

## Executive summary

This document is the final version of the first Evaluation Report within the project “Implementation of the Evaluation Plan of the Technical Assistance Operational Program 2014-2020”, within the service contract no. 61451/09.08.2019, concluded between the Ministry of European Funds (“Purchaser”) and the Association between S.C.ERNST & YOUNG SRL (Leader), the National Institute for Scientific Research in the Field of Labour and Social Protection (Associate) and SC QURES Quality Research and Support SRL (Associate).

The objectives of this evaluation are the following:

- **Facilitating the informed management** of the Technical Assistance Operational Program 2014-2020 and **consolidating the evidence-based decision-making process** within the Technical Assistance Operational Program 2014-2020
- **Consolidating the annual and progress reports** to be submitted to the European Commission by including the results of the evaluations and reporting the evaluation findings by December 2022
- **Supporting the strengthening of the evaluation culture** within the European Structural and Investment Funds system as well as **increasing the level of information** of the European Commission and the public on the effects of the interventions financed from the Operational Program for Technical Assistance

The evaluation covers the period 2014-2019.

### Evaluation topics

The evaluation aims at measuring the contribution of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance 2014-2020 to:

- Strengthen the capacity of the beneficiaries of European Structural and Investment Funds/Operational Program for Technical Assistance, Large Infrastructure Operational Program and Competitiveness Operational Program
- Disseminate information on the European Structural and Investment Funds/Operational Program for Technical Assistance, Large Infrastructure Operational Program and Competitiveness Operational Program
- Coordinate and control the European Structural and Investment Funds
- Manage the Technical Assistance Operational Program, the Large Infrastructure Operational Program and the Competitiveness Operational Program
- Functionality and efficiency/effectiveness of the computer system
- Efficiency and effectiveness of human resources in the European Structural and Investment Funds system

The areas mentioned above represent the "Evaluation Topics" and were related to the program intervention logic, respectively its specific objectives, according to the table below.

Table 1. Evaluation topics

Evaluation Topics	The specific objective of the Program in the coverage area
1	1.1. Strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries of the projects financed by European Structural and investment funds to prepare and implement projects
2	1.2. Ensuring the transparency and credibility of the European Structural and Investment Funds and the role of the European Union's Cohesion Policy
3	2.1. Improving the regulatory, strategic and procedural framework for the coordination and implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds - with the exception of the specific

Evaluation Topics	The specific objective of the Program in the coverage area
	support for the Operational Program for Technical Assistance, the Large Infrastructure Operational Program and the Competitiveness Operational Program
4	2.1.Improving the regulatory, strategic and procedural framework for the coordination and implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds - activities related to the specific support for the Operational Program for Technical Assistance, the Large Infrastructure Operational Program and the Competitiveness Operational Program
5	2.2. Developing and maintaining a functional and efficient electronic system for the Structural and Cohesion Funds, as well as strengthening the capacity of its users
6	3.1. Developing an improved human resources management policy to ensure stability, qualification and adequate motivation of staff working in the system of coordination, management and control of the European Structural and Investment Funds

### Evaluation questions

For each evaluation topic, a series of general evaluation questions were addressed regarding the following:

- The effectiveness of the interventions financed by the Operational Program for Technical Assistance 2014-2020 in relation to the achievement of the planned targets (i.e. measured by the result indicators and the immediate achievement indicators)
- The progress achieved on the specific objectives of the Technical Assistance Operational Program 2014-2020 as identified in the Program Intervention Logic (see Table 1)
- The extent to which the progress observed is causally related to the projects funded under the Technical Assistance Operational Program 2014-2020
- The extent to which the projects funded under the Technical Assistance Operational Program 2014-2020 produce unintended, positive or negative effects, different from those identified in the Program Intervention Logic
- The probability that the observed progress and unexpected effects will be maintained after the completion of the program
- The existence of mechanisms or contextual factors that have facilitated/prevented unexpected progress and effects

With regard to the general evaluation questions requested by the Specifications, for this evaluation cycle the Supplier proposes a cross-sectional additional evaluation question, applicable to all topics, on the existence of cases of good practice regarding the interventions of the Operational Program Technical Assistance and the related implementation mechanisms.

**The purpose of this report** is to provide answers to the evaluation questions as well as an overview of the status of the data collection activity required for the evaluation, given the existing limitations on the availability of information.

The elaboration of this version of the Report is based on the Evaluation Methodology approved within the Evaluation Coordination Committee during the meeting on 16.12.2019 and the General Calendar for the implementation of activities updated within the Addendum no. 2 to the financing contract dated 22.05.2020. **The cut-off date for this Evaluation Report is 31.12.2019.**

### Data collection methods

In order to answer the evaluation questions, the methodological approach used was built on a mix of methods and tools for data collection, having both qualitative and quantitative character, depending on the particularities of each evaluation topic. These contributed to the formulation of robust, reliable conclusions on the evaluation questions.

The methodological approach used was a complex one, considering the application of evaluation methods based on theory, self-assessment methods of impact, case studies, supplemented with other

research methods, respectively the analysis of the literature, documentary research (programming and implementation documents within the program, documents within the project), analysis of administrative data on the projects funded within the Operational Programs and data that may indicate unintended effects or sustainability of effects. The analysis of the literature has contributed to highlighting types of potential effects, factors and mechanisms by which the expected (planned) effects occur, or external factors that may potentiate or mediate the production of effects.

For the triangulation of the information, data were collected through additional collection methods, namely:

- Survey (1) addressed to project managers who have managed interventions financed within the Technical Assistance Operational Program 2014-2020
- Survey (2) addressed to the persons who participated in horizontal and/or specific training activities financed within the Technical Assistance Operational Program 2014-2020
- Survey (3) addressed to the beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020
- Survey (4) addressed to the employees of the institutions coordinating and managing the European Structural and Investment Funds using SMIS 2014+ and to the staff of the institutions managing SMIS 2014+, with SMIS 2014+ management responsibilities
- Survey (5) addressed to the employees of the institutions that coordinate and manage the European Structural and Investment Funds, which benefit from the interventions of the Operational Program Technical Assistance 2014-2020 and to the employees of the institutions that manage the public funds for investments
- The survey on the Partnership Agreement addressed to the members of the Steering Committee for the management of the Partnership Agreement, to the members of the thematic coordination subcommittees and to the members of the functional working groups
  - Opinion survey for the general public (i.e. representative sample, stratified random extracted from the Romanian population)

The number of responses collected in the surveys ensured representativeness.

In order to integrate the understanding resulting from the documentary research on the program intervention logic, the theory of change and the current situation of the program implementation, the team of experts conducted 13 preliminary interviews with representatives of relevant actors for evaluation topics. Also, three focus groups were organized with well-defined goals, as follows:

- The first focus group for the validation of the reconstruction of the theory of change as a first step in carrying out the theory-based evaluation
- The second focus group for each evaluation topic to analyze the identified mechanisms or contextual factors that facilitated/prevented unexpected progress and effects
- The third focus group for each evaluation topic to validate the preliminary findings of the evaluation

The analysis matrix of stakeholder was the tool used for the systemic organization of the analysis.

### Challenges and solutions

The first evaluation cycle covered the period between 2014 - 2019. During this period, only 26 projects (out of the 109 funded) were completed. The level of physical progress of the projects in the evaluation area did not allow the evaluation team to assess the direct / indirect effects, both expected and unexpected. The same challenge is related to the sustainability of the effects after the end of the program.

The research team focused the analysis on mapping the effects that are visible on December 31, 2019 by discussing with the stakeholders the conditions under which the expected effects will be obtained. Also, the existing mechanisms and contextual factors that may facilitate the achievement of these effects were analyzed.



Given that the evaluation envisages three more evaluation cycles, the results and conclusions of this exercise will be verified, developed and integrated in the future.

The horizontal limits of the evaluation depend on the time of the evaluation and the quality of the data provided to the evaluation team. The data requested according to the approved methodology required in some cases a significant effort to:

- check their quality (for example, in terms of internal / external coherence)
- data cleaning (deletion of values / inaccurate values)
- data processing (i.e. data was not always available in a format that can be processed).

These limits were exceeded by validating the data in the interviews with relevant stakeholders regarding each evaluation topic and by triangulating them with the results of the surveys. At the time when the procurement procedure for this contract was launched, the current GDPR regulation was not in force so, after the start of the evaluation, an agreement with MFE on the use of personal data had to be signed. This led to a revision of the work plan so that data collection and analysis were completed earlier than originally planned.

Regarding the **indicators of immediate achievement**, the analysis was performed based on the indicators reported until December 31, 2019. According to interviews in the case studies, there may be situations where reported progress and current progress may be different because physical progress was reported to the Managing Authority after the evaluation reference date or, in some cases, is to be reported. The values of the indicators will be monitored and analyzed in the next evaluation exercises under this contract.

Another challenge was the **limited availability of stakeholders participating in the surveys**, the support of the Evaluation Office within the Ministry of European Funds, by submitting repeated requests, was decisive for the successful completion of the surveys. All surveys reached a response rate that ensures the robustness of the conclusions.

The analysis methods proposed for the counterfactual analysis are based on data series throughout the program at the employee level regarding the **position, performance and income. Data availability and completeness was limited.** Institutional changes (such as the transfer of the Ministry of European Funds to the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, and then its returning as a stand-alone ministry, or the transfer of intermediate bodies from one ministry to another) affected the availability and consistency of data regarding the personnel. Due to the large period of time during 2014-2020, the data were not stored in a single database, but in different databases, difficult to aggregate due to recording differences. No data were obtained from the Energy Intermediate Body. The process of cleaning and aggregating data has been long and demanding in terms of human resources and time. The evaluation team mobilized the resources needed to process and aggregate the databases and bring them to the format and structure needed for statistical analysis.

### **Effectiveness of interventions financed by the Operational Program for Technical Assistance 2014-2020**

According to the latest report for 2019 published on the website of the Ministry of European Funds on 30.11.2019 with regard to the contracted projects within the Technical Assistance Operational Program 2014-2020, the total number of contracted projects is 109, with a total value of the eligible public budget of 1,583,203,089.99 lei. The value of payments to beneficiaries amounts to 657,097,856.45 representing a degree of absorption of 41.5%, according to Table 2

Table 2. Details on the absorption of projects financed by the Operational Program for Technical Assistance 2014-2020

Priority axis / Specific objective	Number of projects	Total public value (lei)	Payments to beneficiaries	Absorption degree <sup>1</sup>
<b>Priority Axis 1</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>271,211,486.77</b>	<b>41,710,497.89</b>	<b>15.37%</b>
Specific objective 1.1	14	213,071,649.46	39.378.285,1	18.48%
Specific objective 1.2	8	58.139.837,31	2.332.212,79	4.01%
<b>Priority Axis 2</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>366.551.514,18</b>	<b>100.118.611,8</b>	<b>27.31%</b>
Specific objective 2.1	54	345.055.802,74	92.373.661,93	26.77%
Specific objective 2.2	4	21.495.711,44	7.744.949,87	36.03%
<b>Priority Axis 3</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>945.440.089,04</b>	<b>515.268.746,76</b>	<b>54.5%</b>
Specific objective 3.1	29	945.440.089,04	515.268.746,76	54.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>1,583,203,089.99</b>	<b>657,097,856.45</b>	<b>41.50%</b>

Source: List of projects contracted on 30.11.2019, available at <http://mfe.gov.ro/programe/autoritati-de-management/am-poat/>

The effectiveness of the interventions financed by the Specific Objective 1.1 of the Technical Assistance Operational Program is limited, but consistent with the stage of implementation of the 14 contracted projects. The absorption degree of 18.48% reflects the fact that most of the interventions under implementation were contracted only in 2019, with the completion date in 2023. The progress made up to the reference date in the contracted projects ensures that the targets for four of the seven indicators of immediate achievement in the next period are met. For the others, no conclusion could be drawn at this time, as the projects have only recently begun. The period until their completion is extended, therefore no major risks have been identified that could prevent targets from being met.

Regarding the efficiency of the projects financed under the Specific Objective 1.2, although the projects started early, some even in 2015, the delays or failure to carry out some activities have led to a degree of absorption and meeting the targets of indicators of immediate implementation below the planned level. The delays reported in the development of information projects were mostly recovered during 2016-2019. Exception is the project code SMIS 120018 - "National Information Centre for European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020", which needs a reconceptualization, according to a new vision to meet the information/promotion needs of target groups.

Of the eight contracted projects, two are completed and the others are being implemented, but the project code SMIS 120018, although contracted in December 2017, has not made any progress. The progress in meeting the targets of the five output indicators of the program varies between 100% for information campaigns and approximately 7% for information and advertising materials and information/work events and 0% for the two indicators corresponding to the activity of the project code SMIS 120018. The real progress is higher than the level captured in the progress reports and reimbursement requests, as the projects are in progress.

The output indicators of the program, according to the implementation stage reflected in this report, show a significant risk for the three indicators to which a contribution from the project related to the National Information Centre is expected. In order to compensate the absence of the services of the National Information Centre, the Ministry of European Funds provided help-desk services from its own resources, which could reach the target level, but this achievement cannot be attributed to the interventions of the Technical Assistance Operational Program. However, the contracted projects will not be able to fulfil the

<sup>1</sup> The absorption degree is calculated as the ratio between the total payments made to the beneficiaries and the total public value of the projects.



program indicator 6S10 - "Developed information and publicity materials", the realization of which will be under target, even if the projects that include it are completed. Also, for indicator 6S21 - "Information/work events", with a program target of 182, contracted projects for information dissemination contribute only by 92.31% (calculation based on cumulative target values).

The support for the implementation of the partnership principle has produced effects confirmed by the logistical support, which created the framework for the meetings during the implementation of the Partnership Agreement, but especially during the programming period, when the involvement of the partners is more intense. The code of conduct is expected to take effect on participation, having recently been finalized. The effectiveness of the logistical support for the Monitoring Committees is somewhat intrinsic, as it ensures procedural compliance, with other actions on active participation not being implemented.

**The degree of achievement of the targets of the achievement indicators related to the Specific Objective 2.1** of the Technical Assistance Operational Program (for evaluation themes 3 and 4<sup>2</sup>) reflects, so far, the stage of implementation of the projects. The target of the result indicator has been substantially exceeded, with more than three quarters of the beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds considering that the procedures for the European Structural and Investment Funds are appropriate. Regarding the indicators of achievement, the projects financed under Specific Objective 2.1 aimed in total to achieve a higher number of evaluations and surveys (respectively 89) compared to the target of 60 surveys set in the program for indicator 6S14. However, only 6 surveys were carried out up to the evaluation reference date, because problems were found that generated delays in public procurement procedures related to evaluations and surveys. On the other hand, the number of supported coordination, control and management structures of the European Structural and Investment Funds is 78 (each supported structure is counted once in each year in which it receives support). The achieved value is close to the target set for the 6S32 indicator, of 97 supported structures, and there are good premises for reaching the indicator by the end of the program implementation.

Regarding the **interventions funded under the Specific Objective 2.2** "Development and maintenance of a functional and efficient electronic system for the Structural Cohesion Funds, as well as strengthening the capacity of its users", the progress made is low in terms of absorption rate. It has an average value of 36.03% but of the four projects, all in the implementation phase, two projects have an absorption rate of about 11% and another project has not progressed in this regard. Only one of the four projects has a high absorption rate, respectively 84.64%.

Regarding the indicators of immediate achievement, please note that the progress regarding their fulfilment is generally slow and uneven, and half of the projects are without any achievements compared to the planned targets. Given that the interventions are ongoing, no solid conclusions can be drawn regarding the effectiveness of the funded interventions but the analysis revealed that there are projects for which the probability of meeting the indicators is very high.

The stage of implementation of the **interventions financed within the Specific Objective 3.1** within the Technical Assistance Operational Program, with fulfilment rates of achievement indicators between 31% and 67%, and the plans of the implementing projects indicate that the targets of the program indicators are likely to be met. This conclusion does not take into account the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on project implementation. In the case of Action 3.1.2 - "Providing financial resources for the remuneration of staff in the coordination and control system of the European Structural and Investment Funds and in the

---

<sup>2</sup>As the coverage area for evaluation topics 3 and 4 is the Specific Objective 2.1 of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance, in the initial evaluation period, based on consultations with the Managing Authority for the Operational Program for Technical Assistance, the projects considered for evaluation under each topic were defined according to the objectives pursued. In this context, 11 projects were envisaged for both the evaluation for topic and the evaluation for topic 4. For this reason, it is not possible to make a separate presentation of the indicators for each topic without avoiding overlaps and double calculation of results, especially with regard to indicator 6S32 - Coordination/Management / Control Structures of the European Structural and Investment Funds whose logistics and operation have been supported, including equipment and licenses for the operation of SMIS 2014+ (no.).

management system of the Technical Assistance Operational Program, the Large Infrastructure Operational Program and the Competitiveness Operational Program", meeting the targets does not pose implementation risks because the financed activities (their related costs) are current activities of the authorities and other institutions with responsibilities in the management of the European Structural and Investment Funds.

### **The progress achieved in the targeted areas, sectors and groups in relation to the specific objectives of the Technical Assistance Operational Program 2014-2020**

Following the analysis, evidence was identified that indicates progress on meeting the specific objectives of the Program.

The following issues were considered as representative variables to measure the progress of the capacity of the beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds:

- The evolution of the capacity to identify and prepare quality and strategic impact project proposals, based on:
  - The success rate, representing the ratio between the contracted and submitted projects, at the end of 2019 compared to 2012 for operational programs;
  - The evolution of the total value of the projects contracted at the end of 2019 compared to 2012 for the operational programs;
  - The evolution of the average value of the projects contracted at the end of 2019 compared to 2012 for the operational programs;
  - The perception of the increased capacity to identify and prepare quality and strategic impact project proposals at the end of 2019 compared to 2014, including on:
    - The easier identification of funding opportunities;
    - The preparation of more complex project proposals, which obtain better scores and in a shorter time;
    - The number of errors in the elaboration of financing applications and the implementation of projects.
- The evolution of efficiency in project implementation, based on:
  - The evolution of the absorption degree of the projects contracted at the end of 2019 compared to 2012 for the operational programs;
  - The perception regarding the evolution of efficiency in the implementation of projects in the period between 2014-2019, including on:(i) the number of errors in the project communication, (ii) the number of errors in the reporting, (iii) the number of comments received for the technical reports, (iv) the amount of expenses for which payment was rejected;
  - The perception on the evolution of the competences of organization and development of public procurement procedures at the end of 2019 compared to 2014;
  - The perception of the presence of management and control systems that integrate the project activities with the other activities of the beneficiary and with the decision-making process at the end of 2019 compared to 2014;
  - The perception of the human resources management capacity of the project teams at the end of 2019 compared to 2014;
  - The perception of the presence of an adequate number of consultants with technical and economic specializations at the end of 2019 compared to 2014.

**Overall, the analysis indicated the strengthening of the capacity of beneficiaries of the projects financed by European Structural and investment funds to prepare and implement projects. The**



UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



degree of complexity of the projects<sup>3</sup> contracted at the level of operational programs in the current programming period has increased and, implicitly, the capacity of the beneficiaries to identify and prepare project proposals with strategic impact has been improved.

At the same time, the increase in the absorption rate for the period 2014-2019 compared to 2007-2012 indicates **an improvement in the efficiency in the implementation of projects** financed from the European Structural and Investment Funds<sup>4</sup>.

With regard to **ensuring the transparency and credibility of the European Structural and Investment Funds and the role of the European Union's Cohesion Policy**, the analysis shows that **progress on citizens' awareness** regarding the European Union projects compared to the reference level of the program (46% in 2013) is very high. The level of awareness regarding the projects financed by the European Union measured in 2020 is 84% and it indicates the percentage of the population aware of the fact that the European Union finances social and economic development projects in Romania. Thus, the target of the 6S2 program indicator Awareness level on projects co-financed by the European Union of 60% in 2023 is practically reached and exceeded as early as 2020.

Regarding the **overall evolution of the regulatory and institutional framework for the coordination of the European Structural and Investment Funds** - with the exception of the specific support for the Operational Program for Technical Assistance, Large Infrastructure Operational Program and Competitiveness Operational Program - during the period under review (since the approval of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance and by December 2019), the evaluation identified as follows:

- A rather accentuated dynamics of the regulations regarding the coordination of the European Structural and Investment Funds. Emergency Ordinance 40/2015 on the financial management of European funds for the 2014-2020 programming period has been amended 18 times from its adoption until the end of 2019 (in less than 5 years), which reflects a concern to improve the framework regulatory, but also a large legislative dynamic, with possible impact in ensuring coherence in the coordination of the European Structural and Investment Funds.
- A stability of the strategic framework for the coordination of the European Structural and Investment Funds, including coordination at territorial level (through the implementation of the Integrated Territorial Instrument). It has not changed during the programming period compared to the planning included in the Partnership Agreement.
- The instability of the institutional framework regarding the coordination of European Structural and Investment Funds, generated by the reorganization of the Ministry of European Funds in 2017 (merging with the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration) and in 2018 (reorganization as an independent ministry).

On the other hand, the regulatory and institutional framework for the control of the European Structural and Investment Funds has not undergone major changes.

The result indicator for the Specific Objective 2.1 of the Technical Assistance Operational Program is 6S3 - *Share of beneficiaries considering the procedures regarding the corresponding European Structural and Investment Funds (%) - target 50.00% (starting from the basic value 23.5%).* **Applying the methodology detailed in the Indicators Guide, it appears that 75.25% of the beneficiaries consider the**

<sup>3</sup>The degree of complexity refers to the average value of projects that increased in the period 2014-2018 compared to the period 2007-2011.

<sup>4</sup> The degree of absorption registered in 2012 by the projects contracted in the operational programs in the period 2007 - 2012 was 12.82% while the degree of absorption registered in 2019 by the projects contracted in the operational programs during 2014-2019 is 21.02 %. There is therefore an increase in the degree of absorption by 8.2%.





UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



**procedures regarding the European Structural and Investment Funds to be appropriate**<sup>5</sup>. The funding and reporting procedures, which are considered appropriate by fewer beneficiaries compared to other procedures, are the most complex of the types of procedures considered in the calculation of the outcome indicator, involving most procedural steps / most actions to be performed by the beneficiaries. Also, according to the program evaluations carried out so far and the assessment of the administrative burden on beneficiaries in 2015, these procedures also involve the administrative burden and the highest administrative costs for beneficiaries. In addition, these procedures are most strongly related to the operation of the MySMIS system.

Regarding the Operational Program for Technical Assistance, the Large Infrastructure Operational Program and the Competitiveness Operational Program, the implementation has largely advanced in a suitable manner especially from a financial point of view. Thus, until the evaluation date, including in 2019, the decommitment of allocated funds was avoided by all three programs; in terms of OPTA the risk of decommitment was not only avoided annually, the n+3 target was achieved including in 2020.

However, there have been delays in terms of contracting and implementing projects, resulting in more limited progress at the end of 2018 in terms of meeting the targets of performance indicators, and more. If, at the end of 2018, there were delays in the case of at least half of the priority axes of the Competitiveness Operational Program and the Large Infrastructure Operational Program, in 2019 some of them were recovered, although not completely. There are still priority axes with an insufficient (Priority Axis 2 of the Competitiveness Operational Program) or very low level (Priority Axis 6 of the Large Infrastructure Operational Program) of contracting, which is a risk situation for which new measures must be identified (including by reallocation of available funds and/or phasing of projects for the current and future scheduling period). Regarding the Operational Program for Technical Assistance, the effectiveness of interventions is largely adequate given the extent to which the targets of the indicators are met at the time of this evaluation, as well as the fact that a large part of the projects are still being implemented.

Regarding the development and maintenance of a functional and efficient IT system as well as the strengthening of the capacity of its users, **evidence was identified indicating that in the period between 2014-2020 progress was made on the functionality and infrastructure development of the SMIS2014 + electronic system**. The hardware infrastructure is adequate for the current needs of the system (i.e. according to the information obtained in the case study interviews there are no needs for hardware infrastructure that have not been covered) and the software infrastructure is under development. Users' perception is that many improvements have been made to the system (e.g. the platform has become more stable, the number of errors is declining), but they still feel the need to improve the menu customization possibilities (e.g. more detailed predefined reports) and in terms of compatibility with all applications in the Microsoft Office suite. According to the information provided by the Managing Authority of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance, the degree of use of SMIS 2014+ for fulfilling the reporting obligations at the level of Operational Programs to the European Commission is 99.42%, beyond the target for 2023, respectively 85%.

Regarding the human resources management policy to ensure the stability, qualification and adequate motivation of the staff working within the coordination, management and control system of the European Structural and Investment Funds, **the qualitative analysis reveals that the staff performance<sup>6</sup> has increased in the European Structural and Investment Funds system**, although there is a widely held opinion that the score on performance evaluation has a limited ability in terms of measuring the actual performance. The degree of satisfaction of vocational training and skills development needs has increased and staff stability is ensured mainly due to the level of income.

<sup>5</sup> Both the findings and the conclusions of the evaluation under the topic 3 and the findings and conclusions of the evaluation topic 4 must be taken into account in order to estimate the contribution of the Technical Assistance Operational Program to the achievement of the indicator of results of the 6S3 program.

<sup>6</sup> Reflected in the individual annual scores used by managers to evaluate staff performance.

### The extent to which the observed progress is attributed to the program

Following the analysis, evidence was identified that the progress mentioned above is consistent with the specific objectives of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance and is largely due to the interventions funded under the Program.

For example, regarding the **capacity of beneficiaries of European Structural and Investment Funds projects to prepare and implement projects**, the contribution of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance 2014-2020 is significant in terms of increasing the **number of projects with strategic impact** objectives or in terms of the **improvement of the competences** of the beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds for the organization and conduct of **public procurement** procedures.

Given the limitations on the information identified, the clues are largely empirical, based on the perceptions of stakeholders involved in data collection activities. Examples of the contribution of the Operational Program of Technical Assistance are:

- **Within the Ministry of Communications and Information Society, a structure dedicated to the identification, development and implementation of projects to be integrated in the functioning and organization of the Ministry was created with the support of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance.** Although the project is still being implemented, evidence has been identified that both the capacity of the Ministry of Communications and the Information Society for project management and the project portfolios of the beneficiary institutions have been developed. According to the latest progress report, 12 project ideas were selected, for which the discussions started. At the same time, some of the ideas identified in the development phase of the project are already being implemented.
- Within the **Ministry of Internal Affairs, training sessions were organized in specific areas for accessing and implementing projects** funded by the Large Infrastructure Operational Program, the Competitiveness Operational Program and the Operational Program for Technical Assistance for staff with responsibilities in this regard. The identified evidence suggests that the capacity of this staff category to identify funding opportunities and to write and implement quality projects has been developed.
- In three other projects out of the 14 contracted, **training sessions were organized in the field of public procurement.**

The analysis, carried out in connection with **ensuring the transparency and credibility of the European Structural and Investment Funds and the role of the European Union's Cohesion Policy**, indicates that the Operational Program for Technical Assistance has contributed to raising public awareness and informing beneficiaries about the funding through the following activities:

- Communication campaigns, the most important holding the message "European money for Romanian ideas". The communication channels were used in such a way as to reach a large and diverse a number of citizens, covering as large a territorial area as possible, as is the case with locations where there is no cable TV, and messages can be transmitted by radio;
- For the internet user audience, online web banners, publicity reports on several sites and advertisements on Facebook have been designed.
- Panels were placed in heavily trafficked areas: airports, railway stations, subways, national roads, the distribution being homogenous across counties, and promotional items and brochures were also distributed.

Regarding the **regulatory, strategic and procedural framework for the coordination and implementation** of the European Structural and Investment Funds, the analysis revealed that **most projects** funded under this Specific Objective **contribute to strengthening the coordination and control systems of the European Structural and Investment Funds**, as well as other bodies with a role in the coordination and control of the European Structural and Investment Funds. These projects



contribute to the expected outcome of improving the regulatory, strategic and procedural framework for European Structural and Investment Funds coordination and control, but most make this contribution in an indirect way, ensuring the optimal functioning of the structures responsible for coordination and control, but without supporting the technical elements of their activity.

On the other hand, the project under which the operational programs for the period 2021-2027 are developed makes a substantial direct contribution to the coordination of the European Structural and Investment Funds, however not for this programming period, but for the future.

The evaluation identified progresses made during the current programming period in terms of fulfilling the tasks of the Managing Authorities, from the perspective of most functions, except for scheduling and program monitoring (especially in terms of program indicators). The most important progress was identified by the beneficiaries of the Large Infrastructure Operational Program and in terms of guidance capacity in the process of writing funding applications, project implementation, in the process of mandatory communication, technical reporting but also financial reporting.

In addition, thanks to all the completed or implemented projects, the Program already has an important contribution to supporting and increasing the capacity of the institutional system related to the Operational Program for Technical Assistance, the Large Infrastructure Operational Program and the Competitiveness Operational Program, but also a major contribution deriving from the perspective of the closure of 2007- 2013 scheduling period (regarding the Sectoral Operational Program for Increasing Economic Competitiveness, the Transport Sectoral Operational Program and the Environment Sectoral Operational Program). This impact is also caused by the provision of operating costs of capacity structures, not so much by the fact that there is a direct link between this type of expenditure and organizational performance, but due to the creation of a motivating work environment for each individual and the high volume of this support, which exhaustively covered the existing needs.

The projects funded for the **development and maintenance of a functional and efficient** electronic system as well as for strengthening the capacity of its users **have fully contributed** to the improvements made in the 2014-2020 scheduling period to hardware infrastructure (e.g. with the purchase of storage equipment) and software infrastructure (e.g. with the development of "Implementation" and "Communication" modules) and largely to the progress made in meeting the other operational objectives, namely increasing the capacity of users to use the system (e.g. by developing publicly available user manuals), increasing the level of information security, ensuring compatibility with third-party applications and introducing the possibility to customize the system menus for the end beneficiaries.

On the other hand, indications are limited as to the extent to which the information in the SMIS is used to strengthen the process of correct and efficient management of the Operational Programs, or to fulfil the reporting obligations to the European Commission.

As far as the **human resources management policy** is concerned, having to ensure the stability, qualification and adequate motivation of the staff working in the coordination, management and control system of the European Structural and Investment Funds, the **Operational Program for Technical Assistance has a major contribution** to meeting the needs of training in the system of the European Structural and Investment Funds institutions. Thus, a very large proportion of the training is provided from the European Structural and Investment Fund resources. The employees of the institutions recognize the contribution of the training financed by the Operational Program for Technical Assistance to the satisfaction of their training needs and, as a chain effect, to the increase of the level of competence and performance.

On the other hand, the contribution of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance to ensuring staff stability is significant and is mainly due to the high level of insured revenues.

### Existence of unintended effects

The not-so-advanced degree of implementation makes the assessment of unexpected effects premature. However, the analysis carried out in the case studies has already identified some unexpected effects.

At institutional level, an example of unexpected effect is the **improvement and strengthening of intra- and inter-institutional communication and cooperation**. Also, the interventions financed by the Operational Program for Technical Assistance had the effect of **increasing the stability for the human resources** involved in the management of the European Structural and Investment Funds.

From the point of view of the beneficiaries, an unexpected effect resulted from the interventions through the Operational Program for Technical Assistance is represented by the **increase of confidence** in the activity carried out in the field of obtaining non-reimbursable European funds.

Another example of an unexpected effect is the **reduction in the amount of paper used** in project management, which derives from the use of SMIS and of the electronic signature and has a **positive impact on the environment**.

### Durability of effects

The rather low level of project implementation currently limits the drawing of conclusions on the durability of effects, given that the effects themselves (both expected and unexpected) are not fully highlighted.

However, measures have been identified to ensure the sustainability of the effects, which indicates that the achievements and results of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance have a high potential for sustainability. For example, equipment purchased to serve SMIS2014+ and its related applications for the next five years are provided with warranty and specific technical support by the manufacturer, while the SMIS and IT Coordination Directorate within the Ministry of European Funds together with the Special Telecommunications Service will ensure the system administration and maintenance.

In addition, some factors have been identified that may facilitate the durability of certain effects. For example, the analysis carried out within the Evaluation Topic 4 indicates that the training activities through expertise implemented with the help of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance are largely sustainable if the input of contracted/employed experts is used.

### Mechanisms that facilitated/prevented the effects and their contextual key characteristics

With regard to the mechanisms identified in the context of project implementation, a number of internal and external **factors were identified that facilitated the emergence and manifestation of the effects of the interventions of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance**.

The internal factors with a positive influence on the effects include:

- Inter and intra institutional communication
- Improving the computer system
- Horizontal projects to support the functioning of coordination structures
- The possibility to involve external experts
- Continuity for the staff
- Flexible action plan

An example of an external factor with a positive influence refers to the existence of a **legal framework suitable to the needs of the information system**

Regarding the **internal factors that prevented the manifestation of the effects** of the interventions of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance, the identified examples include:



UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



- Difficulties encountered with the use of the SMIS computer system, due to the fact that the system does not have features adapted to the specificities of each Operational Program
- Limited human and financial resources
- Resistance to change

The external factors that prevented the manifestation of the effects of the interventions of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance are as below:

- Legislative and institutional changes
- Changes in public procurement legislation.

### Good practice regarding the interventions of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance and the related implementation mechanisms.

**Information** on the results obtained, their sustainability and their effects on the economic environment or public policies **is limited** by the level of project implementation.

Thus, following the analysis performed in the case studies, a series of methods were identified that proved to be effective, methods that were validated as models of good practice in Focus- the group for the validation of preliminary findings.

For example, in the project *Support for the identification, management and implementation of projects of the Ministry of Communications and Information Society funded within the axis 2 - Competitiveness Operational Program 2014-2020* it was noted that **the existence of a single team with an overview of all projects in a certain area**, contributes to avoiding the overlapping interventions with similar objectives, but also to ensuring the complementarity of interventions financed from the European Structural and Investment Funds. Also, the **collaboration protocols ensure a close link between the teams designing the interventions** (in this case, the Project Implementation Unit) and the **teams implementing them** (for example, the institutions implementing the projects developed with the support of the Project Implementation Unit).

Another example of good practice is the **combination and coordination of several types of support in a single project**. The project aimed at increasing the evaluation capacity supports the specialized structure of the Ministry of European Funds in several aspects (providing data for evaluation, training, conducting on-demand evaluations) and, at the same time, supports other structures responsible for evaluation. In addition, to a lesser extent, this project aims at supporting also the evaluation offer from the scientific environment and consultancy by forming an evaluation network.

### Conclusions and recommendations

The main conclusion is that the **Operational Program for Technical Assistance 2014-2020 contributed** to the progress made during 2014 - 2019 as follows:

- Strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries of the projects financed by European Structural and investment funds to prepare and implement projects
- Ensuring the transparency and credibility of the European Structural and Investment Funds and the role of the European Union's Cohesion Policy
- Improving the regulatory, strategic and procedural framework for the coordination and implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds
- Developing and maintaining a functional and efficient system for the Structural and Cohesion Funds, as well as strengthening the capacity of its users
- Developing an improved human resources management policy to ensure stability, qualification and adequate motivation of staff working in the system of coordination, management and control of the European Structural and Investment Funds

Given that 83 of the 109 projects contracted on 30.11.2019, the date of the last monitoring report for 2019 (representing 76.14%) are still in implementation, the effectiveness of interventions is limited but consistent with their implementation stage.

On the other hand, areas for intervention have been identified in which improvements can be made. Regarding the **capacity of beneficiaries** of the projects financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds **to prepare and implement projects**, the main **strategic recommendation** refers to **improving the challenges related to the organization and conduct of public procurement procedures** (e.g. improving the overlapping between processes and institutional responsibilities in the field, orientation to customer needs by developing technical specifications, identifying appropriate award criteria, ensuring technical expertise between evaluators, developing digital solutions; providing sufficient staff in terms of numbers and skills in the field, promoting collaborative approaches; creation of specialized units or teams to assist in the organization and conduct of procedures).

**In terms of implementation**, improvements could be needed for the following:

- **Increased project quality** by designing and implementing verification grids, made available to applicants, respectively supplementing the guidelines for preparing applications;
- **Supplementing interventions** directly aimed at strengthening **management and control systems** that integrate project activities with other activities for the beneficiary and with the decision-making process, **human resources management in project teams**, and **supplementing the number of consultants with technical and economic specializations**. Interventions could include, for example, training sessions on the implementation of formal management and control systems at the level of institutions benefiting from European Structural and Investment Funds, measures to improve staff turnover, staff training in order to acquire technical skills in specialized fields consistent with the institutional needs, training of personnel from the human resources departments and the creation of specialized teams with specific attributions of human resources management for the projects implemented within the beneficiary institution. Also, in order to design and implement these interventions, it is recommended to **conduct surveys to analyze the needs of beneficiaries in this regard**.

With regard to **ensuring the transparency and credibility** of the European Structural and Investment Funds and of the role of the European Union's Cohesion Policy, the main strategic recommendations focus on:

- **Performing periodic actions to increase public awareness**- the current level reached so far can be eroded in the absence of the action for dissemination, broadcasting of appropriate messages, through methods and communication tools adapted to the evolution of technology and public information and communication preferences. The same approach will be used in relation to beneficiaries.
- During the implementation of the Partnership Agreement and the Operational Program, the **involvement of the social partners** should be stimulated by debates on the coherence of the Operational Program with sectoral policies, complementarities and any other strategic issues.

In terms of implementation, the recommendations refer to:

- **Unlocking projects** that focus on actions that contribute to the program target, such as the National Information Centre project.
- Urgent launching of the training component of the support project for the partnership structures and implementation of the Code of Conduct, in order to propagate the effects of the support for the active involvement of the partners.

With regard to **the strategic and procedural implementation framework for the coordination and implementation of European Structural and Investment Funds, strategically speaking** the case studies and the focus group on the validation of the results show that the following actions are needed:

- **Creation of a functional working group to amend the Emergency Ordinance 66/2011** (on the prevention, detection and sanctioning of irregularities in obtaining and using European funds and/or national public funds related to them), in order to ensure a better management of irregularities.
- **A very careful planning of the indicators for all the operational programs and the capitalization of the lessons learned** from the current scheduling period regarding the definition, calculation and monitoring of the indicators.
- The elaboration by each Managing Authority of a medium- and long-term implementation plan, based on which the future interventions financed within the Operational Program for Technical Assistance shall be implemented on time. Moreover, the Managing Authorities must perform comprehensive analyzes on the organizational performance, based on a template established in the literature. Funding from the Operational Program for Technical Assistance must be conditioned by the existence of these two strategic documents and should be based on their provisions (needs, priorities).

In terms of implementation, the recommendations refer to:

- Wider use of the **opportunities generated by the digitization of the management of the European Structural and Investment Funds**, so that a series of data and reports based on SMIS data are no longer transmitted on paper from the Managing Authorities to the Certifying and Payment Authority and the Audit Authority;
- **Analyse the needs** for the period 2021-2027 regarding the provision of systematic support, in the future, for the structures/coordination mechanism of the European Structural and Investment Funds 2021-2027, in order to avoid institutional blockages
- Better choice of when to conduct evaluations (so that their recommendations come in time in the decision-making process);
- **Publication of evaluations** and multiplication of cases in which the results of evaluations are communicated to the public and specialists (it generates press communication, it is the basis for communications and scientific articles);
- **Strengthening the capacity of scheduling and physical monitoring** within the program;
- Implementing extensive communication activities between decision makers and the technical level on the planned evaluations and the results obtained, in order to strengthen their relevance, usefulness and use;
- Defining more precisely and earlier the services to be contracted through public procurement and organizing the procedures so that they are available in time;
- Ensuring the use of all deliverables developed within the financed projects;
- **Identify and adequately substantiate the selection criteria** that allow the employment of the necessary experts in institutions in order to ensure institutional performance.

With regard to the **development and maintenance of a functional and effective information system** as well as the strengthening of the capacity of its users, the main **strategic recommendation** refers to preparing an analysis to foresee the system needs for the future scheduling period. With the help of the results of this analysis, the elements that can endanger the operation of the system can be prevented.

From the implementation point of view, the recommendations refer to the following directions of action:

- In order to maintain a long-term vision for the development of the information system, it is necessary to **reduce staff turnover within the team of experts outside the organisation chart** by identifying sources of funding to cover the costs of their salaries. At the same time, this predictability will eliminate the stress of experts on job security;

- **Performing an analysis on the maximum size of files that can be uploaded** taking into account the specifics of each workable module and the implementation of the resulting measures. Thus, the transfer of information between users' work devices and the computer system will be constantly maintained smooth, while the administrative burden of users working with large files will be kept to a minimum;
- **Carrying out an analysis in relation to the needs of users regarding the level of detail of the predefined reports** and carrying out a **cost-benefit analysis regarding the customization of MySMIS2014+** according to the needs of the MAs and beneficiaries of each Operational Program;
- Carrying out an **analysis regarding the technical solution that would allow the simultaneous upload of several files on the platform**;
- **Strengthening the public procurement capacity for the General Directorate for Public Procurement and Internal Services** by supplementing staff and organizing training sessions in the field of procurement;
- **Early publication of information materials** on the functionalities of the system to be put into operation, in order to reduce the impact of the novelty factor on the activity of users.

With regard to the **human resources management policy** which should ensure stability, qualification and suitable motivation of the staff working in the coordination, management and control system of the European Structural and Investment Funds, **from the strategic point of view**, the interventions to ensure competent, motivated and high-performance staff should better adapt to modern practice in the field of human resources involving as follows:

- **Orientation towards quality and impact** by introducing a quality analysis and feedback system to all stakeholders involved in processes;
- **Digitization** of training and performance management processes;
- **Creating data management systems** to inform decision makers;
- Modernization of training methods, **organization of flexible programs**, focusing on the individual and the responsibility of one's own development;
- **Strengthening the role of managers** and developing managerial and leadership skills, key factors for amplifying the effects of the interventions of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance - transposed into an extensive managerial development program;
- Ensuring **institutional stability** as a precondition for implementing the interventions of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance.

From the implementation point of view, the recommendations refer to the following directions of action:

- **Simplification of the project implementation approach** by moving from large projects with a large number of participants and complex activities to small projects with smaller procurement procedures with lower risk of blockage and failure;
- **Simplification of implementation procedures**, decreasing the volume of administrative activities, especially for reporting and documenting expenses;
- Organizing a **comprehensive program of managerial development** and leadership consistent with a vision of the role, empowerment and involvement of managers, in order to ensure the conditions for increasing the impact of the interventions of the Operational Program for Technical Assistance on performance, motivation and competence by involving and training managers on all levels
- Ensuring a better integration **in the training processes of managers and staff since the design phase of the training program**, taking over the knowledge from the training provider and preparing the transfer of knowledge acquired in practice and in the institution for replicability;
- Encourage and support beneficiaries to **adapt and modernize appropriate training programs for staff** in different categories, including those with high expertise to meet their specific needs.





UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



These may include the creation of networks of international experts, the organization of sessions on innovative topics related to concrete problems and challenges.

- Expanding good practices by **creating a project model** and providing external assistance on modern approaches and digitizing training.