoP are instrumental in capacity-development and knowledge production in the Adriatic-Ionian region, yet their potential to influence public policies and agendas remains unexploited.

Among the reasons, we should add that, advocacy is not always perceived as a priority by practitioners, who often view their role as that of providing evidence-based knowledge to decision-makers, and/or implementing pilot initiatives rather than advocating for systematic solutions: "*As a research body, we always provide the data, but we do not make the decisions. The decisions are always made by Europe through its commissions, which are the ones that actually decide*" (n. 10).

Indeed, most of the practitioners lack the time and resources to regularly engage with advocacy activities, as daily and project activities turn into a limiting factor to grasp and work to address the big picture: "*I don't have time to do my own job and many obligations, I have to always work for my NGO. If I had that as my primary work, I would probably, you know, give much more to the policies of Montenegro in correlation with the EU chapters*" (n.11).

As a consequence, the limited dialogue between practitioners and decision makers significantly limits the possibility to translate project-level achievement into policy-making, thus confining valuable projects' outputs to pilot, local or technical level.

2.3 **Communities of practice and EU integration: missed opportunities?**

The Adriatic-Ionian region is undoubtedly an important political space where EU member states and candidate countries can work together on equal footing, especially through the cooperation programmes of the European territorial cooperation and the EUSAIR.

In the context of the European integration of the WB, the CoP composed of scientists, researchers, and practitioners could serve as crucial interlocutors as well for EU institutions, especially given their expertise and practical knowledge.

They are generally aware of their belonging to the common cultural and historical context of the Adriatic-Ionian region - with its shared challenges in various sectors, including environment and infrastructure development. As one interviewee put it when describing the reason for his commitment in transnational cooperation: "*being part of something larger than our personal space, our country, our traditions, connecting with people with with similar values, temperament, well, you know, creating something new, better*" (n.6).

However, our analysis suggests that this sense of belonging is not necessarily nor explicitly linked to the EU enlargement agenda. Indeed, the connection with the broader European integration process of EU candidate countries from the WB is rarely perceived by the actors involved in hands-on work. For example, attention or direct reference to the process of European integration is often absent in the work of technical experts or professionals engaged in cross-border projects, who view their work as more practical and sectoral.

Significantly, we recorded the same perception from an institutional representative of the EUSAIR, who noted that European enlargement is only a "marginal topic" within the TSG's agenda (n. 19). Basically, our interlocutors do not perceive their work on these norms as a direct contribution to the EU integration process, even when it is.

For instance, our interviewees mentioned EU norms and standards to which IPA countries need to align, such as the Green Deal or the Paris Agreement in the field of climate and energy policy. In these sectors related to environmental protection and sustainable development, EU regulations are generally stricter than those in candidate countries. As one practitioner observed, local action plans developed during a project that he had been working on "had to be drafted and implemented "*100% in compliance with European regulations and existing policies related to specific subjects*" (n.14).

Similarly, another interlocutor noted that: "*all countries, including non-EU countries, have their national energy and climate plan and it's based on EU regulatory frameworks and EU regulations and other documents like Paris Agreement, Green Deal and so on*" (n.15). However, when asked directly about the EU accession the answer would not lead to a clear awareness of the contribution of their work to the process itself.

The length of the process is indeed the reason behind this view that leads practitioners to focus on their concrete work rather than on larger ambitions. Most interviewees did not hide their frustration towards an enlargement process which has been going on for more than 20 years and that is seen as lacking a strategic direction (n.6). One interlocutor lamented that the EU, along with its cumbersome procedures, has lost credibility in most parts of the Balkans: "*there is a train that everyone must board, but nobody knows where it is going, not even the Europeans themselves*" (n. 7).

Another one added that "w*e no longer talk about integration. We talked about it ten years ago, probably because now it is perceived as very distant. In my opinion, there are elements that stem from the fact that European integration is perceived as too institutional, too formal, too much of an event involving signatures and paperwork, and much less so in terms of everyday practices. It's like none of us knows how to collaborate with the administrations and ministries*" (n. 8). Overall, the political horizon of EU enlargement does not appear to be a defining element in the work of practitioners working within CoP.

Indeed, as noted above, the disparities in resources and institutional capacities risks widening the gap between EU members and candidates, rather than reducing it. While EU member states can rely on much bigger cohesion funds and relatively robust administrative systems, candidate countries not only struggle with limited funds from ETC and IPA programmes, but they also have to deal with slower processes and weaker administrative capacities.

"Investment in renewable sources is much greater in EU countries than in non-EU countries. [...] On one side, we have EU countries who have access to EU funding and resources. On the other hand, we have non-EU countries which have limited access to these resources", commented one of our interlocutors (n.15).

Notwithstanding the question of length and resources, there is also a knowledge gap regarding EU institutions and decision-making to be noted. Several interviewees admitted that even as EU citizens, they lacked a clear understanding of the functioning of EU policies and institutions, and that projects were often their first exposure to these dynamics. Political elites themselves are often described as "*not very well informed*" at local level regardless of their EU membership or not (n. 13).

Indeed working on cross-border projects, being in the environment or in the infrastructure sector, requires a complicated puzzle of political processes, funds and administrative procedures. The EUSAIR could serve as a capacity building, know-how exchange and advocacy platform, but once again so far its role has remained rather peripheral.

Overall, we can conclude that the link with EU enlargement is not explicit in the narratives of practitioners. Projects are framed in terms of environmental protection, infrastructure, or innovation, but rarely in terms of advancing EU integration; nor advancements in these same fields are seen as directly contributing to the integration process even when they do. As one stakeholder put it: "*we cannot tackle the enlargement because it's so much out of the scope of the project*" (n. 5). The challenge is to bridge this gap: to move from technical compliance and project-based cooperation towards a clearer recognition of how these activities contribute to the European integration of the WB.

Hopefully, as recently the Interreg Adrion programme - that supports transnational cooperation initiatives across the Adriatic and Ionian space - explicitly considers the projects' potential contribution to the Western Balkans's European integration among its evaluation criteria, the latter will be more present in the applicants' understanding of their role and contribution.

2.3.1 *Regional cooperation and the role of Italy*

To be sure, cross-border and transnational cooperation supported by Interreg projects serves the political purpose of regional reconciliation, helping overcome the legacies of the wars that tore the WB region apart in the 90s and that in some cases still constitute a limit for local development: "*In the Western Balkan countries, we still have some political disagreement, political disputes, some tensions and so on. So this project, like the Interreg projects which express transnational cooperation and cross-border cooperation, in my opinion, are very important to rebuild this trust and overcome these political barriers*" (n. 15), noted an interviewee. This appreciation is particularly relevant, as regional cooperation is one of the conditions introduced by the EU for the WB integration.

Given its geographical proximity and its historical, cultural, and economic ties with the Adriatic-Ionian region, Italy is seen as potentially playing a leading role in strengthening cooperation within this area and in supporting the EU integration of candidate countries.

However, interviews conducted for this study reveal a dual perception of Italy's commitment to transnational cooperation. On the one hand, some experts recognise that "*Italy is trying to make a difference in the region of the WB" (n.6), while others suggest that Italy's efforts could be improved: "There should be more funding and a greater commitment from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself […] a greater presence measured against what Germany and Austria do for the Danube region. Italy is not committed enough…*" (n.4).

Some interviewees stressed that Italy should strengthen its commitment both economically, by increasing resources to finance cooperation, and politically, by providing credible support from political leaders to build trust among countries in the region. While Italy already holds significant symbolic and cultural influence in the Adriatic-Ionian area, it often struggles to translate this influence into consistent political and institutional strategies.

Some stakeholders highlighted the lack of coordination among different institutions and the limited awareness of EUSAIR work within Italian ministries as additional obstacles that reduce the effectiveness of cooperation as a boost for EU integration. For instance, in matters such as the recognition of university qualifications between EU member states and WB countries, one interviewee noted: "*Here we're touching on a matter that falls under the Ministry of Universities, but there is no one in that Ministry who knows about the EUSAIR. Officers within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs know it, and that's all, but people in other ministries don't*" (n.4).

3. Conclusion and policy recommendations

This work was carried out as part of a research project whose purpose was to explore how Communities of Practice (CoP) - intended as a group of practitioners who work together in the implementation of European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg) projects and participation in the Adriatic-Ionian Macro-Regional Strategy (EUSAIR) political fora - can further the European integration of the Western Balkans (WB).

It started from the assumption that practitioners working on Interreg projects and engaging with the EUSAIR can contribute with their shared knowledge production and know-how exchanges to strengthening transnational and cross-border connections between the countries of the macro-region, which in turn can benefit the European integration process of the WB.

The research findings show that CoP emerge around concrete issues, such as environment, sustainable tourism, connectivity, and marine pollution, where practitioners exchange knowledge, build trust, and create enduring professional and personal ties with the aim of tackling common or similar problems or opportunities.

On one side, EU funds, particularly through Interreg IPA Adrion, are the primary enablers of these transnational networks that contribute significantly to capacity building, mutual learning, and reconciliation in a region still affected by political tensions. On the other hand, these funds are often perceived as too limited to generate substantial change and de facto allow only for pilot initiatives.

Moreover, despite the potential identified in the literature (Bicchi 2022), the CoPs we studied fail to have a significant policy impact, even when they obtain valuable project outputs. In particular, the CoP in the Adriatic and Ionian region up to now do not really constitute a resource for the EU enlargement, and this is certainly a missed opportunity that should be addressed.

In our findings, CoP represent an important, yet unexploited resource for EU integration. They embody “everyday integration from below,” allowing WB stakeholders to experience horizontal collaboration with their EU counterparts. In particular their potential to influence public policies and agendas should be carefully considered so as to devise appropriate solutions.

By fostering transnational cooperation, the CoP have the potential to complement the political level with insights into policy areas and the needs of the territories involved. The limited dialogue between practitioners and decision makers significantly limits the possibility to translate project-level achievement into policy-making, thus confining valuable projects’ outputs to pilot, local or technical level.

To conclude, CoP in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region holds significant potential to complement and strengthen the EU integration process of the WB. Unlocking this potential requires political recognition, institutional support, and a stronger alignment between technical cooperation and strategic enlargement objectives.

Recommendations:

- Valorising the role of practitioners and embedding their knowledge into evidence-based policy-making;
- Reward projects with a clear link to EU integration by ensuring the scaling up of project outcomes from the status of pilot initiatives to policy measures;
- Strengthening the link between EU enlargement objectives and cooperation frameworks like Interreg and EUSAIR;
- Enhancing the role of EUSAIR Thematic Steering Groups as genuine platforms for dialogue between practitioners and policymakers, something that in turn would increase their role and visibility among stakeholders;
- Ensure adequate and increased funding for Interreg and IPA Adrion programmes to guarantee the sustainability of innovative initiatives, and capitalise on project outcomes beyond the project cycle;
- Ensure funding for research and monitoring activities on the contribution of territorial cooperation and EUSAIR to the enlargement process, in order to gain evidence capable of orienting future funding schemes and strategic activities.

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Annex 1

Questionnaire for Project Representatives

- Can you briefly present the project?
- What were the results? What do you consider a success?
- Why did you decide to work on transnational projects?

- What do you feel you have in common with your project partners?
- What role did geographical proximity play?
- What other factors influenced your decision to engage in transnational projects? (e.g., previous collaborations with partners, mutual contacts, internal goals of "internationalization," shared identity elements, functional area, etc.)

- How do you evaluate the collaboration with the other project partners?

- What benefits do you think you gained from collaborating with partners from other countries and/or with different experiences, methodologies, and perspectives?
- Were there any difficulties in the collaboration?
- If so, how did you overcome them? What strategies and/or methodologies did you develop to address the challenges in collaboration?

- What does it mean to work with regional partners from both EU and non-EU member states? Is the lack of European integration an obstacle? If so, how did you try to overcome it?
- Have you remained in contact with the project partners? If so, how and at what level?

- Did the project lay the groundwork for future collaboration among the partners? (e.g., have you worked together on other applications/projects?)
- Do you think the practices and methodologies developed during the project can continue beyond the project's official duration?
- Has your work expanded to include actors who were not directly involved in the project?

- Did you establish any form of collaboration with policymakers? For what purpose? And with public decision-makers?

- As a professional/technical expert, are you in a position to advocate for the results of your projects to become public policies? If yes, how? Do you have any experiences to share in this regard?
- Based on your experience, how do you see the process of European integration for the Balkan countries?
- - Was the project's aim (either implicit or explicit) to contribute to the integration process?
- - Do you think your work has contributed to the European integration of the Balkans? If yes, how? If not, why not (e.g., obstacles, lack of interest, etc.)?

Questionnaire for Pillar Coordinator of EUSAIR Thematic Steering Groups

- EUSAIR is the only EU macro-regional strategy that includes more non-EU countries than EU member states. What does it mean to work with regional partners from both Member and non-member states? Is the lack of European integration an obstacle? If so, how has this been addressed?
- Is the alignment of the non-EU countries participating in EUSAIR with EU policies and standards perceived as a priority for the TSG you coordinate?
- In your work within the TSG, have you dealt with:

- Issues related to EU enlargement?
- EU directives or regulations that candidate countries must adopt or demonstrate the capacity to implement?

- Do you think cooperation within the EUSAIR mechanisms (equal partnership, hands-on learning through projects) can contribute to the European integration process from the bottom up? If yes, how? If not, why not? (e.g., obstacles, lack of interest, etc.)

- How do the TSGs contribute or how could they contribute in this regard?
- In your opinion, are TSGs in a position to push for project results to become public policies? If yes, how? And what about individual participants?

- What kind of relationship has been established with the actors involved in the implementation of individual projects?

- Are there opportunities for meetings and exchanges among stakeholders involved in the various flagship projects of a TSG?
- Has collaboration remained limited to the EUSAIR context, or has it extended to other areas and involved other actors?
- Were there any difficulties? If so, how were they overcome?

- In your opinion, what is (if any) the added value of the work of the TSGs in terms of building networks and collaborations at the Adriatic-Ionian level? And in terms of the enlargement process?

Annex 2 List of interviews

No.	Organisation	Country	Date of interview
1	University of Tirana	Albania	07/03/2025
2	TSG 2 EUSAIR	Italy	17/03/2025
3	M.A.R.E. Scarl - marine biology expert	Italy	26/03/2025
4	University of Padua	Italy	03/04/2025
5	University of Pescara	Italy	03/04/2025
6	University “St. Kliment Ohridski” Bitola	North Macedonia	04/04/2025
7	Agenda 21	Italy	17/04/2025
8	Polytechnic University of Turin	Italy	29/04/2025
9	AEBR	Serbia	30/04/2025
10	CNR IRBIM	Italy	12/05/2025
11	Development Vranj	Montenegro	24/05/2025
12	Mediterranean Center for Environmental Monitoring	Montenegro	26/05/2025
13	Chamber of Commerce of Venice Rovigo	Italy	28/05/2025
14	PIERIKI ANAPTIXIAKI S.A. - Local Development Agency	Greece	30/05/2025
15	University of Banja Luka	Bosnia and Herzegovina	03/06/2025
16	LEPIDA SCPA - Public company	Italy	04/06/2025
17	Regional Natural Park of Coastal Dunes from Torre Canne to Torre S. Leonardo	Italy	24/07/2025
18	MedReAct	Italy	13/08/2025
19	TSG 3 EUSAIR	Bosnia and Herzegovina	21/08/2025
20	Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania	Albania	16/09/2025