



Stronger



Resilient

# Healthacross: ensuring access to cross-border healthcare in Lower Austria



## SUMMARY

The Health Agency of Lower Austria is an umbrella organisation including the region's 27 hospitals and 49 houses for the elderly. In 2007, the agency launched the Healthacross initiative to implement projects addressing pressing healthcare provision challenges in the region's border areas.

Through innovative approaches and cross-border cooperation, Healthacross works to streamline processes, reduce disparities and enhance access to healthcare services. The initiative has successfully implemented several projects, such as collaboration on endometriosis treatment and the establishment of a cross-border healthcare centre, by engaging key stakeholders and incorporating residents' perspectives. These efforts have significantly improved access to healthcare services for thousands of patients.



## CONTEXT

Healthcare systems across Europe's rural and remote areas face pressing challenges such as demographic shifts and financial strains.

The geographical layout of Lower Austria's border areas means there is limited connectivity and accessibility, particularly in remote areas. Innovative approaches are essential to promote cross-border cooperation with neighbouring Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary in order to streamline processes, reduce disparities, leverage existing resources and facilitate access to services.

The Health Agency of Lower Austria oversees healthcare facilities in the region and employs around 27 000 people. Through its Healthacross initiative, operating in the border area of Lower Austria, spanning around 414 km, the agency is working to consolidate its European and cross-border health efforts.

## OBJECTIVES

The initiative aims to enhance border region communities' quality of life, ensure equitable access to healthcare services and generate positive economic impacts in Lower Austria the region.

**Theme(s):** Access to services, Health and care

**Country:** Austria

**Organisation(s):** Health Agency of Lower Austria (de *Niederösterreichische Landesgesundheitsagentur*)

**Start & end date:** 01/2007 - ongoing

**Budget:** The cross-border healthcare centre in Gmünd (Healthacross MED Gmünd) received approximately EUR 2 500 000 under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), Austrian Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

### Funding sources:

- INTERREG AT-CZ, SK-AT, AT-HU (programming periods 2007-2013, 2014-2020, 2021-2027)
- INTERREG Central Europe (programming period 2021-2027)
- EAFRD, Austrian Rural Development Programme 2014-2020
- NextGenerationEU (Recovery and Resilience Facility)

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## ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

Healthacross implements cross-border projects in cooperation with public and private partners in neighbouring border regions, including in the field of healthcare. The streamlined process of such cooperation includes the following steps:

- > Initiate a project on the basis of **mutual understanding and awareness of existing issues**, along with brainstorming for potential solutions, through workshops, partner meetings and expert groups;
- > **Engage key stakeholders**, including hospital personnel, administrative bodies, policy-makers and residents of the target area, throughout the entire process;
- > Implement **pilot actions**, such as cross-border neonatal emergency transfers, through careful planning and adaptation, prior to scaling up;
- > **Incorporate residents' perspectives** into all project stages, anticipate and address any legal or administrative challenges;
- > Ensure **proactive dissemination of project outcomes** to raise communities' awareness of new opportunities, such as accessing treatment abroad;
- > **Demonstrate positive outcomes and benefits** of innovative projects to win over initially sceptical stakeholders, turning them into enthusiastic supporters.



## RESULTS

The Healthacross initiative has implemented innovative projects and actively engaged in European and international health networks, resulting in:

- > Cooperation between the Melk (Lower Austria) and Znojmo (Czechia) hospitals in endometriosis treatment through the Unlimited Health Together project. This has resulted in specialised treatment of nearly 600 women and 120 couples, fulfilling their desire to have children.
- > Development of a bilateral state treaty between Lower Austria and Czechia to facilitate faster emergency care.
- > Collaboration in neonatology between the Hainburg hospital (Lower Austria) and the National Institute for Children's Diseases of Bratislava (Slovakia) through the Bridges for Birth project. Four neonatal transfers have been carried out in the Austrian-Slovakian border region thanks to this collaboration.
- > Partnership in digital pathology between the Wr. Neustadt (Lower Austria) and Sopron (Hungary) hospitals through the HEAL NOW project.
- > Construction of the first cross-border healthcare centre "Healthacross MED Gmünd" on the Austrian-Czech border, improving both Austrian and Czech patients' access to healthcare services. This has benefited around 5 500 Austrian patients monthly and around 1 000 Czech patients a year.



## SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

Establishing cross-border partnerships and maintaining momentum requires perseverance and determination. Initially, finding suitable cooperation partners across borders was a significant challenge, necessitating sustained effort and commitment.

Despite initial hurdles, the Healthacross initiative and its various projects have thrived due to the dedication of like-minded individuals with a common vision. Over time, relationships have been cultivated, fostering collaboration and generating a continuous flow of ideas.

Highlighting the benefits of such cross-border cooperation is crucial, not only to enhance residents' access to primary and specialised health services, but also to indirectly contribute to socio-economic development through the advancement of healthcare services.