



STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF THE INTERREG PROGRAMME AUSTRIA-HUNGARY 2021–2027

Non-technical summary



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Recommended citation:

Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Interreg Programme Austria-Hungary 2021–2027, Non-technical summary, 12 July 2021

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Strategic Environmental Assessment framework

In accordance with the SEA Directive (2001/42/EC), a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is being conducted for the Austria–Hungary programme 2021–2027 to assess the likely significant effects of the programme on the environment.

The environmental report was prepared as part of the Strategic Environmental Assessment. This non-technical summary provides an overview of the full report.

Short description of the AT–HU Programme 2021–2027

The subject of the Strategic Environmental Assessment is the Interreg Austria–Hungary cooperation programme 2021–2027. This version of the environmental report is based on the draft programme of 8 July 2021.

The programme aims to tackle common challenges identified in the cross-border region and to strengthen cooperation in selected priorities that are linked to the EU objectives.

In compliance with these EU objectives, the programme focuses on the following priorities:

- **Priority 1: A green and resilient border region** by promoting climate change adaptation and risk management, access to water and sustainable water management, and protecting and preserving nature and biodiversity (42% of the programme budget)
- **Priority 2: A better-connected border region** by enhancing sustainable mobility (9% of the programme budget)
- **Priority 3: A competent border region** by improving access to inclusive and quality services in education, training and lifelong learning as well as promoting sustainable tourism (34% of the programme budget)
- **Priority 4: An integrated border region** by supporting capacity building and strengthening cross-border governance to address future challenges (15% of the programme budget).

Methodology of Strategic Environmental Assessment

The Strategic Environmental Assessment identifies, describes and assesses the direct and indirect impacts of the programme on a number of environmental issues such as biodiversity, water, soil, climate, air, landscape, human health and population, and cultural and material assets.

After describing the current environmental situation in the cross-border region, the SEA sets out the likely significant environmental impacts of the programme and whether the environmental situation is expected to improve, worsen or remain unaffected – especially in comparison to the scenario in which the programme is not implemented (the so-called zero scenario).



The time frame of the assessment is primarily the funding period 2021–2027. However, the subsequent period within which all projects funded under this programme are expected to be completed, i.e. by 2029, is also taken into account.

The programme defines potential activities in a broad manner, hence only a qualitative assessment is possible. Potential impacts on the environment will depend on the precise nature and scope of projects to be funded, as well as on external factors. However, it should be noted that the programme has a limited budget and does not aim to support heavy investments. Instead, it focuses on small-scale investments and intangible or 'soft' actions (studies and research, know-how exchange, etc.).

Throughout the assessment process the programme managing authority, the programming team and the Strategic Environmental Assessment experts exchanged information continuously in order to improve the programme and eliminate possible sources of negative environmental impacts, as well as to enhance provisions and activities protecting the environment.

Environmental status quo

The cross-border region faces significant challenges with regard to preserving its rich biodiversity. There is thus an urgent need to improve the conservation status of habitat types and species. Expanding afforestation, forest regeneration and sustainable forest management remain necessary, especially amid growing pressure arising from climate change. Further efforts are also needed with regard to public awareness of biodiversity.

The risk of climate change impact and extreme weather events such as floods is relatively high, and the situation is expected to become worrying in the coming years.

Regarding water supply and wastewater management, some minor gaps are still to be tackled, especially the public sewerage network in some areas of Vas and Zala counties in Hungary. Significant improvements are also needed with regard to the chemical and ecological status of water bodies in the cross-border region.

On waste management and the circular economy, Austria has one of the highest recycling rates in Europe, while Hungary is still at an early stage, with landfill being the main destination for municipal waste. However, recent years have seen increasing awareness of this issue in the Hungarian regions.

Land consumption and soil sealing are still at high levels, especially in Austria. On air pollution, reducing emissions from the transport sector remains a key challenge for the programme area. Traffic is also a dominant source of noise pollution, mainly in metropolitan areas.

Considering future developments such as transport and other infrastructure, it is essential to protect and preserve cultural heritage and natural landscape in the region. This should be given high priority in tourism-related development and functional improvement projects.



Potential environmental impacts of the AT–HU programme

The programme affects the most important environmental issues of the cross-border region in a positive way. Negative impacts are expected to be negligible and indirect, since the programme focuses mainly on 'soft' actions.

Planned activities under **priority 1 "A green and resilient border region"** have a clear focus on the environment. With the highest programme budget allocation (42% of the budget), activities implemented under this priority are expected to have a significant positive impact on a number of environmental issues by focusing on climate change adaptation and mitigation, water management, and the protection and preservation of nature and biodiversity.

However, some small-scale interventions related to the implementation of new technologies, green infrastructure or water management could have some short-term and reversible impacts on biodiversity, water, landscape and soil. Nevertheless, the potential negative impact of these activities is expected to be limited.

Planned activities under **priority 2 "A better-connected border region"** focus on accessibility and particularly on promoting sustainable national, regional and local mobility in the region.

Depending on the scope and nature of the intervention, some small-scale infrastructure investments and increased cross-border mobility could have a negative impact in the form of increases in land take, higher pressure on habitats and cultural heritage sites, and additional impact through noise pollution in sensitive areas.

Environmental impact assessments and the introduction of project selection criteria during the programme implementation are expected to serve as gatekeepers in the event of unforeseen negative impacts.

Planned activities under **priority 3 "A competent border region"**, which contribute to improving access to inclusive and quality services in education, training and lifelong learning, are considered to be largely neutral or positive to the environment.

On the other hand, activities focused on sustainable tourism could have some negative impacts as a result of small-scale infrastructure development projects and increased numbers of tourists. While a detailed assessment of possible impacts on specific areas cannot be made here, potential negative impacts could be expected, particularly on landscape, cultural heritage, biodiversity, water and air. These impacts should be taken into account by strict project selection criteria.

Planned activities under **priority 4 "An integrated border region"** are of a very "soft" nature and no negative impacts are to be expected. These activities should aim to further enhance the positive effects of the programme on the environment through more effective and sustainable cross-border cooperation in the cross-border region, especially between public authorities.



Main results and recommendations

The Interreg Programme AT–HU is strategic in nature, so this assessment focuses on a qualitative description of possible impacts.

Most of the planned programme activities will have positive impacts on the relevant environmental issues, and significant negative impacts are not to be expected.

To mitigate potential minor negative impacts, environmental project selection criteria and monitoring measures will be developed in line with the specific priorities and objectives of the programme and the existing monitoring system. In addition, measures for efficient environmental monitoring at project level will be included in the next draft of the environmental report.

Strategic Environmental Assessment consultation process

The SEA Directive says that the citizens and authorities who are likely to be concerned with the environmental effects of the Interreg Programme AT–HU shall be consulted on the environmental report.

The environmental report as well as this non-technical summary and the draft programme document are therefore made available to the public and authorities in both countries in order to give them the opportunity to comment.

All comments and opinions received during the public consultation will be documented, integrated in the environmental report, and commented on by the SEA experts.

As a final step, the environmental report will be revised and recommendations will be forwarded to the programme managing authority so that the programme can be revised appropriately and any necessary environmental protection provisions integrated into the implementing provisions.