Implementation Evaluation Report

Evaluation services regarding the implementation and impact of Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme

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Table of contents

Acronyms

AA	Audit Authority
AIR	Annual Implementation Report
CBC	Cross-border Cooperation
CfP	Call for Proposals
EC	European Commission
EQ	Evaluation Question
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
EU	European Union
EUSDR	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
FLC	First Level Control
JS	Joint Secretariat
MA	Managing Authority
MATAS	Multi-Annual Technical Assistance Strategy
MC	Monitoring Committee
NA	National Authority
NGO	Non – Governmental Organization
PA	Priority Axis
Programme	Interreg V-A Romania – Bulgaria Programme
SO	Specific Objective
SCO	Simplified Cost Option
TA	Technical Assistance

Executive summary

This document is the implementation evaluation report of the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme 2014-2020. The current report has the purpose to evaluate the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness and to contribute to its management and performance from this perspective, by replying to 28 evaluation questions established in the evaluation service's terms of reference.

The analysis of the implementation activities carried out within the Programme involved the application of different evaluation methods and instruments, such as: literature review, interviews with the programme bodies and stakeholders, survey applied among the beneficiaries and focus group with programme structures, beneficiaries and applicants. The triangulation of the above-mentioned evaluation methods has led to the formulation of conclusions and recommendations, detailed for each of the 28 evaluation questions.

Main evaluation conclusions

Programme Relevance

- The programme is well rooted in the cross-border area, in a consistent continuity with the previous programming period and based on a well-grounded territorial analysis, that has the merit of having identified the key structural problems of the region, and is in a wide part still actual and valid at the start of a new programming period.
- The programme has a good level of complementarity with the national policies and contributes strongly to the EUSDR.
- The high number of organizations/institutions involved in the projects represents a particularly positive feature from the perspective of the overall objective of a cross-border cooperation programme. It suggests a good level of cooperation, both in intensity and in the thematic/geographical coverage.

Programme Implementation

- All programme resources have been contracted, mid-term performance targets achieved, and the final achievements look at reach.
- There is a programme implementation strategy clearly based on wisdom and prudence, capitalizing on the lessons learnt in the past programming period.
- The programme has a strong strategic management with very clear priority values: full absorption of resources and smooth achievement of Programme targets. These values inspired strong choices, to some extent uncommon, but consistent with the vision and effective – like the establishing of mid-term absorption targets at project level or the "maximum 4 projects/beneficiary" rule.
- It can be stated that the programme implementation is progressing well in terms of reaching the specific objectives and related indicators. Considering the timeframe of the Programme implementation, the reported values of the indicators are suggesting that the specific objectives are on track.
- The portfolio of the projects under implementation suggests that the Programme will not face significant risks of decommitment neither in the upcoming years. Nevertheless, the public procurement procedures may have an impact on the smooth implementation of the projects. The prolongation of these procedures may generate decommitment risks at project level (not at Programme level).

Programme management

- Programme management processes and procedures are currently the result of a stratification of gradual improvements resulting from the experience of two full programming periods, during which the key staff of the management system bodies has had the great advantage of remaining practically unchanged.
- The applicant's guide and pack are useful and tailored around the needs of the applicants. In general, the support provided by the Programme is adequate and the quality of the project proposals is a good one.
- The programme significantly progressed the project assessment and selection processes compared to the previous programming period. More important, the beneficiaries have high levels of confidence in the project selection and assessment processes and believe that project assessment, selection and contracting processes are efficient.
- Achievement of targets for the TA projects is progressing well. The staff and teams in management bodies have been set up and operating. Information actions and support to applicants and beneficiaries is being implemented by all relevant bodies. There is room to improve the efficiency of TA expenditure, which is currently supported through projects covering maximum 3 years of implementation.
- Simplified cost options (SCO) are perceived as very useful by the large majority of beneficiaries. Managing structures are also convinced that the adoption of simplified costs options facilitates the effective implementation of the Programme and projects.
- There is room for further simplification in the programme management procedures, especially by rationalising the first level control system and making it more efficient, and by adopting a full digital/ 0 paper approach in all documental flows to/from the project beneficiaries.
- There is room to improve the representativeness of the Monitoring Committee, where the public sector appears over-represented as compared to the civil society.

Main recommendations

Programme Implementation

- While Programme targets and full financial absorption are at reach, it is recommended to closely monitor the achievement of some specific indicators and, at project level, to closely follow the impact of important procurement procedures on the smooth implementation of infrastructural projects.
- Some key successful implementation rules, like the ceiling of 4 projects per beneficiary and the mid-term implementation target at project level, can be further refined in order to prioritize the support to the best projects and improve the impact of such rules in terms of efficiency and effectiveness of Programme implementation.

Programme management

- The successful adoption of SCOs should be taken further, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the incoming regulatory framework for the 2021-2027 period, also for the TA expenditure.
- The transition to a full digital flow of information should be completed, targeting a "0 paper" flow for the next programming period.

- The system of expenditure control should be made simpler and more efficient by eliminating duplications and by improving the control-related common interpretation of some eligibility rules, especially in relation with SCOs, which appear not aligned among Programme authorities.
- The representativeness of the Monitoring Committee should be improved by stimulating a wider and more effective participation of the civil society.

Prezentul document reprezintă raportul de evaluare a implementării Programului Interreg V-A România-Bulgaria. Scopul raportului este acela de a evalua relevanța, eficiența și eficacitatea, precum și de a contribui la îmbunătățirea managementului și performanței Programului, răspunzând la cele 28 de întrebări de evaluare stabilite la nivelul caietului de sarcini.

Analiza implementării activităților desfășurate în cadrul Programului a implicat aplicarea de diferite metode de evaluare și instrumente de cercetare precum: analiza literaturii de specialitate, interviuri cu autoritățile implicate în implementarea Programului și părți interesate, sondaj de opinie aplicat în rândul beneficiarilor și focus grupul organizat cu reprezentanți ai structurilor Programului, beneficiari și solicitanți. Triangularea metodelor de evaluare menționate anterior a contribuit la formularea de concluzii și recomandări, detaliate în cazul fiecărei dintre cele 28 de întrebări de evaluare.

Principalele concluzii rezultate din evaluarea programului:
Relevanța Programului:
- Programul este bine înrădăcinat în zona transfrontalieră, este consistent și demonstrează continuitate cu perioada de programare anterioară și este bazat pe o analiză teritorială bine fundamentată care are meritul identificării problemelor cheie structurale ale regiunii, încă de actualitate pentru contextul regiunii și valide la începutul noii perioade de programare.
- Programul are un bun nivel de complementaritate cu politicile naționale și contribuie substanțial la realizarea obiectivelor Strategiei UE pentru regiunea Dunării.
- Numărul ridicat de organizații / instituții implicate în proiecte reprezintă un element deosebit de important în special din perspectiva obiectivului general al unui program de cooperare transfrontalieră. Acest element indică un nivel bun de cooperare, atât în ceea ce privește intensitatea, cât și acoperirea tematică/ geografică.

Implementarea Programului:
- Toate resursele Programului au fost contractate, țintele de performanță pe termen mediu au fost atinse, iar țintele stabilite par să fie în curs de atingere.
- Există o strategie de implementare a Programului bazată pe perspicacitate și prudență, capitalizându-se lecțiile învățate în perioada de programare anterioară.
- Programul beneficiază de un management strategic puternic fundamentat pe principii prioritare foarte clare: absorbția completă a resurselor și îndeplinirea fără dificultăți a obiectivelor Programului. Aceste principii au stat la baza adoptării unor decizii solide, într-o oarecare măsură neobișnuite, dar în concordanță cu viziunea Programului și eficiente (ex: stabilirea de ținte intermediare de absorbție la nivelul proiectelor sau regula „maxim 4 proiecte/beneficiar").

- Implementarea Programului înregistrează progrese semnificative în ceea ce privește atingerea obiectivelor specifice și a indicatorilor aferenți. Având în vedere calendarul implementării Programului, valorile raportate ale indicatorilor sugerează că obiectivele specifice sunt în grafic.
- Portofoliul de proiecte care se află în curs de implementare sugerează că Programul nu va fi afectat de riscuri semnificative de dezangajare în anii următori. Cu toate acestea, procedurile de achiziții publice pot avea un impact asupra implementării facile a proiectelor. Prelungirea acestor proceduri poate genera riscuri de dezangajare la nivel de proiect (însă nu la nivelul Programului).

Managementul Programului

- Procesele și procedurile de management ale Programului sunt rezultatul acumulării îmbunătățirilor treptate rezultate din experiența a două perioade complete de programare, timp în care personalul cheie al organismelor de management a avut marele avantaj de a rămâne în mare parte neschimbat.
- Ghidul solicitantului și pachetul de formulare aferent sunt utile și adaptate în funcție de nevoile solicitanților de finanțare. În general, sprijinul oferit de Program este adecvat, iar calitatea propunerilor de proiecte este bună.
- Comparativ cu perioada de programare anterioară, Programul a progresat semnificativ în ceea ce privește procedurile de evaluare și selecție a proiectelor. Mai mult, beneficiarii au un nivel ridicat de încredere în procesele de selecție și de evaluare și consideră că procedurile de evaluare, selecție și contractare sunt eficiente.
- Atingerea țintelor în cazul proiectelor de AT înregistrează un progres crescut. Personalul și echipele din organele de conducere au fost mobilizate și își derulează activitățile. Activitățile de informare și de sprijin pentru solicitanții de finanțare au fost implementate de către toate autoritățile relevante. Există o oportunitate de îmbunătățire a eficienței cheltuielilor de AT care, în prezent, sunt susținute prin proiecte care acoperă maximum 3 ani de implementare.
- Opțiunile de costuri simplificate sunt percepute de marea majoritate a beneficiarilor ca fiind foarte utile. Structurile de management sunt, de asemenea, convinse că adoptarea opțiunilor de costuri simplificate facilitează implementarea eficace a Programului și a proiectelor.
- Procedurile de gestionare a Programului pot fi simplificate suplimentar, în special prin eficientizarea sistemului de control de prim nivel, precum și prin adoptarea unei abordări de digitalizare completă (abordarea "0 hârtie") care să vizeze toate fluxurile de documente către/ dinspre beneficiarii proiectelor.
- Reprezentativitatea Comitetului de Monitorizare poate fi de asemenea îmbunătățită. Se observă o supra-reprezentare a sectorului public în comparație cu societatea civilă.

Principalele recomandări:

Implementarea Programului

- În timp ce obiectivele Programului și absorbția financiară totală se apropie de atingerea țintelor finale, se recomandă monitorizarea atentă în ceea ce privește realizarea unor indicatori specifici, și, la nivel de proiect, se recomandă urmărirea atentă a impactului procedurilor de achiziții asupra implementării facile a proiectelor de infrastructură.
- Anumite reguli cheie care au contribuit la buna implementare a Programului precum plafonarea la 4 proiecte per beneficiar și țintele de implementare stabilite pe termen mediu pot fi în continuare

îmbunătățite pentru a prioritiza sprijinul către susținerea celor mai bune proiecte și pentru a crește impactul acestor reguli în ceea ce privește eficiența și eficacitatea implementării Programului.

Managementul Programului

- Adoptarea cu succes a opțiunilor de costuri simplificate trebuie urmărită inclusiv pentru cheltuielile de AT, valorificând oportunitățile oferite de noul cadru de reglementare aferent perioadei 2021-2027.
- Pentru noua perioadă de programare se recomandă finalizarea tranziției către un flux digital de informații ghidat de principiul „0 hârtie".
- Sistemul de verificare a cheltuielilor ar trebui simplificat și eficientizat. Se recomandă eliminarea duplicărilor și îmbunătățirea interpretării comune a controlului în ceea ce privește anumite reguli de eligibilitate, în special în ceea ce privește costurile simplificate a căror interpretare nu pare să fie aliniată între autoritățile Programului.
- Reprezentativitatea Comitetului de Monitorizare ar trebui de asemenea îmbunătățită prin stimularea unei participări mai ample și mai eficace a societății civile.

Този документ представлява доклад за оценка на изпълнението на Програмата за трансгранично сътрудничество Interreg V-A Румъния-България 2014-2020. Целта на доклада е да се оцени уместността, ефикасността, както и да допринесе за подобряване на управлението и изпълнението на програмата, отговаряйки на 28 въпроса за оценка, установени на ниво спецификации.

Анализът на изпълнението на дейностите, провеждани в рамките на програмата, включва прилагането на различни методи за оценка и инструменти за изследване като: анализ на специализирана литературата, интервюта с органите, участващи в изпълнението на програмата и заинтересованите страни, анкета на общественото мнение, прилагана сред бенефициентите и фокус група, организирана с представители от структурите на Програмата, бенефициенти и кандидати. Триангулацията на гореспоменатите методи за оценка допринесе за формулирането на заключения и препоръки, подробно описани за всеки от 28-те въпроса за оценка.

Основните изводи, произтичащи от оценката на програмата:
Съответствие на програмата:
- Програмата е добре вкоренена в трансграничния регион, последователна е и демонстрира приемственост с предходния програмен период и се основава на добре обоснован териториален анализ, който има заслугата да идентифицира ключови структурни проблеми на региона, все още актуални в контекста на региона и валиден в началото на новия програмен период
- Програмата има добро ниво на допълване с националните политики и допринася съществено за постигането на целите на стратегията на ЕС за Дунавския регион.
- Големият брой организации / институции, участващи в проекти, е особено важен елемент, особено от гледна точка на общата цел на програмата за трансгранично сътрудничество. Този елемент показва добро ниво на сътрудничество, както по отношение на интензивността, така и по тематично / географско покритие.

Изпълнение на програмата:

- Всички ресурси на програмата са договорени, средносрочните цели за изпълнение са постигнати и целевите постижения изглежда са постигнати.
- Има стратегия за изпълнение на програмата, основана на проницателност и предпазливост, възползваща се от изводите, извлечени в предходния програмен период.
- Програмата се възползва от силно стратегическо управление, основано на много ясни приоритетни принципи: пълно усвояване на ресурсите и изпълнение без затруднения на целите на програмата. Тези принципи бяха в основата на стабилни, донякъде необичайни решения, но в съответствие с визията на програмата и ефективни (напр. Определяне на средносрочни цели за усвояване или правило "максимум 4 проекта").
- Изпълнението на програмата постига значителен напредък в постигането на конкретни цели и свързани с тях показатели. Като се има предвид времето на изпълнение на програмата, отчетените стойности на индикаторите предполагат, че конкретните цели са в графиката.
- Портфолиото от проекти, които се изпълняват, предполага, че програмата през следващите години няма да бъде засегната от значителни рискове от прекратяване. Процедурите за възлагане на обществени поръчки обаче могат да окажат влияние върху лесното изпълнение на проектите. Разширяването на тези процедури може да генерира рискове за изключване на ниво проект (но не на ниво Програма).

Управление на програмата
- Процесите и процедурите за управление на Програмата са резултат от натрупването на постепенни подобрения в резултат на опита на два пълни програмни периода, през които ключовият персонал на управителните органи имаше голямо предимство да остане непроменен.
- Ръководството на заявителя и свързаният пакет формуляри са полезни и адаптирани към нуждите на кандидатите. Като цяло подкрепата, предоставена от програмата, е адекватна и качеството на проектните предложения е добро.
- В сравнение с предходния програмен период, програмата постигна значителен напредък по отношение на процедурите за оценка и подбор на проекти. Освен това бенефициентите имат високо ниво на доверие в процесите на подбор и оценка и считат, че процедурите за оценка, подбор и договаряне са ефективни.
- Постигане на целите за напредъка на проекти за техническа помощ се увеличава. Персоналът и екипите на управителните органи са мобилизирани и осъществяват своята дейност. Дейностите по предоставяне на информация и подкрепа за кандидатите са изпълнени от всички съответни органи. Има възможност за подобряване на ефективността на разходите за техническа помощ, които понастоящем се подпомагат от проекти, покриващи максимум 3 години изпълнение.
- Опростеният вариант на разходите се възприема от по-голямата част от бенефициентите като много полезен. Управляващите структури също са убедени, че приемането на опцията за опростени разходи улеснява ефективното изпълнение на програмата и проектите.
- Все още е полезно да се опростят допълнително процедурите за управление на програмата, по-специално чрез оптимизиране на системата за контрол на първо ниво, както и чрез възприемане на пълен подход за дигитализация (подход „0 хартия"), насочен към всички комуникационни потоци на документи до / от бенефициентите по проекта.

- Представителността на Комитета за наблюдение също може да бъде подобрена. Има публично представителство на публичния сектор в сравнение с гражданското общество.

Основни препоръки:

Изпълнение на програмата

- Въпреки че целите на програмата и цялостното усвояване на финансовите средства са близо до достигане на крайните цели, се препоръчва стриктно наблюдение по отношение на постигането на конкретни показатели и, на ниво проект, внимателно наблюдение на въздействието на процедурите за възлагане на обществени поръчки върху лесното прилагане на инфраструктурни проекти.
- Някои ключови правила, допринесли за правилното изпълнение на програмата, като ограничаване до 4 проекта на бенефициент и средносрочните цели за изпълнение могат да бъдат допълнително подобрени, за да се даде приоритет на подкрепата за поддържане на най-добрите проекти и да се увеличи въздействието на тези правила по отношение на ефективността на изпълнението на програмата.

Управление на програмата

- Успешното приемане на опцията за опростени разходи трябва да се търси и за разходите за техническа помощ, като същевременно се използват възможностите, предлагани от новата регулаторна рамка за периода 2021-2027 г.
- За новия програмен период се препоръчва да се извърши преход към цифров поток от информация, ръководен от принципа „0 хартия".
- Системата за контрол на разходите следва да бъде опростена и ефикасна. Препоръчва се премахване на дублирането и подобряване на общото тълкуване на правилата за контрол по отношение на условията за допустимост, по-специално по отношение на опростените разходи, чието тълкуване изглежда не е в съответствие между програмните органи.
- Представителността на Комитета за наблюдение също трябва да бъде подобрена чрез стимулиране на по-широко и по-ефективно участие на гражданското общество.

1. Introduction

The *Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme 2014-2020 implementation evaluation* has been carried out by the independent evaluator ACZ Consulting SRL& VVA S.r.l, contracted by the Managing Authority of the Programme, the Romanian Ministry of Public Works, Development and Administration. The evaluation contract was signed on 08th of October 2019, having an overall implementation period of 13 months and a total budget of 626,934 lei. In order to keep track of the activities undertaken and to plan the next steps in the evaluation process, the Provider submits every two months activity reports, which also present the status of implementation for each activity.

The present Implementation Evaluation Report for Interreg V-A Romania - Bulgaria Programme 2014-2020 aims to provide an independent reflection on the programme's relevance, efficiency and effectiveness and to contribute to its management and performance from this perspective.

On a more detailed level, the report was drafted in order to achieve the following objectives: i) the evaluation of the management and implementation of the programme, ii) the evaluation of the design and relevance of the programme and its physical and financial progress.

Throughout the evaluation activities performed within the project, a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods and techniques was applied, which substantiated the answers to **28 evaluation questions** and enabled in-depth analyses focused on the following topics: **relevance** of the programme, **effectiveness** and efficiency of the **implementation** at the **programme level**, effectiveness of the implementation at the **project level**, application of the equal opportunities and non-discrimination horizontal principles (programme and projects level), effectiveness and efficiency of the programme management system. The evaluation of the communication strategy was treated in a separate report, delivered along with the present one.

For the implementation evaluation, the activities which were conducted by the team of experts aimed to achieve an in-depth analysis on programme output and result indicators and performance framework indicators as well as an analysis of the efficiency and effectiveness of programme implementation until the agreed cut-off date of 31st December 2019.

As mentioned above, the evaluation aims to analyse the effectiveness (the extent to which the objectives have been met), efficiency (the optimal relationship between the resources used and the results obtained), relevance (the extent to which the programmed objectives are in accordance with the needs, problems and various other aspects met in the implementation of the Programme), providing answers to the evaluation questions, as established by the terms of reference of the evaluation services and eventually re-classified in agreement with the Managing Authority (Annex 3).

2. Methodology

In order to evaluate the Programme relevance and effectiveness in terms of implementation of the programme, the consortium used a set of main methodological tools to answer the related evaluation questions. The methodological toolbox encompassed three types of methods (as detailed below):

- Methods of data collection and processing;
- Methods of quantitative analysis supporting data analysis and interpretation;
- Methods of qualitative analysis completing quantitative methods and contributing to the formulation of conclusions and recommendations

Methods of data collection and processing	Data analysis and interpretation	Formulation of conclusions and recommendations
•Literature review •Desk research •Interviews •Questionnaire survey •Data quality check procedures •Focus grup	•Benchmarking analysis •Stakeholders analysis	•Focus group •Benchmarking analysis
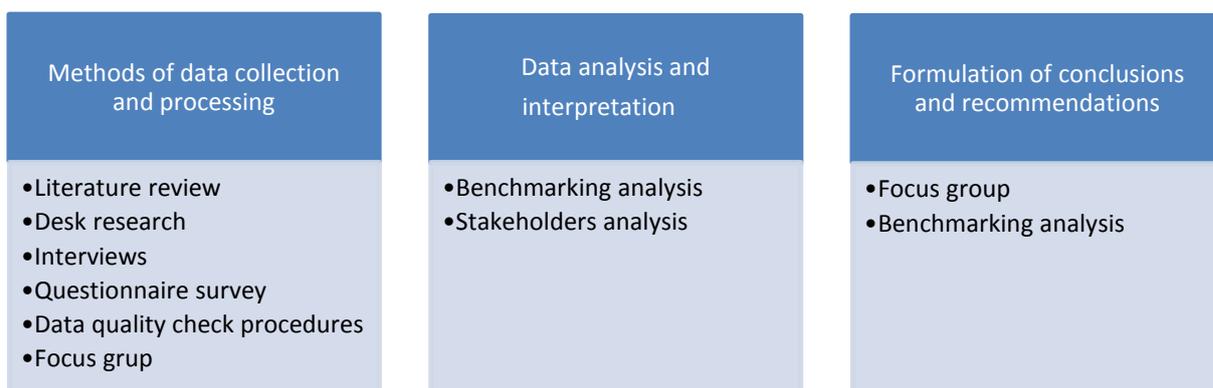
As illustrated by the table below the team of experts used for each evaluation questions the following data collection tools:

Evaluation questions (EQ)	Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire survey	Benchmarking analysis
E.R.01. Is the programme still relevant in the policy context and is the use of funds properly addressing the current development needs of beneficiaries in the programme area?	●	●	●	
E.R.02 To what extent does the programme add benefits to the cross-border region development and how has the programme complemented and enhanced the effect of other related policies or strategies?	●	●	●	
E.R.03 What is the programme contribution to the implementation of EU Strategy for the Danube River objectives?	●	●	●	
E.R.04 Are there more stringent uncovered needs that could be tackled under a future cross-border programme?	●	●	●	
E.IM.01. Which is the actual implementation progress regarding each specific objective? Which is the achievement level of programme indicators? Which is the achievement level of performance framework indicators as compared to the milestones for 2018?	●	●		
E.IM.02. What stands behind the over-reaching of certain output indicators?	●	●		
E.IM.03. Will the progress to date (given the current trends) lead to the achievement of target values of programme output and result indicators (including the performance framework indicators)?	●	●		
E.IM.04. In case of non-achievement risk for the output and result indicators target values (including the performance framework indicators), which are the main causes and how can they be addressed?	●	●		
E.IM.05. Is there any de-commitment expected to take place at programme level? What specific actions should be taken in order to minimize the de-commitment risk?	●	●		

Evaluation questions (EQ)	Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire survey	Benchmarking analysis
E.IM.06. Are there any risks/unsolved problems hindering the smooth programme implementation that are emerging both in programming period 2007-2013 and the current one and what could be done, in order to mitigate/ overcome them?	●	●	●	
E.IM.07. What are the external factors that have led to the results of the programme?	●	●		
E.IP.01. To what extent have the objectives of the projects financed under this programme been achieved or are about to be achieved? What are the possible internal and external factors affecting the achievement of the objectives (e.g. human resources, financial capacity)?	●	●	●	
E.IP.02. Are there any patterns that could be identified for successful project implementation?	●	●	●	
E.IP.03. In case weak points (e.g. irregularities, budgetary corrections, breaches from the application of the Project Implementation Manual) have been detected within project implementation, could a pattern be identified in relation to their cause and their influence on the overall implementation of the programme's specific objectives?	●	●	●	
E.IP.04. What are the major difficulties faced by the beneficiaries? What measures could be taken to overcome them?	●	●	●	
E.IP.05. Are the beneficiaries sufficiently supported to prepare projects and implement them?	●	●	●	
E.HP.01. Are the actions taken to promote equality between men and women and to promote non-discrimination working? Are the actions taken to promote sustainable development working?	●	●	●	
E.HP.02. How do the financed projects contribute to the application of equal opportunities and non-discrimination horizontal principle, especially as regards the equality between men and women?	●	●	●	
E.PM.01. Did the applicant's guide and pack enable the potential beneficiaries to prepare well-written applications? Are the project assessment, selection and contracting systems efficient? Is the project monitoring system efficient?	●	●	●	●
E.PM.02. Is the overall management and control system efficient?	●	●		●
E.PM.03. Did the use of simplified cost options prove to be efficient?	●	●	●	
E.PM.04. Are there any specific factors hindering the effective use of Technical Assistance funds?	●	●		●
E.PM.05. Are there any steps in the use of Technical Assistance funds that could be made more efficient?	●	●		●
E.PM.06. Are the actions taken to reinforce the capacity of authorities and beneficiaries to administer and to use the EU funds under this programme efficient and relevant?	●	●		●
E.PM.07. Is the right balance of relevant stakeholders involved in the implementation of the programme, including as regards their participation in the Monitoring Committee, from the point of view of applying the partnership principle?	●	●		●
E.PM.08. Are the actions taken in order to reduce the administrative burden on beneficiaries working? What can be improved?	●	●	●	
E.PM.09. Is the communication between beneficiaries and Joint Secretariat efficient? How about Antenna?	●	●	●	
E.PM.10. Do the anti-fraud activities carried out by the programme authorities lead to the achievement of the objectives set out in the Anti-fraud Strategy? Which actions were the most relevant and effective in managing the risk of fraud and dealing with fraudulent activity?	●	●		

Methodological aspects – desk research

The desk research carried out within the contract concerned both the review of the specialized literature, which represented the basic starting point for the analyses that were performed, as well as the analysis of the programme related documents and materials.

The documents analysed by the team of experts are listed in Annex 8.

The preliminary results obtained from the desk research are subsequently validated by the results and findings obtained in the field research, respectively from the face-to-face interviews, the application of questionnaires among public authorities, NGOs, the private environment and universities and from the Focus Group organized in the eligible area of the programme.

Methodological aspects – semi-structured Interviews

As a first and key element of field research, a number of interviews were conducted, which targeted a number of subjects (national, regional and local authorities and local stakeholders) based on their role played in Programme implementation and/or on their representativeness in the Programme area.

These interviews were applied in accordance with the activity calendar approved for conducting the field research and were organized between 26.02.2020 – 13.03.2020. The final number of undertaken interviews was 15, 8 with Romanian interviewees and 7 with Bulgarian interviewees.

Methodological aspects – Survey

An online questionnaire was conducted, addressed to Programme beneficiaries spread all over the Programme area. The final number of respondents was 49, 22 Romanian respondents and 27 Bulgarian respondents. There were 6 respondents who applied in the first call for proposals, 16 in the second call and 27 in the third call. With the exception of SO 1.2, all the other specific objectives were covered.

Methodological aspects – Benchmarking analysis

For the purpose of the EQ in which this instrument was foreseen, the team of evaluators made use of a benchmarking analysis, by comparing the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme with two similar Interreg programmes funded by ERDF in the same period: Interreg V-A Italy-Slovenia and Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary.

In order to identify the two Programmes of comparison, the team followed the below-detailed approach, in line with the methodology approved with the Inception report:

- One comparison programme was selected among the best performing Interreg Programmes in the EU, based on the degree of achievement of financial and physical (output and result) indicators. Indicators considered depended on the specific evaluation question in which the tool is applied.
- One comparison programme was selected among Interreg programmes in the same area – possibly having at least one of the participating countries in common (Romania or Bulgaria), making sure that the selection is relevant (sufficient comparability of the programmes – in terms of budget, kind of interventions, etc.- considering the specific EQ for which the tool is applied).

The main reasons considered for the choice of each programme are as follows:

For Interreg V-A - Italy-Slovenia (IT-SI):

- The consistency of programme objectives, as the challenges and needs identified by the programme for the cooperation area are extremely detailed and aligned with the relevant strategic documents considered (Europe 2020 Strategy; the Common Strategic Framework; Recommendations of the Council etc.);
- The intervention logic of the programme;
- Presence of a Technical Assistance strategy;

- The Programme acts on streamlining and simplification of decision-making processes to ensure the programme's good governance, and also, to speed up the performance of the realizations and, therefore, expenditure reporting and payments;
- The performance related to results capitalization, which enabled to identify development opportunities to pursue for specific thematic areas (tourism, cross-border healthcare, research, development and innovation);
- The actual contribution that the strategy of the programme is capable of making to Europe 2020 Strategy, as the programme strategy develops themes aligned with Europe 2020 and, in particular, with smart growth (Priority 1 "Promoting innovation capacities for a more competitive area"), and sustainable growth (Axis 2 "Cooperation for low-carbon strategies" and Axis 3 "Protecting and promoting natural and cultural resources").

However, it should be noted that in terms of budget, the EU allocation of this programme represents 36% of the allocation of RO-BG Programme.

For Interreg V-A – Romania-Hungary (RO-HU):

- Similar funding priorities (including thematic priorities) the Programme is focused on and the expected impacts;
- Similar budgets;
- One bordering Country in common with Ro-Bg
- The Programme's management and monitoring system;
- Cross-border character and impact;
- Presence of a Technical Assistance strategy.

3. Analysis of the EQs

3.1. Relevance

Evaluation Domain	Relevance
RE.01	**Is the programme still relevant in the policy context and is the use of funds properly addressing the current development needs of beneficiaries in the programme area?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The **Territorial Analysis of the Romania – Bulgaria Cross Border Area** identifies several development challenges pointing out that the regions included in the area are amongst the poorest in Europe (with average GDP below national and European averages). The resulting needs analysis lists a set of priorities in the following areas:
  1. Transport and accessibility, especially as far as TEN-T connection and Danube navigability, in the border region
  2. Unemployment and labour market mobility, especially in terms of long-term unemployment, brain drain and skills mismatch
  3. Heritage and tourism untapped potential due to lack of cross-border coordination and investments
  4. Climate change and environmental risk are not efficiently tackled in the region. The cross-border area remains significantly exposed to natural disasters – such as flood. Likewise, the transition towards renewable energy is significantly lagging to the EU standards.
  5. Institutional capacity and governance need to be improved as the cross-border communities lack of an integrated governance level.

These priorities were identified also in the previous programming period and - as the **Ex-post evaluation of Romania-Bulgaria Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013** points out - these needs are considered "structural". Thus, they are likely to affect the area in the following decades.

- Data from **EUROSTAT and the National Institute of Statistics for Romania and Bulgaria** show that the regions involved in the Programme remain amongst the top 10 least developed regions in Europe. Indeed, regional data concerning GDP per capita at NUTS 3 level display that it corresponds to only one fourth of the real GDP per capita at EU level in 2019. In addition, regional unemployment figures are slightly above the EU average (7.0%), with higher peaks on the Bulgarian side of the cross-border region. For what concerns the early leavers from education and training (18 – 24 years old), the interested regions perform among the last in the EU, whilst the share of the population aged between 25 and 64 years, with less than primary or lower education, markedly underperforms the EU benchmark. These findings highlight that the development challenges are still existing and that the overall approach of the programme remains relevant to the current needs, still consistent with the needs' assessment carried out between 2012 and 2014 for the programme.
- The **Cooperation Programme** (final version) is fully consistent with the Territorial Analysis and the identified needs are integrated in the overall logic of intervention. Indeed, the Thematic Objectives are consistent with the needs assessment and this is a pre-requisite for long-term relevance.

- As far as **Programme documents and data** are concerned, the very high absorption rate can be considered as an interesting proxy of its relevance to local needs.

From the **interviews** with Programme management bodies, the main findings are:

- There is **a substantial consensus on the current relevance** of the programme amongst interviewees. Some pointed out that the scope for cross-border cooperation and programme intervention is huge. Beneficiaries are already preparing for the following programming period. This view is shared by another interviewee who also adds that the needs identified ex-ante remain key challenges for the region.
- In particular, one interviewee underlined how the **bottom up approach** adopted during the needs assessment has proven to be particularly successful and it supported programme relevance in the long term.
- A key factor for ensuring programme relevance was **its continuity with the previous programmes** (2007-2013 and PHARE CBC phase). This dynamic created a local network of partnerships and local stakeholders are aware of key needs and issues.
- Despite the substantial relevance with current needs, one interviewee declared that **"there is still room for further improvement"**. For instance, local stakeholders may have a more significant role in the needs assessment.

From the **interviews** with Programme management bodies, the main findings are:

- **Highly consistent** with the previous findings. Interestingly, they agree on an extended and streamlined involvement of local stakeholders.

From the **survey** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- As the Figure below shows, the vast majority of respondents (83%) confirm current programme relevance. The remaining share (17%) considers the programme as partly relevant. These findings confirm what described above, namely that the Programme is still perceived as highly relevant. Interestingly enough, no respondents consider that the programme is out of context.

Figure no.1   **Is the programme relevant to current development needs?**
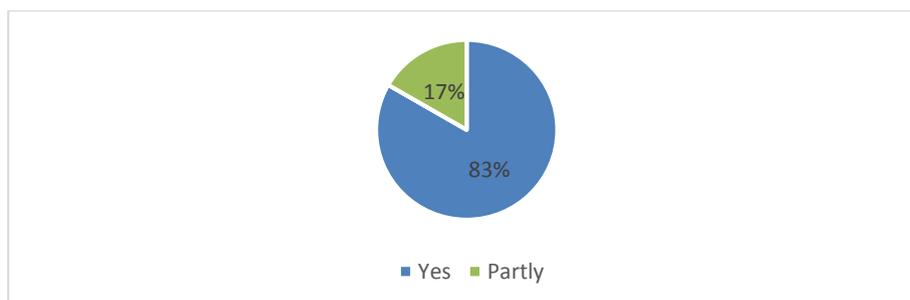
2. Conclusions

The key conclusion is that the programme remains largely relevant to the area. The reason for this success is twofold: on one hand, the development needs are structural, thus unlikely to change in the short term. On the other hand, the needs assessment proved to be effective and accurate – which is a prerequisite for ensuring relevance.

3. Recommendations

R.RE.01. Given the substantial positive outcome of the analysis for this evaluation question, the key recommendation is to keep the same approach, perhaps expanding the role of local stakeholders in the needs assessment consultation.

Evaluation Domain	Relevance
RE.02	**To what extent does the programme add benefits to the cross-border region development and how has the programme complemented and enhanced the effect of other related policies or strategies?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- At project level, it is possible to notice a general and significant synergy and relevance with EU policies/strategies and other programmes. This is due to the efficient selection grids for projects – which are tailored by SO. For instance, relevance with transport EU policies is ensured by the fact that synergies with TEN-T and EUSDR are essential for projects financed under SO 1. Projects financed under other SOs are tested multiple times as far as their relevance with the EU policies is concerned. Out of 28 Evaluation Questions for project selection, 5 are directly related to relevance with EU policies[1]. Evaluation assessments show that most of the projects tend to receive the highest score under these selection criteria. The table below illustrates some examples of these positive assessments.

Project	SO	Score	EU goals relevance	TEN -T Relevance	Other policies relevance	Danube strategy Relevance	Previous funding Relevance
connectivity project	1.1	84	2/2	1/1	2/2	n.a.	2/2
tourism project	2.1	78.5	1/1	n.a.	1/1	2/2	1/1
employment project	4.1.	78	2/2	n.a.	2/2	1/1	2/2
cultural project	2.1.	66.50	2/2	n.a.	2/2	1/1	2/2
transport project	1.1	78	2/2	1/1	2/2	n.a.	2/2

- In terms of cross-border regional development, the attention of the evaluation team has focused on the extent to which the programme has supported initiatives with real cross-border added value, that could have not been supported by national budgets or by ESI funds mainstream Programmes. The ensurance of a cross-border added value represents a typical challenge for Managing Authorities of CBC programmes, which have to overcome the natural attitude of many applicants simply seeing the programme as an alternative funding source for their needs.
- Like in all CBC programmes, the challenge has been there also for the programme under evaluation: as the AIR for 2018 mentions, about PA 4, "*Interreg V-A Ro-Bg was one of the first programmes to start implementation in both countries. Considering the fact that no other EU financing was*

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[1] Q1 Does the project contribute to the implementation and achievement of proposed results of the EU 2020 strategy? Does the project contribute to the implementation of the Danube strategy?; Q3. Are the project objectives/implementing priorities in line with other EU, national, regional, local strategy or programmes?; Is the project capitalizing the results of another EU-funded project?; Is the project planning to have synergies (complementarities) with implemented/ongoing projects (if relevant) carried out under this or other EU-funded programmes?).

available at the time when the first calls for proposals were launched, the traditional applicants of the national mainstream Programmes (FSI financed Programmes for development of human resources) financing complementary actions on the field of human resources, have migrated to the cross border programme, approaching across border perspective for solving their identified needs in the field". This points out that to a certain extent, local stakeholders – given the lack of alternatives – have applied with projects which did not necessarily have, at least originally, a genuine cross-border dimension.

- The Programme has set up relevant mechanisms to stimulate the cross-border added value of the projects: the assessment grid for the selection of the projects includes a specific criterion to praise, beyond the minimum required, the degree of cross-border added value (i.e. "Q10 - Is the project generating a clear and tangible cross-border impact?").
- In fact, an analysis of the project assessment grids shows that this evaluation criterion has been sometimes analyzed briefly, and with the recurrent use of standardized assessment, repeated, with the same wording, for more projects.

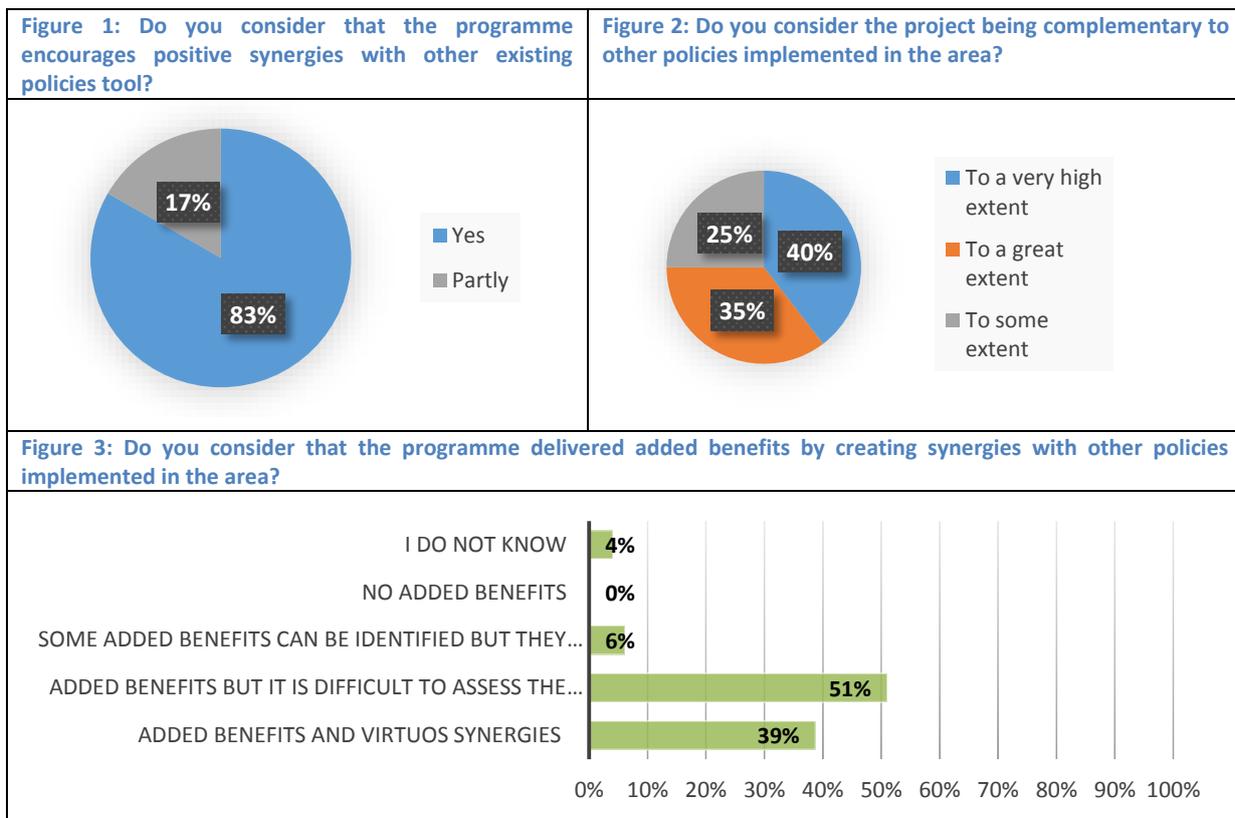From the **interviews** with Programme management bodies the main findings are:

- There is **substantial complementarity** with regional and national policies. No interviewees highlighted any contradictions between policies objectives.
- Considering the **limited size of the budget**, one interviewee pointed out that synergies and coherence with other policies or interventions is essential.
- The **cross-border dimension** of the development has been taken in due consideration in Programme implementation, by targeting the funding of initiatives that come with a tangible cross-border added value; beyond the minimum cross-border dimensions required by the Regulations, the Programme has established a specific criterion in the project evaluation grids that helps selecting projects with the higher cross-border added value.
- There is consensus in considering that the current Programme has improved its attention to cross-border added value compared to the previous period; several examples were mentioned of projects with an intense and permanent joint added value, going above and beyond the project results on each side of the border. However, some respondents consider that there is still room to improve, by further reducing the phenomenon of the "mirroring projects".

From the survey with **beneficiaries**, the main findings are:

- The key evidence emerging from the survey is that project beneficiaries perceive significant synergies with other relevant policies. Indeed, the large majority (83%) of respondents declared that there are full synergies with other policies while 17% found that these synergies are only partial. The findings largely confirm the evidence emerging from interviews.
- According to respondents, the Programme has significant complementarity with other policies implemented in the area. Indeed, three quarters of interviewees pointed out that there is a very high or high complementarity while only 25% perceive it to a lesser extent.
- While complementarity and synergies are clearly shown, with the vast majority of respondents (90%) acknowledging it, it is sometimes difficult to assess the extent of the added value (51% of respondents found it difficult to quantify the extent). On the other hand, an important share of respondents (39%) are more positive, considering that the programme created virtuous synergies

and added benefits. Only a tiny minority (6%) believe that added values are not significant. Also, important to be mentioned, no respondent considers that there is no added benefits.

Figure 1: Do you consider that the programme encourages positive synergies with other existing policies tool?

Figure 2: Do you consider the project being complementary to other policies implemented in the area?

Figure 3: Do you consider that the programme delivered added benefits by creating synergies with other policies implemented in the area?

2. Conclusions

According to all sources, the Programme presents a good degree of complementarity and synergies with other policies, at EU and national level.

The intensity of the cross-border added value of the projects is visible and improved compared to the previous period. Like in all CBC programmes, projects are sometimes developed based on local and unilateral needs, adapted to the cross-border dimension; not all the projects, accordingly, present the same degree of cross-border added value. However, the purpose of cross-border territorial cooperation programmes, besides creating cross-border added value, is also to generate regional development in areas that normally tend to be neglected by national policies and programmes.

3. Recommendations

R.RE.02.1. The current level of complementarity and synergy with EU/national policies and programmes should be maintained also for the next programming period. As the 2021-2027 programme is written at a beginning of a period of incertitude and difficult changes/challenges at EU level, it is suggested to set-up a monitoring of the external coherence of the future programme also after its first approval, so that adaptations can be adopted rapidly in case of context changes.

R.RE.02.2The current level of attention to the cross-border added value should be maintained for the next programme. The use of the cross-border added value related assessment criterion in the project

assessment grid could be made more effective by establishing more clearly how the proposed added value leads to a certain score. For instance, the scoring system should prioritize projects which prove that the cross-border intervention is the most suitable for tackling a given need.

Evaluation Domain	Relevance
RE.03	**What is the programme contribution to the implementation of EU Strategy for the Danube River objectives?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The EU Strategy for the Danube River and the Interreg RO-BG share several common objectives (such as environmental risks, shipping and transport, socio-economic development). Thus, there is high potentiality for combined contribution – at least from an ex-ante perspective.
- According to Sageata publication[2] (2010) the key evidence emerging from an analysis of the Danube region along the Bulgarian-Romanian border is: "the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border zone in the Danubian sector features by a sudden variation in transversal fluxes, concentrating on certain directions imposed by the pattern of communication routes and the layout of doublet towns". In particular, the area between Giurgiu and Ruse is arguably the most relevant for cooperation.

From the **interviews** with Programme management bodies, the main findings are:

- According to one interviewee, **185 projects** financed under the Programme **contribute to the Danube strategy** – which shows that several common goals exist.
- The EU Danube Strategy is indeed very relevant for the Programme and there are substantial synergies in terms of objectives. For instance, Romania and Bulgaria manage jointly one of the Priority Areas of EUSDR which is Tourism.
- It appears that there are not conflicts between the European and local objectives, even though cross-border navigability is somehow less prioritized than navigation through the Danube to the Black Sea.

From the survey with **beneficiaries**, the main findings are:

- Findings from interviews are largely confirmed by the result of the survey. Indeed, almost nine respondents out of ten either "strongly agree" or "agree" that the Programme contributes to EUSDR objectives. According to 14% of respondents, there is a neutral contribution while only a very tiny minority (2%) disagree.

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[2] Available online http://www.dgt.uns.ac.rs/pannonica/papers/volume14_2_4.pdf.

Figure 4 : Does the programme contribute to the implementation of EU Strategy for the Danube River objectives?
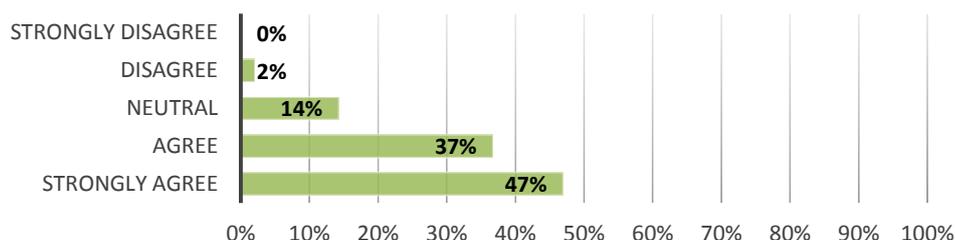
2. Conclusions

The straightforward conclusion is that the Programme significantly contributes to the EU Strategy for the Danube River and there are not major conflicts between local and EU objectives.

3. Recommendations

R.RE.03. The only (soft) recommendation would mainly concern the better alignment between the EU Strategy and the Programme regarding the cross-border navigability of the Danube river (i.e. crossing ferries).

Evaluation Domain	Relevance
RE.04	Are there more stringent uncovered needs that could be tackled under a future cross-border programme?

1.Analysis

From the **interviews** with Programme management bodies, the main findings are:

- As emerged from the previous EQs, an accurate needs assessment led to an efficiently designed programme which covers most of the relevant needs.
- One interviewee pointed out that interventions in the field of transport should be improved and extended. However, given the budget, it is quite unlikely that major infrastructural investments will be financed.
- Similarly, another interviewee pointed out the need of implementing "integrated projects" with a "strategic component" which will be able to cover different sectors (i.e. transport plus tourism).
- There is also room for improvement in the field of Maritime investment, as some potential benefits remain untapped.

From the interviews with **local stakeholders**, the main findings are:

- Transport and employment should be the areas to prioritize in the next programming period. While they agree that meaningful progress has been made, there is a large scope for interventions.

From the survey with **beneficiaries**, the main findings are:

- Findings from the survey largely confirm what highlighted in the interviews. The vast majority of respondents believes that funds properly match the development needs. This is mostly due to programme relevance and points out that uncovered needs – albeit existing – are quite limited.

Figure 5 To what extent does the use of funds properly match the development needs of beneficiaries in the programme area?

NOT AT ALL — 0%
TO A SMALL EXTENT — 0%
TO SOME EXTENT — 15%
TO A GREAT EXTENT — 48%
TO A VERY HIGH EXTENT — 38%
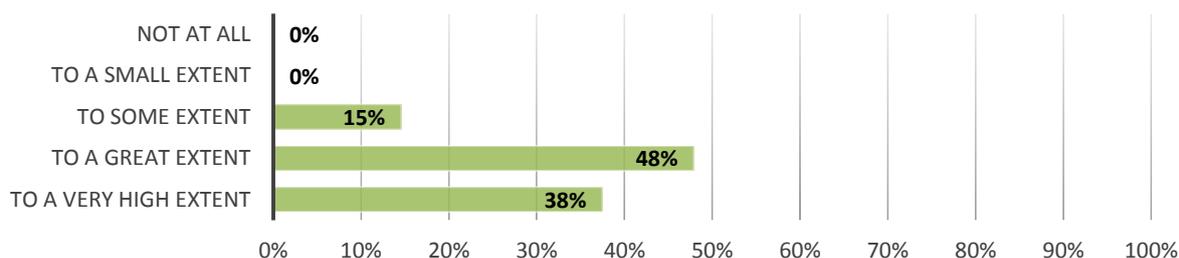
2. Conclusions

All the analyzed sources highlight the fact that very few needs are not covered by the programme. On the other hand, this is relatively normal considering the diversity of needs in the region.

3. Recommendations

R.RE.04. More direct involvement of local stakeholders as well as an extended bottom approach may be useful to understand and subsequently assess uncovered needs.

3.2. Effectiveness/implementation – Programme Level

Evaluation Domain	Implementation – Programme level
E.IM.01	**Which is the actual implementation progress regarding each specific objective? Which is the achievement level of programme indicators? Which is the achievement level of performance framework indicators as compared to the milestones for 2018?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The analysis of the implementation of the programme revealed solid progresses registered to date. By the beginning of 2020, all of the available funds were contracted and 53% of the contracted projects finalized their implementation. The contracted ERDF amounts of the finalized projects make up approx. 23.57% of the overall contracted ERDF funds.

- The Programme management proved to be reactive and able to react in situations of risks which had the potential to generate negative impacts on the achievement of the programme level indicators, and implicitly on achieving the specific objectives. The most important and relevant intervention was related to the 16 hard projects within the first Call for Proposals of the Programme. The results of the assessment process were delayed with 3 months in 2016 after noticing that, in case the projects qualified for selection would have been contracted, some of the indicators wouldn't have been achieved. Meanwhile, the available funds would have been committed, which would have seriously jeopardized the achievement of the target values for indicators. Therefore, the decision was to increase the threshold of points for selection (from 60 to 65), reducing the number of projects which would be invited for contracting, and to use the remaining funds within a new Call for Proposals. The new CfP was launched, focusing on operations which could deliver the indicators which were at risk. In some cases (PA 1 and PA 5) the Programme decided even for over-contracting, in order to secure the achievement of the target values. Based

on these measures, the level of achievement of programme indicators was secured, the milestones of the performance framework indicators being achieved by 2018, in most of the cases – with one exception treated below.

- In line with the current status of the implementation of the projects, the level of achievement of the output indicators in case of SO 1.1 is ranging in between 6% and 25%, while the result indicator is currently achieved in a proportion of 15.29%. Only 2 soft projects finalized their implementation under this Specific Objective, there are still 15 projects ongoing, all of them having important infrastructural components, relevant from the perspective of the indicators (see Annex 2).

- None of the 3 projects under SO 1.2 finalized their implementation, the first one being expected to close at the end of 2020. Therefore, the contributions to the specific objective will become quantifiable only when results will be available (see Annex 2).

- In terms of financial implementation of PA 1, almost 14% of the contracted ERDF funds were already included in requests for payment sent to the Commission, while more than 19% of the contracted ERDF amounts were certified by the FLC, these rates being in line with the status of the ongoing projects (see Annex 2).

- In case of SO 2.1., approximately one third of the projects finalized the implementation by 31st of December 2019, 46 projects being still ongoing by 1st of January 2020. In case of the common output indicator related to the number of visits to the supported sites, the projects managed to already exceed the target value foreseen for the end of the implementation period. The programme specific output indicators are reached in proportion of 32% and 34%, respectively (see Annex 2).

- In case of SO 2.2, both projects which were contracted finalized their implementation by 31st of December. They have secured the achievement of both the result and the output indicator (see Annex 2).

- In terms of financial implementation of PA 2, almost 34% of the contracted ERDF funds were already included in requests for payment sent to the Commission, while more than 47% of the contracted ERDF amounts were certified by the FLC, these rates being in line with the status of the ongoing projects (see Annex 2).

- In case of SO 3.1, 7 projects finalized their implementation by 31st of December 2019, while 19 are still in the implementation phase. There are 16 hard projects under implementation, which once finished, will bring a significant contribution to the output indicators. The target value of the result indicator has been already reached. Being a qualitative indicator, its achievement at this early stage of implementation reflects a positive perception of the relevant stakeholders towards the interventions supported by the Programme. Considering the status of project implementation, not all the output indicators managed to produce measurable values to this date (see Annex 2).

- In terms of financial implementation of PA 3, 29% of the funds were already included in requests for payment sent to the Commission, while more than 55% of the contracted ERDF amounts were certified by the FLC, these rates being in line with the status of the ongoing projects (see Annex 2).

- In case of SO 4.1., 31 out of a total of 33 projects finalized their implementation by 31st of December 2019. The achievement of both result and output indicators is reflecting this stage of project management cycle, all of them being already over-reached (see Annex 2).

- In terms of financial implementation of PA 4, 75% of the funds were already included in requests for payment sent to the Commission, while almost 94% of the contracted ERDF amounts were certified by the FLC, these rates being in line with the status of the ongoing projects (see Annex 2).

- In case of SO 5.1, 13 out of a total of 18 projects finalized their implementation by 31st of December 2019. There are still 3 hard projects under implementation, with significant contributions to the output indicators. The result indicator was achieved, while the output indicator is currently at a rate of 62% (see Annex 2).

- In terms of financial implementation of PA 5, almost 60% of the funds were already included in requests for payment sent to the Commission, while more than 75% of the contracted ERDF amounts were certified by the FLC, these rates being in line with the status of the ongoing projects (see Annex 2).

- As for the milestone values for 2018 in case of the performance framework indicators, these were reached in most of the cases. The only exception is "*number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency system*", where the achieved value was 6 out of the targeted 10.[3]

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:

- During the interviews, the interviewees were considering the progresses registered in the implementation to date as being satisfactory, especially to what the indicators are concerned. Most of the target values of the indicators are already achieved, and the prediction based on the commitments of the projects is showing that there will be no major problems related to the achievement of the targets at the end of the programme. The milestone values of the indicators for 2018 were achieved in most of the cases.

- The proactive attitude of the Programme management was highlighted, which was needed for reaching this level of achievements. After the first Call for Proposals, when it became obvious that the projects which were initially proposed for selection would not have brought the required contribution to the programme indicators, the Managing Authority intervened and proposed corrective measures.

- The Programme is constantly monitoring the level of achievement of indicators, which allows to identify potential problems and intervene in time. Moreover, there are a series of instruments built-in in the implementation procedures which allow the management bodies to initiate corrective measures – like the mid-term decommitment of the projects which are not meeting their spending targets, or financial corrections applied in case of not reaching the indicators.

2. Conclusions

It can be stated that the programme implementation is progressing well in terms of reaching the specific objectives and related indicators. Considering the timeframe of the Programme implementation, the reported values of the indicators are suggesting that the specific objectives are on track. Moreover, the

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[3] The AIR 2018 is providing an explanation for not achieving the target: "On long term perspective (end of 2021), 88% from the target will be reached (44 partnerships already in signed contracts versus a set target of 50 partnerships). However, even if this indicator is at a lower level than the intermediary and final targets, it is merely a quantitative one and the actual contribution with high impact for the eligible area is ensured by the related output indicators "Population benefiting from actions of risk management", "Population benefiting from flood protection measures" and "Population benefiting from forest fire protection measures" (covered at 100% by the contracted projects). It is important to mention that relevant national and regional actors from Romania and Bulgaria covering the entire area in the risk management field, are signing parts of the partnerships. Therefore, even if smaller in number, the partnerships are large is scale, covering the main risks identified in the programme area. This fact will ensure the achievement of the result indicator "quality of the joint risk management in the CBC area" (already an increase in the quality of joint risk management is registered in the eligible area, as captured by the survey carried out by the Programme at the beginning of 2019)"

Programme managed to achieve a high percentage of finalized projects, especially if compared to other Cooperation Programmes.

In the meantime, at the moment of delivering the evaluation, there is a significant number of projects under implementation, which did not yet fully deliver their indicators. These will bring their contribution to the indicators in the upcoming three years.

Even if these projects are on track, due to their implementation cycle, in some cases, the reported values for some indicators are still below the final targets, or there are no values reported yet. For example, CO 16 (PA1), CO 20, CO 21 (PA3), or the result indicator for PA1 *"% of the RO-BG CBC Danube length and Black Sea where safety of the navigation have been improved"*, are all in the situation of not reporting any progresses to date. Nevertheless, taking into account the number and commitments of the contracted projects which are under implementation, all of the indicators in this situation will be finally achieved.

In the meantime, there is a series of indicators where the target values were already achieved, or even massively over-reached, as the case of CO 09 (PA2), or 8e.1 (PA4).

If analysed at Specific Objective level – cut-off-date 31st of December 2019:

- o In case of SO 1.1 there is a considerable number of hard projects under implementation - 15. Taken into account the specificities of such projects (longer implementation period, lengthy public procurements) it can be concluded that the Programme is on track in achieving its targets.
- o In case of SO 1.2, there are no projects finalized yet. Based on the analysis of the contracted projects, the achievement of the objective is secured.
- o In case of SO 2.1, with half of the contracted projects still under implementation, the progresses are satisfactory.
- o With 19 projects still under implementation (out of a total of 26), the progresses in the implementation of SO 3.1 can be considered as being in line with the timeline.
- o In case of SO 4.1 most of the projects finalized their implementation, while the indicators are already reached. Based on the reported values, it can be stated that the objective was achieved.
- o The achievement of SO 5.1 is on track, with 5 projects still to contribute to the value of the indicators.

As a general conclusion, it can be stated that the reported achievements of the values of the indicators are consistent with the timing of the Programme implementation.

Almost all the milestones of the performance framework indicators were achieved. In case of the single indicator where this was not possible, the contracted projects which are under implementation will finally provide the outputs which will ensure that the final target will be secured.

The programme management is monitoring the indicator system, and reacted when situations of risks were identified. There is a series of strong instruments meant to be applied in order to secure that projects are kept on track, both in financial terms and in achieving their indicators.

3. Recommendations

R.IM.01.1.There is a considerable number of projects which are still under implementation. Considering that their committed contribution to the achievement of the specific objectives and indicators of the programme will be instrumental for the overall success of the programme, it is recommended to continue to closely monitor and support their implementation.

R.IM.01.2. For the next cooperation programme, it would be recommendable to further refine the system which would enable early warning in case the achievement of the values of the indicators is endangered. For example, during the selection procedure, the Programme may apply differentiated thresholds of points for supporting projects within certain Specific Objectives, based on the aggregated commitments related to the indicators. Hence, even if the minimal threshold of quality for supporting the projects is set at a certain number of points (e.g. 60 points), the Programme would select projects for contracting within a Specific Objective only until the cumulative values of their indicators will reach (or slightly overpass) the target values of the programme level indicators. The remaining financial resources could be redirected towards projects which meet the minimal quality threshold and tackle indicators which are not yet secured.

Evaluation Domain	Implementation – Programme level
E.IM.02	What stands behind the over-reaching of certain output indicators?

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- In case of 5 output indicators the target values for the end of the Programme were already reached at the time of delivering the evaluation. These situations occurred within PA2 and PA4, the two Priority Axes with the highest number of finalized projects. The over-achievements are important in some cases – CO 09 (583%), which is expected to further increase, or CO 46 (454 %), in the other three cases ranging in between 135% and 324%. (see Annex 2)
- If the total commitments of the contracted projects are analysed, a high level of over-achievement is expected in case of certain output indicators by the end of Programme implementation. Most of the indicators with outstanding values are the common output indicators: CO 16 – 2400%; CO 09 – 2800%, CO 20 – 336%, CO 21 – 336%, CO 44 – 540%, and CO 46 – 493%, with only one programme specific output indicator concerned 8e.1 – 324%[4] (see Annex 2).
- There are several possible reasons which may have led to the over-achievement[5]:

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[4] The AIR for year 2018 is explaining the overachievement in case of CO 09 "*The finalized and still running projects have reported an increase of the visits to the supported cultural/natural heritage with more than 300%, greatly exceeding the performance framework milestone (increase with 1000 visits) and the Programme's target for this indicator. The perspective until the end of the implementation period is to exceed the target with more than 700%. The projects financed under the PA are supporting interesting investments that promote cultural and natural patrimony of the eligible area. The high number of the supported sites generated the forecast of the visits for almost all the projects. Important touristic sites are supported by the Programme having an important perspective for attracting tourists in the area, such as: putting into display important artefacts of the Hamangia culture, one of the oldest human culture in the world, rehabilitation of medieval fortress Turnu Magurele, promoting the rich roman patrimony in both Bulgaria in Romania, rehabilitation of religious sites, museums, creating new tourist products such as hot air balloons, hiking, mountain bicycle tours, Danube water sports. All these, together with the actually achieved outputs are baking up the forecast of the beneficiaries*"

[5] The reasons behind overachieving 8e.1 indicator are explained in the AIR as follows *Explanations for the over-achievement of this indicator might be related with the following reasons:*

1.   Beneficiaries high interest on the Programme opportunities related to labour mobility;

2.   The socio economic conditions of the labour market in Romania and Bulgaria. Both countries are facing a lack of specialized workers due to the emigration phenomenon (workers, especially youngsters, are leaving the area to other western EU countries).

3.   Early launch of the Programme. Interreg V-A Ro-Bg was one of the first programmes to start implementation in both countries. Considering the fact that no other EU financing was available at the time when the first calls for

- In case of indicators expressed in total number of population, the data included in the forecast may include duplications, since the values currently used represent the result of summing up the reported figures and the commitments of the projects. Therefore, if more than one project is addressing a certain territory, the population of the given area is counted more than once in the project reports. Once the implementation ends, the duplications will be identified and eliminated, therefore the final values are expected to be lower.
- Changes in the market conditions, which resulted in the delivery of a higher quantity of outputs than the one initially estimated, with the same financial support (in other words, reduced cost per unit, as compared to the programming process).
- A high interest in the programme's events, which can be identified especially in case of indicators measuring the participation in projects' events. A good example for this case is COI 44 "Number of participants in joint local employment initiatives and joint training", where, as compared to the targeted 10.000 persons and the values forecasted by the projects (54.071 persons), the aggregated data reported until the beginning of 2020 shows more than 18,474 participants. Since in this case, the costs related to the organization of the events are not always linked to the number of participants (e.g. in case of a job fair, the costs for organizing the event are not directly related to the number of persons attending), the values are suggesting a large interest towards the supported projects – good promotion, attractive offers, etc.
- Involvement of institutions which are covering the entire programme area, as national level emergency situations/civil protection - e.g. Population benefiting from actions of risk management, measured in persons. For this indicator, the target was set for 2023 was of 2.5 mil persons, while the forecasted achievement is of 4.2 million persons. The Programme managed to involve national level institutions (e.g. General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations from Romania, Directorate General Fire Safety and Civil Protection), which generated projects covering the entire programme area.

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:

- The interviewees were highlighting that the over-achievement is due to the opportunities which were identified by the beneficiaries in the Cooperation Programme. There is a technical reason behind the high values of the indicators, since it was indicated that the methodology to calculate the target values for the output indicators was mainly based on extrapolation from achievements of the past programming period.

2. Conclusions

The outstanding overachievements are mainly related to Common Output Indicators. In some cases (CO 09 or CO 44) they are already massively overachieved. While the situation does not necessarily have a negative impact on the current programme, analysing the causes may contribute to improving the quality of the new Cooperation Programme. The overachievement can be attributed to more factors, as duplication of the values of the indicators tackling total population, changes in market conditions, good quality of the events

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proposals were launched, the traditional applicants of the national mainstream Programmes (FSI financed Programmes for development of human resources) financing complementary actions on the field of human resources, have migrated to the cross border programme, approaching a cross border perspective for solving their identified needs in the field

and their promotion, involvement of strategic stakeholders, or the changes in the general socio-economic environment.

Based on the information provided by the interviewees, it can be concluded that the methodology for establishing the target values was not fully taking into account the changes in the regional context, relying excessively on the experiences of the past programme. This is applicable especially in the case of common indicators.

3. Recommendations

R.RE.02.1. It is advisable for the future Programme to avoid whenever possible the usage of those Common Output indicators or programme specific indicators which are relating to the entire population of a given area, since they are suitable to generate duplications when aggregating the data, leading to inaccurate results. Nevertheless, in case this cannot be avoided, the methodology for aggregating the reported data at programme level should provide filters which would avoid overlaps and contribute to the accuracy of the values. In the meantime, attention should be paid to keeping the administrative efforts (human and financial) at a reasonable level, since such a procedure may result in an increase of the (already high) administrative burden for the beneficiaries.

R.RE.02.2. Furthermore, the methodology for estimating the target values of the output indicators for the upcoming programme should not rely exclusively on the previous experiences but should incorporate a careful analysis and interpretation of the current trends as well as the characteristics of the interventions/projects expected to be supported within the programme.

Evaluation Domain	Implementation – Programme level
E.IM.03	**Will the progress to date (given the current trends) lead to the achievement of target values of programme and performance framework indicators?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- Based on the analysis of the values committed by the contracted projects, the achievement of the indicators (both output and result) is ensured, with one exception:
  - Output indicator 7c.1 "Number of studies, strategies and action plans to improve safety of the navigation on the Danube and the Black Sea supported", where the contracted projects will probably deliver 2 such documents, as compared to the targeted 5. Even if the Programme targeted this specific indicator during the 3rd Call for Proposals, the submitted projects did not bring a sufficient contribution for reaching the target. As stated in the AIR for 2018, the indicator is a quantitative one, the actual contribution with a high impact being ensure by another indicator "*Total length of new or improved inland waterway*", as well as by the result indicator *"% of the RO-BG CBC Danube length and Black Sea where safety of the navigation has been improved by joint actions"*
- The data available for all the other indicators is revealing that, in case the projects will be successfully implemented, the achievement of target values of programme and performance framework indicators will be secured.
- Moreover, the Programme is still having a number of projects which are under contracting procedure, or on the reserve list due to the 4 simultaneous projects/beneficiary rule. In case the

already contracted projects will face serious challenges, endangering their implementation, the projects in the pipeline may bring their contribution to the full achievement of the indicators.

- There is one result indicator where progresses were not made until 2018 *(% of the RO-BG CBC Danube length and Black Sea where safety of the navigation has been improved by joint actions)*. However, there is a project under implementation which will cover the entire length of Danube, boosting the achievement of the indicator to 100%, by 2021.
- Based on the forecast of the achievement of result indicators, it can be concluded that in most of the cases, the target values will be considerably over-reached. This observation is valid especially for the indicators expressed in total number of population.

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:

- The interviewees were confident that the target values of the programme and performance framework indicators will be achieved by the end of the implementation period. In case of indicators which are counting the entire population of a certain geographical area, the programme management adopted calculation methods to avoid duplication at programme level (population of a certain area is counted only once).

2. Conclusions

The target values of the programme and performance framework indicators will be most probably achieved. Based on the values of the output indicators committed by the contracted projects, there is ground to conclude that the Programme will attain its objectives. In case certain project will face serious difficulties, the Programme is prepared with a series of projects on reserve list, which may complement the achievement of the indicators.

The only indicator which will not be achieved in full is output indicator 7c.1. If analysed deeper and if the analysis of this specific indicator is corroborated with the other indicators of the related Specific Objective, it can be concluded that the specific objective will still be reached by the end of the implementation period. This is because this indicator is quantifying the number of studies, strategies and action plans, and even if the final target (5) will not be achieved, the two such documents which are developed by the projects under implementation will cover the entire length of the Danube River in the cross-border area. Therefore, even if only 40% of this specific indicator will be delivered by the end of the implementation period, it can be concluded that, ultimately, the objective of the programme will be fully achieved.

In case of result indicators, the target values may be considerably over-achieved. One of the reasons for this situation is the definition of the measurement units as number of general population (SO 1.1, SO 4.1). Another reason is the involvement of national level stakeholders in the implementation of the programme, which resulted in an increased capacity to address and solve challenges identified at Programme level (SO 1.2).

3. Recommendations

R.IM.03. There is no specific additional recommendation related to the output indicators, since based on the current information, the target values will be achieved in most of the cases. In case of result indicators, the recommendation is similar to the one referring to the over-achievement of the output indicators (see previous EQ). Namely to avoid whenever possible the usage of indicators expressed in total population during the next programming exercise, but also to take into consideration the current trends when setting the target values.

Evaluation Domain	Implementation – Programme level
E.IM.04	**In case of non-achievement risk for the performance framework indicators target values, which are the main causes and how can they be addressed?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The only relevant case is the output indicator 5b.2 "Number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response", where the milestone value for 2018 was achieved only at a rate of 60%. The Programme took the necessary measures to address this situation, including a new Call for Proposals launched in 2017, which was focusing on the indicators which were not secured at that very moment. As a consequence, based on the commitments of the newly contracted projects, the final target for 2023 in case of this performance indicator will be reached.

2. Conclusions

One of the performance framework indicators did not manage to reach its milestone target. The Programme managed to react quickly and to take the necessary measures in order to secure that the target value for 2023 will be reached. The milestone was not reached since the projects from the first calls for proposals were not covering the required number of joint partnerships. Nevertheless, the object of this indicator (the joint partnerships concluded in the programme area) were covering the values of all the other indicators of the Specific Objective, quantified in the overall population served by these instruments. Hence, even if this specific indicator was not reach, the overall Specific Objective was secured.

3. Recommendations

R.IM.04. The Programme should closely monitor the performance of the projects which are delivering the output indicator 5b.2, since based on the committed values, the forecast is that the final value will cover 110% of the indicator (55 partnerships). Therefore, if problems are occurring in the implementation of the projects contributing to this indicator, its achievement may be at risk.

Evaluation Domain	Implementation – Programme level
E.IM.05	**Is there any de-commitment expected to take place at programme level? What specific actions should be taken in order to minimize the de-commitment risk?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- Based on the data available in the eMS system, there are more than 79 million Euro ERDF certified by the first level control. Based on the latest data available, the requests for payment sent to the Commission were in the amount of 65,05 million Euros, which is well above the de-commitment target at the end of 2019 (20,05 million Euros cumulated at Programme level for 2018 and 2019).
- Furthermore, there is a significant number of projects under implementation. The total amount of ERDF funds which is still to be presented for certification to the FLC by the projects which will finalize their implementation in 2020 or after, is of more than 140 million Euro ERDF (see Annex 2).

- Additionally, there are 2.5 million Eur ERDF funds which were not yet reported to the FLC by the projects which finalized their implementation in 2019. These will also contribute to the achievement of the decommitment targets in the future.
- Moreover, there are approx. 6.2 million Euro ERDF under SO 6.1 Technical Assistance, which will further increase the spending at programme level.
- The rate of expenditure declared ineligible by the FLC is at very low level – currently 1,29% of the total project budgets, or 2.77% if we compare them to the amounts declared eligible (see Annex 2).
- Analysing the performance of the projects which finalized their implementation until the end of 2018, they managed to use 87.41% of the contracted ERDF funds. This rate may change, especially in the case of hard projects which are not yet included in the statistics, but it reveals a relatively high performance at project level.
- The upcoming absorption targets are gradually increasing from 34,07 million in 2020, to 36,55 million Euros in 2023.
- The Monitoring Committee approved in October 2018 an over-contracting in a total amount of 15,61% as compared to the available budget. The process of contracting is still in progress, the over-contracting being currently at a rate of approx. 10%.

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:

- The interviewees highlighted that the Programme management bodies are performing a close monitoring of the spending performance of the projects, as well as of their spending forecasts. Based on the outcomes of this exercise, there are no risks of decommitment foreseen.

2. Conclusions

The risk of decommitment is considered as being low. Based on the forecast performed with the support of the data available in the eMS system (see Annex 2), the ERDF amounts already certified and the ERDF parts of the projects which will finalize their implementation from 2020 onwards, will cover the decommitment targets.

Furthermore, the portfolio of the projects under implementation suggests that the Programme will not face significant risks of decommitment neither in the upcoming years. Nevertheless, the public procurement procedures may have an impact on the smooth implementation of the projects. The prolongation of these procedures may generate decommitment risks, especially if they will occur in case of more projects, with large budgets.

Besides the initial goal of securing the achievement of the indicators, the decision of over-contracting will have a positive effect on further reducing the risk of decommitment at programme level. This action is balancing to a certain extent the risks of delays generated by the public procurements in case of large projects.

3. Recommendations

R.IM.05.1. The Programme should closely follow-up on the public procurement procedures initiated in case of the hard projects, since these will have an important effect on avoiding decommitment at project level.

R.IM.05.2. Over-contracting proved to be efficient in minimizing the risk of de-commitment. The approach should be continued during the next programme as well, the exact rate being determined based on the final figures of the current programme – when 15% was applied.

Evaluation Domain	Implementation – Programme level
E.IM.06	**Are there any risks/unsolved problems hindering the smooth programme implementation that are emerging both in programming period 2007-2013 and the current one and what could be done, in order to mitigate/ overcome them?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- Based on the experiences of the previous Programme, the managing structures introduced new instruments and procedures in order to address risks materialized in the past, as well as to prevent and mitigate recurring problems from the past programme. These included financial corrections for non-achievement of mid-term spending targets by the partners or limiting the number of projects under implementation for a given beneficiary. The measures were meant to address the risk of decommitment and to ensure that the beneficiaries do possess sufficient human and financial resources needed for successfully implementing their projects.

- The Programme applies a rule based on which a Beneficiary cannot have more than four projects under implementation, simultaneously. The rule does not include any filters, parameters or exceptions, to take into account, for example, the different complexity or the budget of the given projects. Moreover, there is no differentiation between the roles played by a given institution/organization within the project, even though the responsibilities of a Lead Partner are considerably higher and require more resources than in case of a Project Partner.

- In order to avoid the risk of decommitment and to secure the achievement of the indicators, the Programme decided to award most of the available funds within the first Call for Proposals, launched at an early stage of the implementation period.

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:

- The interviews revealed that the highest risk perceived by the Programme management bodies is related to the public procurement procedures, which can be very lengthy and, in many cases, may have to be repeated. This generates delays in the implementation of the projects, and ultimately are having a negative effect on the smooth implementation of the programme.

- Some of the interviewees were questioning the benefits of applying the 4 simultaneous projects/beneficiary rule. Based on the information provided during the interviews, the rule was introduced based on the experiences of the previous Programme, when there were situations of beneficiaries having 6 projects or more under implementation, without being able to provide sufficient human and financial resources for their proper finalization. The Programme bodies consider the rule as being beneficial, because there is a considerably lower number of projects with contracts terminated due to lack of capacity of the beneficiaries, as compared to the period when the rule was applied.

2. Conclusions

The Programme is performing well, it managed to address the risks and problems which occurred during the implementation. The strategy of awarding all the available funds through Calls for Proposals opened in the beginning of the programme cycle proved to be efficient in avoiding the risk of de-commitment and securing the achievement of the targets of the indicators.

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On the other hand, from a theoretical point of view, committing all the available funds at the beginning of the Programme is carrying certain risks, from several perspectives. While this approach brings unquestionable benefits, there are factors of risks which worth consideration (as experienced within current programme as well):

- o reducing the options in case the proposed projects do not meet the target values of the Programme indicators (reactions are needed, as it was the case, but they may be controversial)
- o reducing the possibility to draw conclusions / gather experiences from the ongoing projects, and to introduce corrective measures/improvements.

The theoretical alternative of awarding the funds through gradually opened Calls for Proposals would allow to organize the projects in a more inclusive manner, offering the possibility for more projects and a wider category of beneficiaries to contribute to the Programme's goals. Moreover, such an approach may provide the opportunity for both Programme and project stakeholders to test, fine-tune and adapt their actions in order to successfully implement the Programme. Furthermore, it may have a positive effect on the quality of the projects, since it will offer the possibility to better address the needs and challenges of the Programme area, ingesting new approaches, methods and instruments into the implementation process. However, this alternative remain a theoretical scenario, since the evaluators have recorded a strong and unanimous support for the current approach within the Programme management system and the local stakeholders.

The maximum 4 simultaneous projects/beneficiary rule managed to reduce the number of projects with terminated contacts because of the shortage of sufficient human resource and financial capacity at the level of beneficiaries. It also contributed, at least as a signal, to a more balanced distribution of the Programme funds. Nevertheless, one of the consequences of applying it is that there are several projects where the contracting procedure is pending, since one or more of the partners are falling under the rule. This is generating a risk of potentially good projects to be suspended, and organizations involved in partnerships with institutions/organizations subject to this rule may be banned from participating in the Programme. The rule is rather rigid, without imposing additional filters/conditions/parameters besides the number of projects. While more structured and equipped, beneficiaries are complaining for the impossibility to take part in more than 4 projects, in specific cases (smaller institutions and organizations) even four projects may represent an important administrative burden.

3. Recommendations

R.IM.06.1. The strategy of awarding all the available funds through Calls for Proposals in the beginning of Programme cycle proved to be efficient, thus it is likely and advisable to be continued during the next programming period as well. A contingency plan in this respect would be nevertheless recommended, analysing scenarios of consecutive, gradually opened Calls for Proposals, in order to address possible modifications of the implementation environment of the programme. Nevertheless, the approach of awarding the majority of the funds in the beginning of the implementation period should be maintained in this case as well, in order to avoid endangering the de-commitment targets. Moreover, the opening of the Calls should be concentrated on the first half of the Programme implementation period, so enough time is left for the projects to finalize their activities.

R.IM.06.2. Even if proven to be effective, the 4 projects/beneficiary rule should be refined, in order to guarantee that the purpose of a proportional application of financial and human resources for the funded

project is achieved in a fair and balanced way. The evaluators suggest the introduction of a variable ceiling, instead of a fixed one, based on 2/3 key parameters, adequately representing the implementation capacity of the applicants[6].

Evaluation Domain	Implementation – Programme level
E.IM.07	**What are the external factors that have led to the results of the programme?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:
- The Programme managed to attract as beneficiaries a high number of institutions and organizations, distributed all over the eligible area in a relatively balanced manner. Besides the high number of partners, a diversity can be observed in terms of thematic and administrative competences, including a series of high-level stakeholders, representing policy-makers at national level;
- The public procurement procedures had an important influence on the capacity of the projects to deliver their results, since due to the need to repeat them, the actual implementation was delayed, resulting in the extension of the project duration.

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:
- A recurring and quasi-general opinion that the public procurement procedures are having a serious effect on the results achieved by the projects;
- Among the factors influencing the efficiency of implementation, the interviewees were mentioning the average good quality of partnerships, based on well-established cooperation networks, as well as the involvement of specialized consultancy services in project management, which supported the beneficiaries in complying with the procedures that are specific to a cooperation programme.

2. Conclusions

The high number of organizations/institutions involved in the projects represents a particularly positive feature from the perspective of the overall objective of a cross-border cooperation programme. It suggests a good level of cooperation, both in intensity and in the thematic/geographical coverage.

The Programme proves successful in facilitating the establishment of well-functioning partnership. This is an important asset for the future, since it can support high-quality projects, capable to address the needs of the border area.

One factor which is having a considerable impact on the results of the Programme is represented by the delays occurred in the public procurement procedures.

3. Recommendations

R.IM.07.1. The maturity of the projects should be carefully checked during the selection procedures in the next programming period as well, reducing thus the risk associated with the public procurements. For example, during the selection procedures, score incentives could be awarded for projects with a higher

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[6] Possible parameters for this purpose may be represented by: the public/private nature of the applicant, history of unsuccessful project implementation (withdrawal, abandoning); demonstrated capacity of running multiple projects (also from different Programmes, based on past experience)

degree of preparedness of the technical documentation and related permits. Such an approach would increase the likeliness of good quality, ready-to-start projects being selected, while reducing the risks of encountering delays during the public procurement procedures (especially related to the technical documentation of the investments).

R.IM.07.2. Additionally, or alternatively, the Management system could consider to stimulate the beneficiaries in rapidly tackling the procurement organization and management during project implementation, by introducing obligatory mid-term procedural milestones, at least for some categories of projects. Procedural milestones would add up to the mid-term financial targets already established for all projects, and lead to financial corrections in case a minimal degree of implementation of the key procurement procedures are not reached.

3.3. Effectiveness/implementation – Project Level

Evaluation Domain	Implementation – Project level
E.IP.01	**To what extent have the objectives of the projects financed under this programme been achieved or are about to be achieved? What are the possible internal and external factors affecting the achievement of the objectives (e.g. human resources, financial capacity)?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- Based on the reported values of the project indicators, it can be stated that, in most of the cases, the projects managed to achieve their objectives.
- The lengthy and/or unsuccessful public procurement procedures are recurrent factors which jeopardize the timely achievement of the objectives.

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:

- The changes in the administrative environment in the two countries was mentioned as a factor which was endangering the achievement of the project objectives. The modifications of the administrative competences of certain beneficiaries were making impossible their participation in the projects, which had a negative influence on their implementation, since alternative solutions had to be identified.
- The lack of availability of good quality human resources, both related to project management, but, even more important, related to the specific expertise needed within the projects, is having a negative influence on the implementation of the projects. This is especially true in case of hard projects, where the partners are relying on external providers (technical plans, works), their contribution being essential for the achievement of the objectives.
- The complexity of the reporting procedures (including certification of costs) was indicated as being a factor which is influencing the efficiency of the implementation of the projects, since it is consuming important resources which are ultimately not invested into the achievement of the objectives.
- The interviewees were highlighting that the applied indicator system is not always able to grasp in full the achievements of the projects. This is particularly true when it comes to the quality of the results, since in most of the cases, the indicators are measuring quantities.

From the **survey** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- 68% out of the 49 respondents declared that they managed to reach until this phase of implementation at least 70% of their project indicators. This percentage is raising up to 78% if we consider the achievement of at least half of the indicators.
- Not surprisingly, the achievement of the indicators is seen more challenging for hard projects, than for the soft ones.
- Most of the respondents were mentioning human resources and financial capacity as the major factors which are influencing the performance of the project. Not lagging too far beyond, and to a certain extent connected to these, the public procurement procedures are considered as having an important impact on the capacity to deliver the results on time and in good quality.

2. Conclusions

The projects are on track in achieving their indicators and ultimately, their objectives.

Securing the sufficient number of qualified human resources for the implementation of the projects is a factor which has a decisive impact on the capacity to deliver the results.

3. Recommendations

R.IP.01.1. As a soft recommendation, the applicants should be encouraged to involve in the project implementation human resources with solid professional expertise, especially with regard to public procurement. Whenever this is not available in-house, resources can be allocated for procuring external support.

R.IP.01.2. The Programme management could provide support for the beneficiaries in interpreting and understanding the rules governing the implementation of the programme. As a theoretical example, a comprehensive list of FAQs could be established (similar to the Q&As published during the Calls for Proposals) which would provide clarifications focusing on different aspects of implementation (procurements, HR, reporting, modifications, etc.).

Evaluation Domain	Implementation – Project level
E.IP.02	**Are there any patterns that could be identified for successful project implementation?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The successful projects were those tackling very clearly identified, specific problems from the border area, within partnerships composed of institutions and organizations with solid professional background.
- Another category which managed to implement smoothly their projects, was the one composed of institutions and organizations which are experienced in working in international/ cross-border environments.

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:

- The interviewees were highlighting the importance of the existing networks which allow the establishment of well-functioning partnerships, facilitated also by the results of the previous

programme. An essential factor for the success of the project is considered the good collaboration with the partner organizations.

- The successful projects are based on carefully identified needs, which are present on both sides of the border.
- Another important element for the smooth implementation is the existence of a solid risk assessment, which provides alternatives in case unforeseen events occur and facilitates quick reaction.
- The interviewees were appreciating the role of the external consultancy companies, which are ensuring a solid support for dealing with the complex administration of a cooperation project.

From the **survey** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- The good cooperative environment is identified as the major ingredient for the successful projects by most of the respondents to the survey.
- The solid management skills are also considered as instrumental for a smooth project implementation.

2. Conclusions

The Programme area is relatively well covered by networks which facilitate good quality partnerships which are essential for carefully identifying common needs and challenges and for developing efficient cooperation mechanisms. The successful projects are based on a solid needs assessment, since addressing common challenges acts as a motivating factor for the partners, which are more committed to the implementation of the project.

A major condition for good projects is the existence of a well-established, functional and efficient cooperation in between partners, based on mutual trust.

The involvement of external providers of consultancy and technical assistance in project management is perceived as a factor contributing to the success of the implementation.

The level of maturity of the projects (including solid risk assessments) represents a key factor for successful implementation.

3. Recommendations

R.IP.02. Given that the existence of solid cooperation environment represents a valuable pre-requisite for successful projects, the Programme should continue to build on this asset in the future, since it creates the premises for further upgrading the level of cooperation in the programme area.

Evaluation Domain	Implementation – Project level
E.IP.03	**In case weak points (e.g. irregularities, budgetary corrections, breaches from the application of the Project Implementation Manual) have been detected within project implementation, could a pattern be identified in relation to their cause and their influence on the overall implementation of the programme's specific objectives?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- Incorrect public procurement procedures were the ground for declaring a considerable amount of reported costs as ineligible. The Programme was investing efforts in informing the partners about the rules which must be applied during the implementation, including the relevant public procurement rules. Nevertheless, there is a considerable amount of reported funds declared as ineligible because of mistakes related to these procedures.

2. Conclusions

The capacity of the beneficiaries to apply correctly the public procurement procedures is the major weakness in project implementation identified as a pattern, which leads in certain cases to irregularities and budgetary corrections.

3. Recommendations

R.IP.03. The recommendation is to continue providing support to the beneficiaries in dealing with the public procurement procedures. The information events organized in cooperation with the first level control bodies represent very good instruments in this sense, being recommended to insist on the applicable, relevant procedures.

Additionally, the programme may encourage the development of informal networks of experts dealing with public procurements at the level of project partners. Such platforms may represent a valuable resource during the implementation, since they could provide the beneficiaries access to verified approaches and solutions for problems of similar complexity occurring during the public procurement procedures. One method of such support would be to develop a forum section of the programme website, moderated by the communication managers, where the interested beneficiaries can exchange their experiences.

Evaluation Domain	Implementation – Project level
E.IP.04	**What are the major difficulties faced by the beneficiaries? What measures could be taken to overcome them?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The public procurement procedures were causing many problems to the beneficiaries, being one of the most important difficulty identified during the documental analysis;
- Another challenge revealed was the volatility of the partnerships (changes in the composition) and changes in the circumstances of the beneficiaries (different administrative competences) which causing serious delays in the implementation of several projects.

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:

- The interviewees were highlighting the language barriers which impose challenges for project generation and implementation, as well as the different legislative environment of the two countries, which makes it difficult to synchronize the documentation and the implementation steps.
- The changes in the national level legislation was mentioned as a factor which may impose challenges on the beneficiaries during the implementation. These are having a major influence on

the projects, since if the conditions existing at the moment of developing the project are modified, the new circumstances may affect the smooth realization of the activities.

- A recurring difficulty affecting the project implementation is related to the frequency and intensity of control procedures. The interviewees were suggesting a more proportionate approach during these activities.

From the **survey** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- Budgetary challenges are by far the most serious difficulties which were identified by the respondents. Within this category, the budgetary corrections imposed during implementation represented serious challenges for the beneficiaries.
- When it comes to the causes which generated the difficulties, the respondents were mentioning a large diversity of reasons. Interestingly enough, the poor quality of planning the project was identified in several cases, together with the complexity of the programme procedures, or the challenges imposed by the national legislation.

2. Conclusions

The heterogeneity of the socio-economic, administrative and legislative environments specific for territorial cooperation programmes proved to be in many cases challenging for the beneficiaries.

The control procedures are perceived as complex and too bureaucratic, with too many levels of programme governance involved.

The budgetary corrections are imposing serious challenges on the beneficiaries, especially related to securing the cash-flow of the projects.

3. Recommendations

R.IP.04. The Programme should seek solutions for further simplifying the control procedures and the implementation rules, as much as the relevant regulations and the principle of sound financial management allows for that. The wider usage of SCOs during the next programming period is expected to contribute to the reduction of the administrative difficulties encountered by the beneficiaries during the implementation.

Evaluation Domain	Implementation – Project level
E.IP.05	**Are the beneficiaries sufficiently supported to prepare projects and implement them?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The Programme organized a high number of events aiming to support the project generation and implementation.
- There is a set of templates available on the programme website, which represent a strong support for the projects - e.g. template for List of participants compliant with the GDPR rules.
- A comprehensive list of Q&A was available (more than 200), covering a wide range of topics (Eligibility – applicant, costs, actions, Annexes, application form, rules laid down in the Applicant's Guide).

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:

- The interviewees were highlighting the good communication with the Joint Secretariat. Moreover, they appreciated the support provided by the programme authorities in solving situations related to the withdrawal of partners from the implementation of projects.
- The training sessions in the application phase, as well as the caravans organized in the programme area by the management bodies in order to support the beneficiaries in dealing with the specific procedures, were highlighted as efficient measures of support provided by the Programme.

From the **survey** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- The respondents were declaring in 82% of the cases that they've received support during project preparation and implementation, half of them considering the support as very useful. Only 6% rated the support as (completely) not useful.

2. Conclusions

The Programme is providing a comprehensive set of support services to the applicants and beneficiaries. Whenever needed, the support proves to be efficient and appreciated by the beneficiaries

3. Recommendations

R.IP.05. The Programme should continue providing this support to the beneficiaries, encouraging effective communication in between different categories of stakeholders, since a good communication between the Programme management and the beneficiaries is essential for the successful implementation. A relationship based on mutual trust can help the identification of possible problems on time, and the implementation of proper measures and solutions.

3.4. Effectiveness/horizontal principles

Evaluation Domain	Effectiveness/horizontal principles
E.HP.01	**Are the actions taken to promote equality between men and women and to promote non-discrimination working? Are the actions taken to promote sustainable development working?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:
- In line with the EU regulations, the Project Implementation Manual lays down that: "projects should reflect the horizontal principles in their activities, outputs and results. Beneficiaries should find the most suitable ways to promote sustainable development, equal opportunities and non-discrimination, and equality between men and women, including via the approach they take and the solutions and outputs they develop".
- Project beneficiaries shall not only comply with horizontal principles, but they should apply them to achieve added value.
- This approach is implemented with specific questionnaires addressed to project beneficiaries. Each horizontal principle is treated separately. This means that – in principle – they are addressed with more accuracy by project beneficiaries.
- Interestingly, the questionnaires combine closed and open-ended questions in order to gather quantitative and explanatory information from respondents. This is in line with the overall approach of going behind the minimum requirements laid down by horizontal principles.

From the **interviews** with Programme management bodies, the main findings are:

- Compared to the 2007-2013 programming period, when the participants were asked to describe how they are going to tackle horizontal principles, **these principles became compulsory**.
- Interestingly, **extra points** have been introduced for the introduction of innovative ways for horizontal principles.
- For the current programme, the **website became accessible for people with disabilities**, which is an added value in the application of non-discrimination principle compared to the previous programming period.

From the **survey** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- Less than half of the respondents (43%) are highly satisfied by the measures and initiatives taken at programme level when it comes to the initiatives and measures to promote gender equality. Another significant part of the respondents is satisfied (37%) and fairly satisfied (8%).
- More than half of the respondents (57%) stated that the actions taken at ensuring sustainable development have been fully in line with their expectations, whereas a substantial minority considered these actions as fairly or barely effective.

Figure no.8   **Are you satisfied with the measures/initiatives taken at programme level to promote gender equality?**
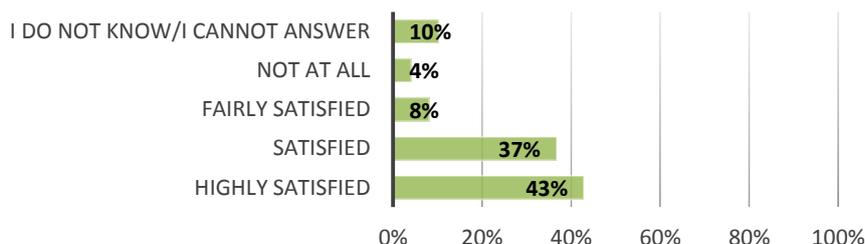
Figure no.9   **How do you consider the specific actions aimed at ensuring sustainable development?**
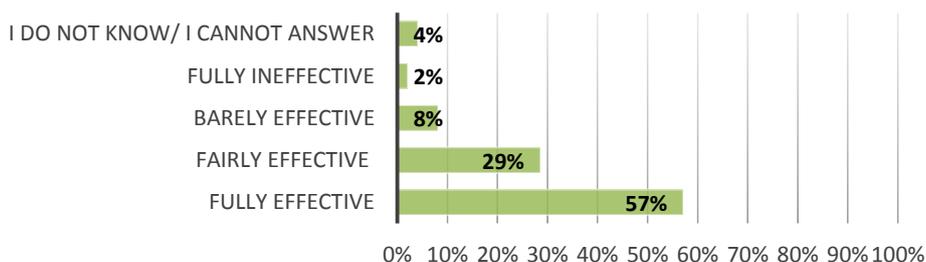
Almost half of the respondents (47%) take in high consideration the initiatives taken to promote non-discrimination whereas 33% of them are satisfied.

Figure no.10 **Are you satisfied with the measures/initiatives taken at programme level to promote non-discrimination?**

- Highly satisfied
- Satisfied
- Fairly satisfied
- Not at all
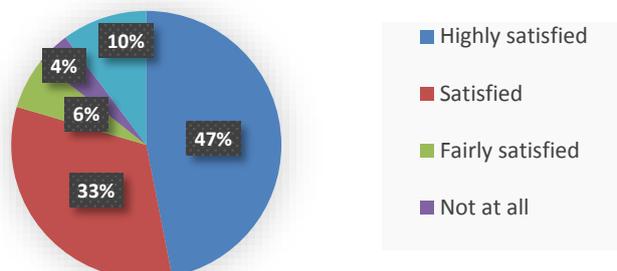
2. Conclusions

From the documental analysis, it is possible to identify a comprehensive and ambitious approach to horizontal principles. Each horizontal principle is treated separately which is – in principle – a good starting.

The horizontal principles are applied in a satisfactory way according to both programme management bodies and project beneficiaries. No major issues emerged, while those concerning sustainable development are perceived as being more effective.

These results mean that what it has been carried out at programming level is sufficient, but the next programming exercise should continue on the same wavelength and achieve even more.

3. Recommendations

No specific recommendations for this EQ.

Evaluation Domain	Effectiveness/horizontal principles
E.HP.02	**How do the financed projects contribute to the application of equal opportunities and non-discrimination horizontal principle, especially as regards the equality between men and women?**

1.Analysis

From the documental analysis, the main findings are:

- From an overview of on-going and concluded projects, it is possible to highlight:
  - Projects concerning educational activities (i.e. Collective Education, Young PM) apply horizontal principles by ensuring a substantial gender equality towards the targeted stakeholders' group
  - Projects in the field of institutional cooperation adopt the same approach, aiming at the involvement of a diverse audience
  - Infrastructural projects are less concerned by the application of Horizontal Principles

- Analysis at the project levels – taking into consideration a representative sample of projects[7] – points out that:

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[7] The research team analysed a sample of 20 projects, covering all TOs and SOs, different size of budget and line of intervention.

- The vast majority of the projects analyzed described in detail that all project activities comply with the principle of equal opportunity and non-discrimination regardless of race, gender.
- Several projects pointed out that horizontal and non-discriminatory principles are taken in consideration in the selection of subcontractors and project team members, religion, convictions, social category.
- A significant share of projects taken in consideration stated that they actively promote the inclusion of disadvantaged groups, and representatives from such groups will be given preference in benefiting from the projects' outcomes and activities. Moreover, websites and advertising materials will be accessible to all kind of persons and designed to be as user friendly as possible.
- Most of the projects taken into consideration stated that the gender equality principle is thoroughly respected and comply with the EU principles on equal treatment between men and women.
- A great majority of the projects highlighted that project management and internal decisions on hiring, salary, benefits, training, promotion, termination are not made on the base of gender.

From the **survey** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- The vast majority of the respondents commented about the high commitment carried out within their projects in support of the equal opportunities and non-discrimination principle. Many of the respondents mentioned best practices concerned the equality between man and women, but another significant part regarded people with disabilities and discriminated ethnic groups.

2. Conclusions

These results mean that what it has been carried out at programming level is sufficient, but the next programming exercise should continue on the same wavelength and achieve even more.

3. Recommendations

No specific recommendations for EQs.

3.5. Effectiveness and efficiency/programme management

Evaluation Domain	Effectiveness and efficiency/programme management
E.PM.01	**Did the applicant's guide and pack enable the potential beneficiaries to prepare well-written applications? Are the project assessment, selection and contracting systems efficient? Is the project monitoring system efficient?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:
- The section on *rules of the call for proposals* from applicant's guide offers detailed information on the eligibility criteria, concerning applicants, actions, and expenditures.
- The section *how to apply for funding* provides a clear and practical step-by-step explanation on how the applicants must fill the application form and its annexes.

- The section *evaluation and selection of applications* clearly informs the applicants on the procedures of project assessment and selection and on the complaint procedure for projects rejected from financing.
- Out of all the calls 855 projects were submitted, out of which 199 were selected (23%) and 168 contracted (20%); The high number of projects submitted compared to the contracted proves that the application process was quite accessible for applicants.
- The rules and procedures on selection, evaluation and contracting of projects are clear, efficient and transparent. The process complies with the European guidelines and rules.
- The functions of selection, evaluation and contracting are performed directly by the staff of the management bodies (MA and JS). In some cases, external experts have been hired to assess specific technical aspects of the applications, without however being responsible in assigning scores for assessment criteria.
- 3 calls were launched for the implementation of the Programme. While the first 2 calls were based on a single step, for the 3rd call a 2-steps approached was chosen, in order to select first projects based on an "expression of Interest". The launch of calls was clearly planned with the intention to anticipate as much as possible the contracting of all available resources.
- The periods going form the launch of the call to the signature of the financing contracts are the following:
  - Call 1: 10 months (soft projects); 23 months (hard projects);
  - Call 2: 19 months;
  - Call 3 (in 2 steps): 10 months.
- According to the Programme and the procedures in place at its level, the function of **evaluation** and project **assessment** is performed by JS, with MA/NA having the right to observe the evaluation process by designating persons to contribute to the process. The evaluation has two phases: one regarding the administrative and eligibility criteria, performed directly and solely by the JS and one regarding the technical evaluation, performed also by the JS, but with observers. The JS also examines, together with the Complaint Panel, the complaints coming as a result of the project selection process.
- The function of **selection** belongs to the Monitoring Committee, based on the list with project ranks delivered by the JS.
- The function of **contracting** is performed by the JS with the support of the MA. Thus, the JS drafts the financing contract for ERDF using a template provided by the MA.
- As regards the **monitoring function**, the JS checks the compliance of the reports with the project application. Thus, in order to check the achievement of the project purpose and objectives according to the financing terms and conditions, JS performs on-the-spot checks for verification of the information within the technical project reports.
- A separate structure from the JS performs the **FLC** for priority axis 1-5, respectively separate structure within the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration for technical assistance axis. The MA may perform checks by sample, on the operations already verified by the first level control, in order to make sure that the system is working correctly.
- The monitoring and reporting is performed exclusively in the eMS system at all levels (beneficiaries, FLC, JS, MA).

- The European Commission representatives appreciated positively the Programme in multiple public occasions (eg. Commisioner Cretu's visit in Ruse, 2016; Euractiv High Level Workshop 2018; EWRC ROBG Case study event, 2019).

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:

- Evaluation, assessment, selection and contracting procedures are the result of a progressive and continuous process of improvement of the management system, dating back to the start of the previous programming period; programme management bodies feel confident that much has been done to make processes rapid and effective.
- Application pack is generally seen as user friendly and simple: however, only few beneficiaries, the strongest from the institutional point of view, appear having elaborated the funding application without the support of specialized consultancy; there is evidence of consultancy firms having specialized on the Programme; their role in involving a wide number of potential beneficiaries, which normally could not afford to apply, is considered important: as a matter of fact, some potential beneficiaries are lacking time and human resources to take care directly of the application process, and they would probably resort to external consultancy irrespective of the level of user-friendliness of the process and the guidelines.
- During the current programming period, the decision of the programme's authorities was to mostly perform the projects' assessment in-house (JS). The external evaluators' solution was not successful in the previous programming period. The JS perceives the workload related to this task as acceptable.
- The selection of projects involving, as partner or leader, Bulgarian Regional Administrations, has been slowed down by the need of obtaining a specific National Governmental approval. This appears due to the status of Regional Administrations that don't have budgetary autonomy.
- For the pre-contracting phase, there is some reflection ongoing about possible improvements, as the length of this phase appears too long; in particular, performing pre-contractual on the spot visits took longer than expected.
- The MA is being proactively involved in the implementation and monitoring of the programme by taking specific measures in order to keep the deadlines and achieve the quality of projects.
- The MA mentioned as important the monitoring of the projects' results and their sustainability.
- Most stakeholders confirm that the Programme is a well written and a well-thought-out programme, with well written guides, covering all information needed for potential beneficiaries to prepare well-written applications.
- The project assessment, selection and contracting systems are generally well appreciated by stakeholders, first two clearly seen as efficient and effective. There are certain requests for improving the contracting process as it takes longer than the maximum 2 months stipulated in the Project Implementation Manual; and it is sometimes seen as troublesome and challenging.
- Good mechanisms are in place covering the monitoring system. eMS is considered to be a very useful, well developed instrument. It increased the level of simplification and transparency across the entire monitoring procedural workflow.

From the **survey** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- The applicant's guide and pack enabled the potential beneficiaries to prepare well-written applications to a good extent (57% considered it very useful/useful).

- In general, beneficiaries have not encountered difficulties in submitting project applications. The suggestions that came from the beneficiaries include: the chapter for indicators should be better developed and detailed, need for a Romanian version of the application pack, more transparency from Programme bodies.

- The respondents are satisfied with the project assessment system, as 53% of them stated that the system is very efficient/ efficient. No one stated in the survey that the system is inefficient. Similar results are available for project selection, as 53% of the beneficiaries are very satisfied/ satisfied with the selection system. Concerning project contracting, the majority of the respondents, 64%, consider the project contracting system as very efficient/ efficient. However, most respondents argued that the process could be accelerated, as it takes too much time in collecting documents and clarifications before contracting. It is suggested to introduce electronic signature and to avoid travels to JS.

- 61% of the respondents see eMS as user friendly. The most common improvement recommendations were related to: increasing eMS storage capacity, so that larger documents can be uploaded; allowing the selected options/information already filled in to be retained from one reporting period to another; a media section to be made available for reporting purposes (as the Programme requires pictures as deliverables for many activities, video and audio files etc.), improving page loading, too many revisions of the Project Implementation Manual etc.

- 69% of the respondents consider the monitoring system as very efficient/efficient.

From the **benchmark analysis (comparison analysis with Interreg V-A Programmes Romania-Hungary and Italy-Slovenia)**, the main findings are:

- While RO-BG Programme did not consider "strategic projects" as a specific target of its calls, based on the experience from 2007-2013 when strategic projects were financed under the programme, this was the case for both RO-HU ("flagships" projects) and IT-SI.

- The 2-step call procedure, adopted by RO-BG in the third call, is in place within RO-HU programme for the strategic project proposals (flagships) – phase 1 Concept Note & phase 2 Full Application.

- Differently from RO-BG, both RO-HU and IT-SI programmes have the project assessment organized in 3 phases, out of which one is dedicated to State aid assessment.

- Differently from RO-BG, both RO-HU and IT-SI programmes have involved external evaluators for the technical assessment of the project. IT-SI programme has simplified the way projects are being evaluated - each project is jointly assessed by a couple of external evaluators, issuing a single joint assessment on each project (instead of two assessments, one for each evaluator). This has been a valuable simplification avoiding the JS to make rather complex calculations and average for the scoring of any single criterion as happened in the past.

- While the RO-HU Programme works with eMS for project application, assessment and contracting, for IT-SI the electronic platform is different - FEG (Front-End Generalizzato) and requires all the documents submitted to be signed with digital signature.

- As regards the length of the process (from issuing the call to the signature of the first contract) – similarly to RO-BG both Programmes' assessment, selection and contracting processes are quite long, thus programme authorities are looking for measures of simplification, time reduction and shortening the lead-time for contracting procedure:
  - For IT-SI, the whole process takes approx. 10-11 months (for example, call for strategic projects published on February 2018 and subsidy contracts signed in December 2018);

-   For RO-HU, the entire process lasts more than 15 months (for example, first open call, for normal project proposals published at the end of January 2017 and contracts signed in April 2018).

- With reference to the precontracting visit, this is foreseen in the 2 Programmes as for RO-BG; however, while its scope is similar for RO-HU (During the on-site visits, the JS verifies the conformity of uploaded documents with the original ones), for IT-SI programme, the JS is mandated to perform face-to-face meetings which purpose is more of a coaching one, in order to clarify the assessors' observations to be fulfilled and to clarify the understanding of indicators and milestones. Before the signature of Subsidy Contracts, JS also collects the confirmation of projects financial plans with a detailed reporting timetable and spending forecast per each project partner.

2. Conclusions

The applicant's guide and pack are useful and tailored around the needs of the applicants, enabling them to submit good applications. However, for the less structured applicants, consultancy is still needed. The programme significantly progressed the project assessment and selection processes compared to the previous programming period. More important, the beneficiaries have high levels of confidence in the project selection and assessment processes and believe that project assessment, selection and contracting processes are efficient.

The choice of not fully externalising the assessment and selection phases paid well, mostly in terms of quality of the projects selected. Internal evaluators know the programme and the territory and are well prepared to assess applications. Excluding the episode of the first call for hard projects, duration of project assessment and selection phases are in line with similar programmes, showing relevant margins for improvement. In the current programme, they have not represented a problem because calls were issued in the first part of the programming period. The choice of going for a 2-step approach for the 3rd call, considering the high number of Expressions of interest received, was quite risky and time consuming.

The contracting procedure, also under the responsibility of JS, presents margins of improvement related to its overall duration. The importance of the precontracting on-the spot visits is more related to its relational and learning aspects than to its formal and time-consuming main task of verifying the correspondence of the documents submitted with the original ones.

The eMS system appears to have a high level of accessibility and user friendliness for programme beneficiaries and potential applicants. Nevertheless, some drawbacks related to its functionality were identified during the evaluation process, most of them concerning saving / storing information in the system from one reporting period to another. However, the introduction of eMS in the current programming period increased the level of simplification and transparency across the entire monitoring procedural workflow.

3. Recommendations

R.PM.01.1. The quality of the applicant's guide and pack should be maintained at the current level.

R.PM.01.2. The introduction of the use of the electronic signature for documents submitted in application phase should be considered, especially for the fact that it implies less need of control in the pre-contracting phase.

R.PM.01.3. The duration of the project assessment and selection process did not represent a major problem for programme implementation mainly because calls were issued in the first part of the programming

period. Should the MA strategy change in the future programme – for example to reserve some funding for projects generated in a later phase– a reduction of this duration should be strongly targeted.

R.PM.01.4. Related to the pre-contracting phase, a re-design of the role of the on-the spot visit should be considered: the utility of the visit, for all projects, is not under question: however it should be explicitly switched from the formal aspects (check of correspondence of original documents) to the information and learning purposes, similarly to the approach adopted in the IT-SI programme.

R.PM.01.5. As regards the eMS, dedicated workshops on the use of the online reporting system should be organized, targeting the beneficiaries.

R.PM.01.6. Tools and procedures must continue in the effort of reducing the administrative burden of applicants and beneficiaries, fine-tuning online procedures.

Evaluation Domain	Effectiveness and efficiency /programme management
E.PM.02	**Is the overall management and control system efficient?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The description of the management and control system follows correctly the EC regulations.
- The procedure set in place at programme level clearly points out the division of tasks – clear programme implementation structure - and the role played by each authority/body involved in the management and control system.
- Where the managing authority also carries out in addition the functions of the certifying authority, description on separation of functions is ensured.
- There is in place a clear specification of the functions and tasks carried out directly by each authority/body involved in the management and control system, with written procedures prepared for use by staff.

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:

- The management and control system of the programme benefits from its continuity through the years and programming periods. Looking at the management side, the continuity in time of the staff within the MA and JS is an important factor that made the system improve, building on negative and positive experience.
- The appointment of the Certifying Authority within the same Ministry as the MA was a huge progress that helped the programme authorities manage the programme in a more efficient way (the cash-flow has been easier to be ensured, the procedures simplified due to the electronic access to the applications).
- Several interviewees report cases of duplication of controls over the expenditure reported by project beneficiaries. This would be mainly related to the first level control function, which is performed by the country specific FLC units, but in many cases also repeated by the MA. This phenomenon is reported to be connected to recommendations expressed by the Audit Authority in occasion of a system audit performed on the programme of the previous programming period.
- Romanian stakeholders interviewed are globally satisfied with the overall management and control systems. On the other side, some Bulgarian respondents consider that projects are suffering from too many levels of control and monitoring. The auditing system is perceived as "over-controlling"

and auditors seen as hunting for the minimum irregularity. Thus, this approach led to frequent financial corrections which – in several cases – affected the implementation of projects.

From the **survey** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- The respondents are satisfied with the overall management and control system, as 69% of them stated that the system is very efficient/ efficient. No one stated in the survey that the system is inefficient.

2. Conclusions

The management and control structures of the programme have been properly identified; their tasks have been defined in accordance with the communitarian regulations. The adequacy of human resources and of administrative capacity to manage the programme have been verified, as well as the measures to reduce the administrative burden on beneficiaries.

The efficiency of the system takes advantage by the continuity of the staff of the MA and JS which allowed for a progressive improvement of all procedures, in the spirit of simplification progressively imposed by the EU regulations. The moving of the Certifying Authority in the same Ministry as the MA improved significantly the efficiency of the system.

The field research – interviews and survey - has revealed a perception that there would be duplications in the performing of the FLC function (national FLC bodies + MA). However, the description of the management and control system does not reveal, under the formal point of view, the presence of a systematic duplication of this function, with the MA only supposed to verify that the national FLC bodies have performed the controls. Unjustified and generalized duplications of controls are a source of inefficiency.

3. Recommendations

R.PM.02.1. It is recommended to maintain the current architecture of the management and control system, avoiding unnecessary changes for the future programming period.

R.PM.02.2. The FLC function should be organized – as it is currently - as to avoid any unnecessary duplication, in respect of the spirit of the FLC as established in the Regulations and in line with the "single audit" principle.

Moreover, it is recommended that the Programme Authorities monitor if the FLC practice is aligned with its description in the management and control system, as approved, and, if needed, agree on measures of avoiding unforeseen and unjustified duplications of the FLC function.

E.PM.03	
Evaluation Domain	Effectiveness and efficiency/programme management
EQ	**Did the use of simplified cost options prove to be efficient?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:
- The programme adopted Simplified Cost Option in line with the EC Guidance on Simplified Cost Options, Regulation 1303/2014, Regulation 1299/2014.

- The methodology for using flat-rate for office and administrative costs for Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme was approved by the MC in March 2015.
- The calculation basis for the application of the flat-rates for *Staff costs* and *Office and administrative costs* for INTERREG V-A Romania-Bulgaria consists in the following eligible direct costs: Travel and accommodation, External expertise and services, Equipment, Infrastructure and works.
- The Simplified Cost Options (SCO), consisting in flat rates, apply for the following categories of expenditure: Staff costs and Office and administrative costs. The methodology and flat rates applied suffered some changes during the 3 calls for proposals, as follows:
    - For applications submitted under the 1st and 2nd call for proposals, office and administrative expenditure is reimbursed as a flat rate of maximum 5% of direct costs for soft projects and maximum 1% of direct costs for hard projects;
    - For the 3rd call, office and administrative costs are reimbursed based on a fix flat rate of 4.5% for soft projects and 1% for hard projects applied to the calculation basis mentioned above;
    - For the 1st call for proposals, staff costs are reimbursed based on a fix flat rate of 15% for soft projects & 5% for hard projects;
    - For the 2nd call for proposals, the Programme bodies decided to grant the beneficiaries the possibility to opt for using flat rate for staff costs or to report based on real costs (the option belongs to the beneficiaries);
    - For the 3rd call for proposals, staff costs are reimbursed based on a fix flat rate of 15% for soft projects & 5% for hard projects, applied to the calculation basis mentioned above.

From the **interviews** with Programme bodies and stakeholders, the main findings are:

- In the next programming period, the MA intends to intensify the use of the simplified costs. Thus, the intention is to elaborate a methodology for establishing the simplified costs and the type of documents that should be received in order to prove the costs.
- The simplified cost options are generally seen very useful, it is a measure that reduces the administrative burden of beneficiaries for reporting, of the Joint Secretariat and of the other authorities for verification.
- Problems have been reported related to the understanding of SCO from the point of view of the Audit Authority whose approach still requires the documental proof of the expenditure corresponding to the amount reported.
- The local stakeholders and project beneficiaries consider that the use of simplified costs proved its efficiency and utility, giving good results in implementation. Also, their opinion is that it facilitates the way of reporting and verification at the level of the management and control structures.
- Some project beneficiaries chose to use simplified cost options in certain projects and direct costs in others.

From the **survey** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:
- The results of the survey for the beneficiaries indicate that the adoption of the simplified cost options proved to be a success. The respondents consider highly efficient the use of simplified cost options, as 61% of them stated that this measure is fully effective, while 24% considers it fairly effective. No one stated in the survey that the system is inefficient.

2. Conclusions

Building on the experience form the previous programming period, the MA has decided to adopt SCOs from the beginning of the programme implementation. The approach based on flat rates appears the most efficient, also considering the types of costs covered, and does not require a disproportionate elaboration effort.

Adequate differentiation was made between soft and hard projects, and rates were adjusted between calls. In one case (2nd call) considering the type of projects targeted, beneficiaries were given the possibility to opt for a reporting based on real cost. As frequently reported in other countries and programmes, problems have been reported with reference to the auditing of SCOs, as auditing procedures and approaches might have not yet been adapted to the introduction of SCOs in the EU legislation.

3. Recommendations

R.PM.03.1. In the perspective of the future programming period, it is recommended to confirm and possibly extend the use of SCO (e.g. by envisaging the possible use of lump sums to cover the preparation costs of other types of SCO to cover travel costs).

R.PM.03.2. It is however recommended to intensify consultation and exchange with the Audit Authority to a greater extent as previously done, in order to reach useful solutions and to prevent/solve any problems for beneficiaries and managing bodies due to the misalignment of audit procedures with the EU Regulations regarding SCOs.

Evaluation Domain	Effectiveness and efficiency/programme management
E.PM.04/E.PM.05	**Are there any specific factors hindering the effective use of Technical Assistance funds? Are there any steps in the use of Technical Assistance funds that could be made more efficient?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:
- The TA Priority Axis has an overall budget of 19.914.966,00 Euro. At the end of 2019, 84,4% of this amount (16,810 Million Euro) has been contracted to TA projects. Reported expenditure at the same date is 4,277 Million Euro (21,47%).
- TA is used for ensuring an effective and efficient programme implementation, mainly by supporting the operation of the Programme bodies (MA, NA, AA, JS and Ro FLC); 15 TA financing contracts have been implemented/under implementation; the majority of resources (around 57%) is allocated to the functioning of the JS (including staff costs).
- The TA interventions are funded and implemented based on the Multi-Annual Technical Assistance Strategy 2014-2020 (MATAS) approved by the Monitoring Committee in 2015.
- The MATAS:
  - Establishes the domains of TA interventions, based on an analysis of needs from the previous programming period;
  - Establishes the list of eligible applicants for the TA resources;
  - Establishes indicators of TA performance (but not the related targets);
  - Establishes the procedure to access TA funds, based on project applications.

- Based on MATAS, TA projects have a maximum duration of 3 years.
- Apart from establishing TA domains of intervention, MATAS does not establish any prioritization criteria among them, or a pre-allocation of resources. The system is based on annual collection of project proposals from eligible beneficiaries, and in case the budget is not sufficient, a negotiation among the applicants is foreseen.
- 57 events were organized by the Programme, out of which 10 were organized in 2018.
- The proposed Regulations for the 2021-2027 period set up a system of flat rate covering of the TA expenditure related to the programmes. This would spare MAs to report to the EC their TA related expenditure; as a consequence, any financial relationship between the MA and beneficiaries of TA would be allowed, including a generalized use of the SCOs.

From the **interviews**, the main findings are:

- Technical assistance plays an important role for objective: reducing administrative burden on beneficiaries, strengthening the administrative capacity of the public administrations involved in the management of the Funds, strengthening the capacity of the stakeholders, sharing good practices among the stakeholders, the effective functioning of the programme etc.
- Technical assistance is designed so as to fund activities that are necessary for the effective implementation and management of the programme, established in compliance with the operational/logistical needs of the programme bodies, but also according to the needs of programme beneficiaries.
- The full operation of the JS is covered by TA. JS staff and activities are covered by TA projects, with funding contracts established for a period of three years since 2018. Before 2018 projects were approved for a duration of only one year.
- One problem related to the use of TA is the ineligibility of expenditures for judicial defence in courts. As JS had to face contestation in Court for its selection and monitoring functions, it needs to pay lawyers and other judicial expenses. As these expenses are ineligible in ERDF, they are covered by using BRCT own budget.
- Some local stakeholders have remarked the need of TA to be designed more wisely, especially envisaging support for project beneficiaries in designing their project ideas. However, this type of intervention does not appear eligible as TA, unless limited to awareness raising.

From the **benchmark analysis (comparison analysis with Interreg V-A Programmes Romania-Hungary and Italy-Slovenia)**, the main findings are:

- TA costs covered by the three programmes are similar (salary costs, publicity events for beneficiaries and applicants, project evaluation, thematic workshops etc); while RO-HU & RO-BG programmes used the TA funds mostly to cover the running cost of the internal structures of the MA and JS, the IT-SI programme used TA funds to cover procurements of external TA services performed by consultancy companies.
- For Ro-Hu programme, the TA budget is similar: 22,7 mil. Euro. TA beneficiaries may submit annual or multiannual application forms, provided that the activities are in line with the MATAS and Programme documents.
- For IT-SI programme, the TA budget is of 6,4 mil. Euro allocated to 5 projects, as decided In the MC. In 2018, committed funds on PA 5 -Technical Assistance are 105,78% (€ 370.000, 00 of overbooking were additionally allocated by the Regional Administration of the Region Friuli Venezia Giulia) of

which 14,67% are spent. The Programme is using extensive external TA expertise to cover all domains of TA intervention.

2. Conclusions

TA funds play an important role in contributing to the achievement of programme's objectives. The implementation of the TA priority appears to progressing well. Even if targets are not established, physical indicators show important numbers.

As regards financial implementation, the rate of contracting is in line with the implementation period (15,6% of resources to be contracted for the last 3 years of implementation), while the rate of reported expenditure (21%) is extremely low, considering that the supported activities are performed on a continuous basis, and without the involvement of external service providers.

While there are no factors that can be considering "hindering" the effectiveness of TA expenditure, the procedure adopted for the implementation of MATAS presents several aspects of potential improvement.

In particular, considering that almost the full TA budget is used to cover operational costs of the management bodies, the approach of allocating resources based on annual "calls" for project applications is not efficient, time consuming and not aligned with the needs.

The very limited use of external expertise proved to be efficient, considering that the programme management led to significant performance results. All potential problems related to service procurement have been avoided. Evidently the programme can count on a significant internal expertise of the management bodies' staff.

The perspective of having TA expenditure for the 2021-2027 period covered with a flat rate in proportion with the rest of the programme expenditure, represent a great opportunity to make the allocation of TA resources simpler, faster and more efficient. As the reporting of expenditure will not be requested anymore, the use of SCOs could be generalized.

3. Recommendations

R.TA.1. A particular attention should be dedicated to improve the rate of reported expenditure for TA, which is unexpectedly low, considering the kind of projects and beneficiaries. Reporting obligations of beneficiaries might need to be intensified.

R.TA.2. It is recommended to improve the efficiency of strategic approach to TA expenditure, by including in MATAS a deeper recognition of TA needs, which should lead to an indicative pre-allocation of resources for the various domains/beneficiaries, covering the whole implementation period.

This would allow, at least for the institutional actors, the signature of financing contracts covering the full programming period.

Moreover, in case of a well built and ground MATAS, with pre-allocation of resources, the need of submission of TA project applications by institutional players could be even avoided, as financing contracts could be simply stemming from the elements already included in MATAS.

R.TA.3. In case of no major changes in TA needs and in the management and control system, it is recommended to continue to invest TA resources to cover the cost of internal staff, which proved to be prepared, efficient and effective in covering all programme management tasks.

R.TA.4. It is recommended to take full advantage from the new flat-rate regime of TA resources announced with the proposals of new Regulations, and adopt all possible simplifications in the financial relationships between MA and TA beneficiaries, including a generalized recourse to SCOs.

Evaluation Domain	Effectiveness and efficiency/programme management
E.PM.06	**Are the actions taken to reinforce the capacity of authorities and beneficiaries to administer and to use the EU funds under this programme efficient and relevant?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- According to annual implementation reports, building administrative capacity of programme bodies and beneficiaries has been a priority throughout the programming period: the programme bodies are continuously implementing measures to increase their capacity to operate, share and confront ideas, practices and methods; for example, for MA, JS and NA, dedicated seminars, trainings and technical meetings were organized, mostly related to eMS, programme and project implementation, communication and information etc.
- In 2017, the representatives of the MA and JS were involved in the implementation of the pilot project for the *Study on the implementation of the EU competency framework for the management and implementation of the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund* of the European Commission. The study aimed to provide concrete results that will further strengthen administrative capacity in national and regional administrations managing the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Cohesion Fund. Dedicated trainings for the MA staff were identified according to the pilot findings.
- The representatives of the MA have continued their activity in different working groups set up at Interact level.
- At applicants/beneficiaries' level, technical assistance has funded JS intense activity based on meetings, info days, trainings for beneficiaries regarding the use of the eMS system, tutorials, etc.

From the **interviews**, the main findings are:

- General perception of adequateness of administrative capacity and number of staff involved at programme management level.
- The management bodies staff has coupled the occasion of formal training with learning by doing, capitalizing on their experience throughout more programming periods.
- TA funds have been focused in contributing to reducing administrative burden and strengthening the administrative capacity.
- On the other hand, there is a need for actions/measures to tackle some problems encountered at all level in relation with public procurement procedures, such as:
    - working instruments to prepare the public procurement experts on how to better perform the procedures within the programme/projects;
    - there is a stringent need to consult on public procurement aspects even before the procedures are launched as beneficiaries are constantly facing several issues on public procurement procedures and the way to perform them.

- Some needs of intensification of capacity building are recorded with reference to audit bodies and procedures, which appear not to be fully aligned with the latest development of ESIF legislation – for example the introduction of SCOs.

From the **benchmark analysis**, the main findings are:

- Within the IT-SI programme, Priority axis 4 of the Programme is *specifically* focused on the pivotal role given to institutional cooperation, enhancing capacity building and cross-border governance (represents 20% of the ERDF overall allocation of the Programme).
- For Ro-Hu, similar capacity building initiatives as for RO-BG are in place. The use of TA funds mostly covers the following:
  - for programme structures: technical meetings, internal training sessions etc. for potential applicants, applicants and beneficiaries: help-desk activities, Info Days sessions, partner search forums, project generation sessions, eMS help desk meetings, information events, thematic workshops, training sessions
  - for beneficiaries: technical meetings/trainings on general rules of implementation, aspects regarding the eligibility of expenditures, including common errors and types of errors leading to irregularities or fraud suspicions, eMS webinars etc.

2. Conclusions

The programme authorities/bodies appear to have an advanced capacity to cover their tasks.

This is proven by the achievements of the Programme, by the scarce use of external expertise and by their involvement in international networks/EU level studies as pilot case. However, this is also due to their openness to continuous learning and the related use of TA resources for capacity building purposes.

Some uncovered needs of capacity building appear to be identified in audit bodies in relation with the latest developments of EU legislation (for example SCOs). From the beneficiaries' point of view, the actions undertaken for their project management capacities are seen as satisfactory. However, a constant and increasing support to face public procurement procedures is felt as needed.

3. Recommendations

R.PM.06.1. The current level of attention to capacity building for authorities and bodies of the management and control system should be maintained.

R.PM.06.2. Some additional specific actions of capacity building should be considered in the future with reference to audit bodies, whose approaches and procedures are not perceived as fully aligned with the latest evolution of EU legislation (ex. SCOs)

R.PM.06.3. A more technical and specific support for beneficiaries is needed, with reference to public procurement procedures. It is recommended to focus these initiatives on irregularity prevention, efficient planning, organization and implementation of the procurement procedure, and on raising the awareness of the most common problems related to procurement procedures and correspondent solutions.

Evaluation Domain	Effectiveness and efficiency/programme management
E.PM.07	**Is the right balance of relevant stakeholders involved in the implementation of the programme, including as regards their participation in the Monitoring Committee, from the point of view of applying the partnership principle?**

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The Monitoring Committee for the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme is a bilateral partnership structure, without legal personality, with a strategic decision-making role in the implementation of the Programme, according to the provisions of Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013, Regulation (EU) No 1301/2013.

- As regards its composition, the MC includes an overall number of 49 subjects from the national, regional and local administrations, NGOs, civil society and the academic environment. Of these subjects, 21 belong to the Romanian side and 28 are representatives from the Bulgarian Side. However, to keep a balanced representation of the 2 sides, for the academic members from Bulgaria there is the principle that only one member (of the total 7) has voting rights on rotation basis.

- Analysing the level of diversity among the members/observers appointed by each country, it can be noticed that MC includes representatives of Ministries responsible for specific areas of intervention defined on programme priority axes, representatives of eligible territorial administrations, as well as representatives of umbrella organizations of Development Agencies and Chambers of Commerce, from each side of the border. Nevertheless, the MC appears to have very few stakeholders representing civil society, in its social, economic, educational, cultural or touristic interests, as compared to the overwhelming presence of national, regional and local public authorities. Thus, from the total number of 21 Romanian members, only two are stakeholders that belong to other categories than public administration entities, respectively one NGO (Foundation Living Nature) and one institution of public utility (Constanta Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Shipping and Agriculture). On the Bulgarian side, the structure is quite different: out of 28 members, a number of 13 – 7 however expressing a joint vote on a rotation basis, as mentioned above - belong to other categories than public administration entities and come from very different backgrounds such as Employers' organization, Employees' organization, National Association of Municipalities, universities, NGOs – environment, business, regional development.

- The representatives of the civil society for the Romanian side have been selected through a competitive procedure, while on the Bulgarian side, the civil society representatives have been simply appointed.

From the **interviews**, the main findings are:

- The Programme beneficiaries and stakeholders state that there are sufficient relevant stakeholders involved in the MC.

- On the other hand, the presence of certain line Ministries is mentioned as important, for the appreciation of the consistency of certain important projects (ex. Ministry of Transport, Infrastructure and Communications, National Agency for Public Procurement etc).

- Active participation of MC members – different than programme authorities – sometimes represents a problem. Participation tends to be passive and discontinuous.

- The civil society in the programme area has a very low level of organization and representativeness of its interests. It has been difficult to find relevant stakeholders to involve in monitoring committee.

From the **benchmark analysis**, the main findings are:

For IT-SI Programme:

- The MC is composed by 14 full/voting members and members with an advisory/non-voting capacity. In comparison with RO-BG programme, both countries are represented as full voting members by public bodies only.

- The members with advisory/non-voting capacity are many, mostly the representatives from both countries of Chambers of Commerce, Worker trade Unions, Local Action Groups, Research institutions, NGOs, minorities etc.

For RO-HU Programme

- As regards its composition, the MC is made of 13 organizations on Romanian side – 11 public authorities and 2 RDAs and of 12 Hungarian organizations, out of which one NGO, Szèchenyi Programme Office Consulting Non-profit Limited Liability Company. The composition of the MC is similar to the RO-BG programme where also the public bodies are greater represented in number (88% out of the total members are public officials).

2. Conclusions

Partnership principle appears to be consistently applied along with the actions and decisions taken at programme level. The institutions and organizations selected in the MC have been engaged throughout the various implementation stages of the programme, including in monitoring, assessment of performance, and analysis of the annual implementation reports, through the periodic MC reunions.

However, the composition of the Monitoring Committee presents a very low level of representativeness of civil society and interests different than public authorities. The presence of line ministries is unproportionate, while the programme area is adequately represented only through its local authorities. Moreover, the involvement of civil society representatives is unbalanced between Romania (2 bodies) and Bulgaria (13, of which 7 expressing a joint vote).

3. Recommendations

R.PM.07. For the establishment of the MC for the next programming period, in line with the principle of partnership established by the Regulations, it is recommended to put efforts in trying to enlarge the representativeness of civil society of the programme area in the Monitoring Committee, while considering reducing the presence of central public administration bodies. The idea is that the programme MC should be an important engine for empowering programme area in taking part to strategic decisions related to its future.

Considering the structural lack of organized interests in the programme area, it is recommended to adopt less formalized procedures for the identification of the MC members: rather than a competitive procedure, the identification could go through an open consultation process on the territory, to be possibly brought on in parallel with public consultations for the drafting of the new Programme. The process should be as inclusive and stimulating as possible and seen as an action of support in the growth of the civil society in its capacity of representing itself.

Evaluation Domain	Effectiveness and efficiency/programme management
E.PM.08	**Are the actions taken in order to reduce the administrative burden on beneficiaries working? What can be improved?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- Improvements have been made since the previous programming period, around project submission/selection/contracting/ implementation/ and monitoring phases. The programme bodies have, compared to the previous programming period, introduced changes in the delivery mechanisms with a view to increasing the efficiency, simplification and harmonization of programme procedures and processes and to increasing the programme result orientation and programme effectiveness. Some examples below:
  - electronic data exchange system for all the communication among the MA, NA, JS, audit authority and the beneficiaries that will also be used for the management, monitoring and evaluation of the Programme was put in place interactive or pre-filled-in forms on the basis of previously inserted data, cross-checks of the filled-in information, automatic calculations and the possibility of beneficiaries to track on-line the status of their project proposal or of their reimbursement requests during project implementation;
  - use of simplified cost options;
  - the submission of documents not to be duplicated;
  - application form-already available on the Programme website www.interregrobg.eufor consultation, reimbursement claim, progress report, FLC checklists etc. elaborated and presented to beneficiaries, in order to create the premises for a sound implementation.
- Also, as emerged from the answers to the previous questions, compared to the previous programming exercise, a series of simplification measures were adopted by managing authorities with the purpose of reducing administrative burden on beneficiaries. The findings collected during the interviews with programme authorities as well as from the documental analysis suggest that a significant step forward is represented by the introduction of eMS and SCOs; the electronic monitoring system supports the beneficiaries throughout the entire project life cycle, starting from the application submission and continuing with the assessment, approval, contracting, implementation, monitoring and payment.

From the **interviews**, the main findings are:

- The findings collected during the interviews with programme authorities suggest also that a significant step forward is represented by the introduction of eMS, the electronic monitoring system which supports the beneficiaries throughout the entire project life cycle, starting from the application submission and continuing with the assessment, approval, contracting, implementation, monitoring and payment.
- Introducing simplified cost options represents a significant step in reducing administrative burden.
- Also, the call for proposals together with the guideline and the application procedure as such were improved, made even more clear and the interventions received were more focused.

From the **survey**, the main findings are:

- Analysing the data collected within the survey, it can be observed the fact that most of the programme beneficiaries are aware of several changes/tools implemented to facilitate beneficiaries' participation in Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme in order to reduce the administrative burden; among the most common changes or actions taken, the following are mentioned, in order of recurrence:
  - training and exchange of experiences;

- o simplification of monitoring, reporting and control;
- o use of simplified cost options;
- o guidance materials/manual and the modifications brought during the calls;
- o simplification and the use of online tools as the best way to simplify the project implementation together with user friendliness of eMS, as well as its level of accessibility and usefulness;
- o standardization of rules and procedures;
- o reduction of archiving requirements etc.
- Among the improvements suggested in the survey for further reducing the administrative burden on beneficiaries, the following are highlighted:
  - o simplification and the use of online tools (eMS) is seen as the best way to simplify the project implementation (the physical check of the documents should be done on most important documents, not for all the documents of a project; online FLC checks through upload of the documents in the eMS; reducing documents on paper and using eMS instead; online forms for declarations in the eMS for project submission etc);
  - o simplification and standardization of the public procurement procedures and rules within the Programme;
  - o a bigger advance payment would be a good option for smaller beneficiaries like NGOs;
  - o guidance materials/manual in partners language etc.

2. Conclusions

The programme has shown a constant attention towards simplification and reduction of administrative burden on beneficiaries. The adoption of SCOs and the progressive transfer of document exchange on digital platform are the most tangible achievements and they encounter the appreciation of the target group: data from the survey reveal that both eMS and SCO are appreciated by the beneficiaries for their benefits in terms of reduction of administrative burdens.

However, there is still room for improvement, mainly about completing the transition to a digitalized exchange of documents with applicant/beneficiaries and abandoning any need left of physical transmission of paper.

3. Recommendations

R.PM.08. The MA/JS should maintain the use of SCOs and exploring possible extensions of their use, also considering the adoption of lump sums to cover specific categories of costs. The MA/JS should continue working on the improvement of the eMS platform and building capacities of applicants and beneficiaries for its use in both the application and reporting process. A complete abandoning of the physical transmission of documents should be targeted by next programming period. The introduction of the digital signature of documents could be of great help. In order to support this approach, all support structures (for example, the legal unit, the control unit etc) should align to the electronic use and to the use of digital signature.

Evaluation Domain	Effectiveness and efficiency/programme management
E.PM.09	**Is the communication between beneficiaries and Joint Secretariat efficient? How about Antenna?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The managing bodies of the Programme, with the JS as the main player, maintain contact with the beneficiaries of the programme by providing through the programme website, social media tools, e-mail regular up-to-date information about the programme rules, documents, events and other relevant information important for the smoothly implementation of the programme. For example, in support of beneficiaries several tutorials have been organised (e-MS User assignment; e-MS – How to create partner report; e-MS Procurements), published on the website and Facebook page of the programme.

From the **interviews**, the main findings are:

- The level, frequency and scope of the communication between JS (including Antenna) and beneficiary is considered good. The beneficiaries appear to trust Joint Secretariat and its personnel. The communication follows both formal and informal channels. Not all the beneficiaries communicate with the JS to the same intensity.
- JS Antenna is not a separated body compared to the JS. It is part of the staff delegated in a premise in Bulgaria, without any autonomous organization. It is established with the purpose of ensuring better accessibility for the Bulgarian beneficiaries of the Programme to technical assistance provided by the JS.
- The level of communication between JS and beneficiaries is good.
- In the MA vision, the JS should be in the future evolving its role towards beneficiaries, and consequently the related communication and perception. JS should play a supporting and coaching role for project implementation, besides the monitoring and verification role which currently is perceived as the main one.
- All beneficiaries/stakeholders interviewed are very much satisfied with the level of communication with JS.
- The only problematic aspect underlined during the interviews refers to the geographical location of the Joint Secretariat which imposes certain logistic challenges for some project beneficiaries, especially from the Bulgarian side of the border.

From the **survey**, the main findings are:

- The communication activities implemented by the programme are considered very efficient/efficient for more than 93% of the respondents, a remarkable result.

2. Conclusions

The communication measures carried out between beneficiaries and Joint Secretariat/JS Antenna are in line with the foreseen measures and activities of the Communication Strategy and the Communication Plan. The quality and the scope of the communication have a very good perception among all the players. The MA intends however to evolve the system, by moving JS even closer to the needs of beneficiaries, by enhancing its support and guidance role.

The mission of the JS antenna is not clear. It does not have an organizational distinction from the JS, of which it is perceived simply as a detachment of staff and does not influence in a significant way the perception that beneficiaries have of JS.

3. Recommendations

R.PM.09.1. While every evolution of the intensity and quality of the communication between JS and beneficiaries, in the sense of a closer support to them, should be welcome, attention should be paid to capitalize on the very good communication and reciprocal perception achieved so far.

R.PM.09.2. It is recommended to rethink the mission of the antenna, which at the current moment appears unclear and scarcely perceivable. It would need some organizational visibility and autonomy.

Evaluation Domain	Effectiveness and efficiency/programme management
E.PM.10	**Do the anti-fraud activities carried out by the programme authorities lead to the achievement of the objectives set out in the Anti-fraud Strategy? Which actions were the most relevant and effective in managing the risk of fraud and dealing with fraudulent activity?**

1.Analysis

From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:
- The Anti-fraud strategy is developed in compliance with the EU legal provisions and sets out clearly the Programme management structure joint approach to managing the risk of fraud and dealing with all aspects of fraudulent activity that may occur at the Programme level.
- The Anti-fraud strategy took all the necessary measures, including legislative, regulatory and administrative measures, to protect the EU's financial interests, namely by preventing, detecting and correcting irregularities and fraud.
- The Programme management structures have set up a risk self-assessment team, responsible with carrying out the fraud assessment risk at Programme level.
- The MA, NA, JS, FLC staff participate to trainings on antifraud.
- An action plan for preventing and mitigation of the fraud risks identified at programme level is set in place and closely monitored.
- A comprehensive set of monitoring fiches has been elaborated for each fraud risk identified, including a risk assessment (based on probability and intensity) and related measures with a clear division of tasks.
- Using the whistler-blowing (public on the programme's website) system set up at programme level by the staff of the management structures, a total number of reported suspicions of irregularity: 186 by June 2019.

From the **interviews**, the main findings are:

- Based on the opinions of the key actors interviewed during the evaluation of the Programme implementation, no major or recurrent errors were encountered in relation with the first level control. The Programme authorities also referred to the training sessions conducted with beneficiaries, which represented an opportunity to raise awareness about the risk of fraud, including by addressing the topics regarding the risk of errors occurring in the preparation of payment documents.
- The MA clearly distinguishes between irregularities and fraud.

- The EC provides the MA with a tool to use in order to tackle the risk of fraud - the fraud risk self-assessment instrument. After the creation of this tool and its correspondent procedures and measures, the MA started to monitor the risk of fraud and to create individual fiches for each risk.
- Of all the cases of suspected fraud that were reported all were dismissed as not grounded by competent authorities, except for few that are currently still under examination.

2. Conclusions

The anti-fraud activities carried out by the Programme bodies led to the achievement of the objectives set out in the Anti-fraud Strategy considering the following:

- Through information sessions, trainings and dissemination of the relevant information related to preventing, detecting and correcting irregularities and fraud, the chances for individuals to commit fraud were minimized.
- The additional measures taken by the Programme authorities (Practical Guide on fraud for applicants and beneficiaries) raised awareness of the fraud risks and ensured that effective anti-fraud measures are in place.
- The human resources involved in the Programme management have sufficient know-how, competences and methodological tools to assess the fraud risk and predict risks in the area vulnerable to fraud. The staff also participates to dedicated seminars, trainings workshops, conferences and technical meetings tackling anti-fraud and related fields (integrity, conflict of interest, incompatibilities etc)
- Effective and proportionate anti-fraud measures were put in place as necessary.

3. Recommendations

R.PM.10. No relevant recommendation is considered needed on this aspect. However, an increase of the exchange of experience with MAs of similar Programmes can be considered to improve – in both directions – the relevance of the risk assessment.

4. General Conclusions

The present evaluation report has analysed the implementation of the Interreg V-A Romania- Bulgaria Programme, from its beginning till the end of 2019.

Our attention has focused on the relevance of the Programme, on the effectiveness of its implementation, on the effectiveness of its management system.

To quote the expression used by a representative of the management system of the Programme during one of our interviews, the Interreg V-A Romania Bulgaria is a "mature" programme.

This term summarizes well the perception that the team of evaluators had of the Programme throughout their work, and may also represent a great part of the conclusion of our evaluation work.

The programme is mature under the point of view of its relevance, because it is well rooted in the cross-border area, in a consistent continuity with the previous programming period and based on a well-grounded territorial analysis, that has the merit of having identified the key structural problems of the region, and is in a wide part still actual and valid at the start of a new programming period.

The programme is mature from the point of view of its implementation, not only because all resources have been contracted, mid-term performance targets achieved, and the final achievements look at reach, but also because its implementation strategy was clearly based on wisdom and prudence, capitalizing on the lessons learnt in the past programming periods.

The programme is mature from the point of view of its management, with processes and procedures which are currently the result of a stratification of gradual improvements resulting from the experience of two full programming periods, during which the key staff of the management system bodies has had the great advantage of remaining practically unchanged.

Overall, this maturity has allowed the Programme to perform very well in terms of physical and financial achievements, overcoming with success some blockings that affected the first period of implementation.

The programme performances are to a great extent due to an energetic strategic management with very clear priority values: full absorption of resources and smooth achievement of Programme targets. These values inspired strong choices, to some extent uncommon – like the establishing of mid-term absorption targets at project level – but consistent with the vision and effective.

Despite these strong choices, the Programme and its management have shown, in all our field work sources, important levels of acknowledgement by local stakeholders and beneficiaries. This is probably due to the achievements reached in terms of progressive simplification and reduction of administrative burdens. The generalized adoption of simplified cost options and the progressive digitalization of the procedures are two important steps taken in this programming period.

Of course maturity does not mean perfection, and our analysis has also shown several aspects that can and should be improved in the next programming period; the most significant ones are related to margins for achieving further efficiency in the programme management system (for example in the use of Technical assistance funds, in completing the adoption of means of electronic communication) or to the improvement of the representativeness of the civil society in the monitoring committee.

Overall, the Programme is well performing, and its main challenge is represented by the need of keeping the current level of performance in the ever changing regulatory, political and economic frameworks waiting behind the corner.

5. Annexes

Annex 1 – Link between findings and analysis

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
RE.01	Is the programme still relevant in the policy context and is the use of funds properly addressing the current development needs of beneficiaries in the programme area?	The Territorial Analysis of the Romania – Bulgaria Cross Border Area identifies several development challenges pointing out that the regions included in the area are amongst the poorest in Europe (with average GDP below national and European averages). The resulting needs analysis lists a set of priorities in the following areas: 1. Transport and accessibility, especially as far as TEN-T connection and Danube navigability, in the border region 2. Unemployment and labour market mobility, especially in terms of long-term unemployment, brain drain and skills mismatch 3. Heritage and tourism untapped potential due to lack of cross-border coordination and investments 4. Climate change and environmental risk are not efficiently tackled in the region. The cross-border area remains significantly exposed to natural disasters – such as flood. Likewise, the transition towards renewable energy is significantly lagging to the EU standards. 5. Institutional capacity and governance need to be improved as the cross-border	There is a substantial consensus on the current relevance of the program amongst interviewees. Some pointed out that the scope for cross-border cooperation and program intervention is huge. Beneficiaries are already preparing for the following programming period. This view is shared by another interviewee who also adds that the needs identified ex-ante remains key challenges for the region. In particular, one interviewee underlined how the bottom up approach adopted during the need's assessment has proven to be particularly successful and it supported programme	The vast majority of respondents (83%) confirm current programme relevance. The remaining share (17%) considers the programme as partly relevant. These findings confirm what described above, namely that the Programme is still perceived as highly relevant. Interestingly enough, no respondents consider that the programme is out of context.		The key conclusion is that the programme remains largely relevant to the area. The reason for this success is twofold: on one hand, the development needs are structural, thus unlikely to change in the short term. On the other hand, the needs assessment proved to be effective and accurate – which is a perquisite for ensuring relevance.	RE.01. Given the substantial positive outcome of the evaluation question, the key recommendation is to keep the same approach, perhaps expanding the role of local stakeholders in the needs assessment consultation.

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
		communities' lack of an integrated governance level. Data from EUROSTAT and the National Institute of Statistics for Romania and Bulgaria show that the regions involved in the Programme remain amongst the top 10 least developed regions in Europe. Indeed, regional data concerning GDP per capita at NUTS 3 level display that it corresponds to only one fourth of the real GDP per capita at EU level in 2019	relevance in the long term.				
RE.02	To what extent does the programme add benefits to the cross-border region development and how has the programme complemented and enhanced the effect of other related policies or strategies?	The Programme has set up relevant mechanisms to stimulate the cross-border added value of the projects: the assessment grid for the selection of the projects includes a specific criterion to praise, beyond the minimum required, the degree of cross-border added value (i.e. "Q10 - Is the project generating a clear and tangible cross-border impact?"). In fact, an analysis of the project assessment grids show that this evaluation criterion has been sometimes analysed briefly, and with the recurrent use of standardized assessment, repeated, with the same wording, for more projects. At project level, it is possible to notice a general and significant synergy and relevance with EU policies/strategies and other programmes. This is due to efficient selection grids for projects – which are tailored by SO.	There is substantial complementarity with regional and national policies. No interviewees highlighted any contradictions between policies objectives. Considering the limited size of the budget, one interviewee pointed out that synergies and coherence with other policies or interventions is essential. There is consensus in considering that the current Programme has improved its attention to cross-border added value compared to the previous period; several examples were	The key evidence emerging from the survey is that project beneficiaries perceive significant synergies with other relevant policies. Indeed, the large majority (83%) of respondents declared that there are full synergies with other policies while 17% found that these synergies are only partial. The findings largely confirm the evidence		According to all sources, the Programme presents a good degree of complementarity and synergies with other policies, at EU and national level.	R.RE.02. The current level of complementarity and synergy with EU/national policies and programmes should be maintained also for the next programming period. As the 2021-2027 programme is written at a beginning of a period of incertitude and difficult changes/challenges at EU level, it is suggested to set-up a monitoring of the external coherence of the future programme also after its first approval, so that adaptations can be adopted rapidly in case of context changes. RE.02.2. The current level of attention to the cross-border added value should be maintained for the next programme. The use of the cross-border added value

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
			mentioned of projects with an intense and permanent joint added value, going above and beyond the project results on each side of the border. However, some respondents considers that there is still room to improve, by further reducing the phenomenon of the "mirroring projects".	emerging from interviews. According to respondents, the Programme has significant complementarity with other policies implemented in the area. Indeed, three quarters of interviewees pointed out that there is a very or high complementarity while only the 25% perceive it to a lesser extent.			related assessment criterion in the project assessment grid could be made more effective by establishing more clearly how the proposed added value leads to a certain score. For instance, the scoring system should prioritize projects which prove that the cross-border intervention is the most suitable for tackling a given need.
RE.03	What is the programme contribution to the implementation of EU Strategy for the Danube River objectives?	The EU Strategy for the Danube River and the Interreg RO BG share several common objectives (such as environmental risks, shipping and transport, socio-economic development). Thus, there is high potentiality for combined contribution – at least from an ex-ante perspective.	According to one interviewee, **185 projects** financed under the Programme **contribute to the Danube strategy** – which shows that exists several common goals.	Findings from interviews are largely confirmed by the result of the survey. Indeed, almost nine respondents out of ten either "strongly agree" or "agree" that the Programme contribute to EU Strategy for Danube River objectives. According to 14% of respondents,		The straightforward conclusion is that the Programme significantly contribute to the EU Strategy for Danube and there are not major conflicts between local and EU objectives.	RE.03. The only (soft) recommendation would mainly concerns the better alignment between the EU Strategy and Programme regarding the cross-border navigability of Danube river (i.e. crossing ferries).

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
				there is a neutral contribution while only a very tiny minority (2%) disagree.			
RE.04	Are there more stringent uncovered needs that could be tackled under a future cross-border programme?		One interviewee pointed out that interventions in the field of transport should be improved and extended. However, given the budget, it is quite unlikely that major infrastructural investments will be financed. Similarly, another interviewee pointed out the need of implementing "integrated projects" with a "strategic component" which will be able to cover different sectors (i.e. transport plus tourism). There is also room for improvement in the field of Maritime investment, as some potential benefits remain untapped. Transport and employment should be the areas to prioritize in the next programming	Findings from the survey largely confirm what highlighted in the interviews. The vast majority of respondents believe that funds properly match the development needs. This is mostly due to programme relevance and points out that uncovered needs – albeit existing – are quite limited.		All the analysed sources highlight the fact that very few needs are not covered by the programme. On the other hand, this is relatively normal considering the varsity of needs in the region.	RE.04. In line with recommendations for current relevance, a more direct involvement of local stakeholders as well as an extended bottom approach may be useful to understand and subsequently assess uncovered needs.

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
			period. While they agree that meaningful progress has been made, there is a large scope for interventions.				
E.IM.01	Which is the actual implementation progress regarding each specific objective? Which is the achievement level of programme indicators? Which is the achievement level of performance framework indicators as compared to the milestones for 2018?	The analysis of the implementation of the programme revealed solid progresses registered to date. By the beginning of 2020, all of the available funds were contracted and 53% of the contracted projects finalized their implementation. The contracted ERDF amounts of the finalized projects make up approx. 23.57% of the overall contracted ERDF funds. In line with the current status of the implementation of the projects, the level of achievement of the output indicators in case of Specific Objective 1.1 is ranging in between 6% and 25%, while the result indicator is currently achieved in a proportion of 15.29%. Only 2 soft projects finalized their implementation under this Specific Objective, there are still 15 projects ongoing, all of them having important infrastructural components, relevant from the perspective of the indicator for the milestone values for 2018 in case of the performance framework indicators, these were reached in most of the cases. The only exception is "number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency system", where the achieved value was 6 out of the targeted 10.	The interviewees were considering the progresses registered in the implementation to date as being satisfactory, especially to what the indicators are concerned. Most of the target values of the indicators are already achieved, and the prediction based on the commitments of the projects is showing that there will be no major problems related to the achievement of the targets at the end of the programme. The milestone values of the indicators for 2018 were achieved in most of the cases The proactive attitude of the Programme management was highlighted, which was needed for reaching this level of achievements. After the first Call for Proposals, when it			It can be stated that the programme implementation is progressing well in terms of reaching the specific objectives and related indicators. Considering the timeframe of the Programme implementation, the reported values of the indicators are suggesting that the specific objectives are on track. Moreover, the Programme managed to achieve a high percentage of finalized projects, especially if compared to other Cooperation Programmes.	IM.01.1. There is a considerable number of projects which are still under implementation. Considering that their committed contribution to the achievement of the specific objectives and indicators of the programme will be instrumental for the overall success of the programme, it is recommended to continue to closely monitor and support their implementation. IM.01.2. For the next cooperation programme, it would be recommendable to further refine the system which would enable early warning in case the achievement of the values of the indicators is endangered

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
			became obvious that the projects which were initially proposed for selection would not have brought the required contribution to the programme indicators, the Managing Authority intervened and proposed corrective measures.				
E.IM.02	What stands behind the over-reaching of certain output indicators?	In case of 5 output indicators the target values for the end of the Programme were already reached at the time of delivering the evaluation. These situations occurred within PA2 and PA4, the two Priority Axes with the highest number of finalized projects. The over-achievements are important in some cases – CO 09 (583%), which is expected to further increase, or CO 46 (454 %), in the other three cases ranging in between 135% and 324%. If the total commitments of the contracted projects are analysed, a high level of over-achievement is expected in case of certain output indicators by the end of Programme implementation. Most of the indicators with outstanding values are the common output indicators: CO 16 – 2400%; CO 09 – 2800%, CO 20 – 336%, CO 21 – 336%, CO 44 – 540%, and CO 46 – 493%, with only one programme specific output indicator concerned 8e.1 – 324%	The interviewees were highlighting that the over-achievement is due to the opportunities which were identified by the beneficiaries in the Cooperation Programme. There is a technical reason behind the high values of the indicators, since the IT was indicated that the methodology to calculate the target values for the output indicators was mainly based on extrapolation from achievements of the past programming period.			The outstanding overachievements are mainly related to Common Output indicators. In some cases (CO 09 or CO 44) they are already massively overachieved. While the situation does not necessarily have a negative impact on the current programme, analysing the causes may contribute to improve the quality of the new Cooperation Programme. The overachievement can be attributed to more factors, as duplication of the values of the indicators tackling total population, changes in market conditions, good quality of the events and	IM.02.1. It is advisable for the future Programme to avoid whenever possible the usage of those Common Output indicators or programme specific indicators which are relating to the entire population of a given area, since they are suitable to generate duplications when aggregating the data, leading to inaccurate results IM.02.2. The methodology for estimating the target values of the output indicators for the upcoming programme should not rely exclusively on the previous experiences but should incorporate a careful analysis and interpretation of the current trends as well as the characteristics of the interventions/projects

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
						their promotion, involvement of strategic stakeholders, or the changes in the general socio-economic environment.	expected to be supported within the programme.
E.IM.03	Will the progress to date (given the current trends) lead to the achievement of target values of programme and performance framework indicators?	Based on the analysis of the values committed by the contracted projects, the achievement of the indicators (both output and result) is ensured, with one exception. The Programme is still having a number of projects which are under contracting procedure, or on the reserve list due to the 4 simultaneous projects/beneficiary rule. In case the already contracted projects will face serious challenges, endangering their implementation, the projects in the pipeline may bring their contribution to the full achievement of the indicators. There is one result indicator where progresses were not made until 2018 (% of the RO-BG CBC Danube length and Black Sea where safety of the navigation has been improved by joint actions). However, there is a project under implementation which will cover the entire length of Danube, boosting the achievement of the indicator to 100%, by 2021.	The interviewees were confident that the target values of the programme and performance framework indicators will be achieved by the end of the implementation period. In case of indicators which are counting the entire population of a certain geographical area, the programme management adopted calculation methods to avoid duplication at programme level (population of a certain area is counted only once).			The target values of the programme and performance indicator framework indicators will be most probably achieved. Based on the values of the output indicators committed by the contracted projects, there is ground to conclude that the Programme will attain its objectives. In case certain project will face serious difficulties, the Programme is prepared with a series of projects on reserve list, which may complement the achievement of the indicators. The only indicator which will not be achieved in full is output indicator 7c.1 In case of result indicators, the target values will be considerably over-achieved. One of the reasons for this situation	IM.03. There is no specific additional recommendation related to the output indicators, since based on the current information, the target values will be achieved in most of the cases. In case of result indicators, the recommendation is similar to the one referring to the over-achievement of the output indicators (see previous EQ). Namely to avoid whenever possible the usage of indicators expressed in total population during the next programming exercise, but also to take into consideration the current trends when setting the target values.

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator	Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking	Conclusions	Recommendations
					is the definition of the measurement units as number of general population	
E.IM.04	**In case of non-achievement risk for the performance framework indicators target values, which are the main causes and how can they be addressed?**	The only relevant case is the output indicator 5b.2 "Number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response", where the milestone values for 2018 were achieved only at a rate of 60%. The Programme took the necessary measures to address this situation, including a new Call for Proposals launched in 2017, which was focusing on the indicators which were not secured at that very moment. As a consequence, based on the commitments of the newly contracted projects, the final target for 2023 in case of this performance indicator will be reached.			One of the performance framework indicators did not manage to reach its milestone target. The Programme managed to react quickly and to take the necessary measures in order to secure that the target value for 2023 will be reached. The milestone was not reached since the projects from the first calls for proposals were not covering the required number of joint partnerships. Nevertheless, the object of this indicator (the joint partnerships concluded in the programme area) were covering the values of all the other indicators of the Specific Objective, quantified in the overall population served by these instruments. Hence, even if this specific indicator was not reach, the overall Specific Objective was secured.	IM.04. The Programme should closely monitor the performance of the projects which are delivering the output indicator 5b.2, since based on the committed values, the forecast is that the final value will cover 110% of the indicator (55 partnerships). Therefore, if problems are occurring in the implementation of the projects contributing to this indicator, its achievement may be at risk.

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
E.IM.05	**Is there any de-commitment expected to take place at programme level? What specific actions should be taken in order to minimize the de-commitment risk?**	Based on the data available in the eMS system, there are more than 79 million Euro ERDF certified by the first level control. Based on the latest data available, the requests for payment sent to the Commission were in the amount of 65,05 million Euros, which is well above the de-commitment target at the end of 2019 (20,05 million Euros cumulated at Programme level for 2018 and 2019). Furthermore, there is a significant number of projects under implementation. The total amount of ERDF funds which is still to be presented for certification to the FLC by the projects which will finalize their implementation in 2020 or after, is of more than 140 million Euro ERDF The upcoming absorption targets are gradually increasing from 34,07 million in 2020, to 36,55 million Euros in 2023.	The interviewees highlighted that the Programme management bodies are performing a close monitoring of the spending performance of the projects, as well as of their spending forecasts. Based on the outcomes of this exercise, there are no risks of decommitment foreseen			The risk of decommitment is considered as being low. Based on the forecast performed with the support of the data available in the eMS system (see Annex 2), the ERDF amounts already certified and the ERDF parts of the projects which will finalize their implementation from 2020 onwards, will cover the decommitment targets Besides the initial goal of securing the achievement of the indicators, the decision of over-contracting will have a positive effect on further reducing the risk of decommitment at programme level. This action is balancing to a certain extent the risks of delays generated by the public procurements in case of large projects	IM.05.1. The Programme should closely follow-up on the public procurement procedures initiated in case of the hard projects, since these will have an important effect on avoiding decommitment at project level. IM.05.2. Over-contracting proved to be efficient in minimizing the risk of de-commitment. The approach shaould be continued during the next programme as well, the exact rate being determined based on the final figures of the current programme – when 15% was applied.
E.IM.06		Based on the experiences of the previous Programme, the managing structures introduced new instruments and procedures in order to address risks materialized in the past, as well as to prevent and mitigate recurring problems from the past programme. These included	The interviews revealed that the highest risk perceived by the Programme management bodies is related to the public			The Programme is performing well, it managed to address the risks and problems which occurred during the implementation. The	IM.06.1. The strategy of awarding all the available funds through Calls for Proposals in the beginning of Programme cycle proved to be efficient, thus it is likely

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator	Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
	Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
Are there any risks/unsolved problems hindering the smooth programme implementation that are emerging both in programming period 2007-2013 and the current one and what could be done, in order to mitigate/ overcome them?	financial corrections for non-achievement of mid-term spending targets by the partners or limiting the number of projects under implementation for a given beneficiary. The measures were meant to address the risk of decommitment and to ensure that the beneficiaries do possess sufficient human and financial resources needed for successfully implementing their projects.	procurement procedures, which can be very lengthy and, in many cases, may have to be repeated. This generates delays in the implementation of the projects, and ultimately are having a negative effect on the smooth implementation of the programme. Some of the interviewees were questioning the benefits of applying the 4 simultaneous projects/beneficiary rule. Based on the information provided during the interviews, the rule was introduced based on the experiences of the previous			strategy of awarding all the available funds through Calls for Proposals opened in the beginning of the programme cycle proved to be efficient in avoiding the risk of de-commitment and securing the achievement of the targets of the indicators.	and advisable to be continued during the next programming period as well. A contingency plan in this respect would be nevertheless recommended, analysing scenarios of consecutive, gradually opened Calls for Proposals, in order to address possible modifications of the implementation environment of the programme. Nevertheless, the approach of awarding the majority of the funds in the beginning of the implementation period shall be maintained in this case as well, in order to avoid endangering the de-commitment targets. Moreover, the opening of the Calls shall be concentrated on the first half of the Programme implementation period, so enough time is left for the project to finalize their activities. IM.06.2 Even if proven to be effective, the 4 projects/beneficiary rule should be refined, in order to guarantee that the purpose of a proportional application of financial and human resources for the funded project is achieved in a fair

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
							and balanced way. The evaluators suggest the introduction of a variable ceiling, instead of a fixed one, based on 2/3 key parameters, adequately representing the implementation capacity of the applicants.
E.IM.07	What are the external factors that have led to the results of the programme?	The Programme managed to attract as beneficiaries a high number of institutions and organizations, distributed all over the eligible area in a relatively balanced manner. Besides the high number of partners, a diversity can be observed in terms of thematic and administrative competences, including a series of high-level stakeholders, representing policy-makers at national level; The public procurement procedures had an important influence on the capacity of the projects to deliver their results, since due to the need to repeat them, the actual implementation was delayed, resulting in the extension of the project duration	A recurring and quasi-general opinion that the public procurement procedures are having a serious effect on the results achieved by the projects; Among the factors influencing the efficiency of implementation, the interviewees were mentioning the average good quality of partnerships, based on well-established cooperation networks, as well as the involvement of specialized consultancy services in project management, which supported the beneficiaries in complying with the procedures that are specific to a cooperation programme			The high number of organizations/institutions involved in the projects represents a particularly positive feature from the perspective of the overall objective of a cross-border cooperation programme. It suggests a good level of cooperation, both in intensity and in the thematic/geographical coverage. The Programme proves successful in facilitating the establishment of well-functioning partnership. This is an important asset for the future, since it can support high-quality projects, capable to address the needs of the border area. One factor which is having a considerable impact on the results of the Programme is	IM.07.1. The maturity of the projects should be carefully checked during the selection procedures in the next programming period as well, reducing thus the risk associated with the public procurements. For example, during the selection procedures, score incentives could be awarded for projects with a higher degree of preparedness of the technical documentation and related permits. Such an approach would increase the likeliness of good quality, ready-to-start projects being selected, while reducing the risks of encountering delays during the public procurement procedures (especially related to the technical documentation of the investments). IM.07.2. Additionally, or alternatively, the

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
						represented by the delays occurred in the public procurement procedures	Management system could consider to stimulate the beneficiaries in rapidly tackling the procurement organization and management during project implementation, by introducing obligatory mid-term procedural milestones, at least for some categories of projects. Procedural milestones would add up to the mid-term financial targets already established for all projects, and lead to financial corrections in case a minimal degree of implementation of the key procurement procedures are not reached.
E.IP.01	To what extent have the objectives of the projects financed under this programme been achieved or are about to be achieved? What are the possible internal and external factors affecting the achievement of the objectives (e.g. human resources, financial capacity)?	Based on the reported values of the project indicators, it can be stated that, in most of the cases, the projects managed to achieve their objectives; The lengthy and/or unsuccessful public procurement procedures are recurrent factors which jeopardize the timely achievement of the objectives.	The changes in the administrative environment in the two countries was mentioned as a factor which was endangering the achievement of the project objectives. The modifications of the administrative competences of certain beneficiaries were making impossible their participation in the projects, which had a negative influence on their implementation,	68% out of the 49 respondents declared that they managed to reach until this phase of implementation at least 70% of their project indicators. This percentage is raising up to 78% if we consider the achievement of at least half of the indicators. Most of the respondents were mentioning		The projects are on track in achieving their indicators and ultimately, their objectives. Securing the sufficient number of qualified human resources for the implementation of the projects is a factor which has a decisive impact on the capacity to deliver the results.	IP.01.1. As a soft recommendation, the applicants should be encouraged to involve in the project implementation human resources with solid professional expertise, especially with regard to public procurement. Whenever this is not available in-house, resources can be allocated for procuring external support. IP.01.2. The Programme management could provide support for the beneficiaries

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
			since alternative solutions had to be identified; The interviewees were highlighting that the applied indicator system is not always able to grasp in full the achievements of the projects. This is particularly true when it comes to the quality of the results, since in most of the cases, the indicators are measuring quantities.	human resources and financial capacity as the major factors which are influencing the performance of the project. Not lagging too far beyond, and to a certain extent connected to these, the public procurement procedures are considered as having an important impact on the capacity to deliver the results on time and in good quality.			in interpreting and understanding the rules governing the implementation of the programme. As a theoretical example, a comprehensive list of FAQs could be established (similar to the Q&As published during the Calls for Proposals) which would provide clarifications focusing on different aspects of implementation (procurements, HR, reporting, modifications, etc).
E.IP.02	Are there any patterns that could be identified for successful project implementation?	The successful projects were those tackling very clearly identified, specific problems from the border area, within partnerships composed of institutions and organizations with solid professional background;	The interviewees were highlighting the importance of the existing networks which allow the establishment of well-functioning partnerships, facilitated also by the results of the previous programme. An essential factor for the success of the project is considered the good collaboration	The good cooperative environment is identified as the major ingredient for the successful projects by most of the respondents to the survey; The solid management skills are also considered as		A major condition for good projects is the existence of a well-established, functional and efficient cooperation in between partners, based on mutual trust. The involvement of external providers of consultancy and technical assistance in project management is perceived as a factor contributing to	IP.02. Given that the existence of solid cooperation environment represents a valuable pre-requisite for successful projects, the Programme should continue to build on this asset in the future, since it creates the premises for further upgrading the level of cooperation in the programme area.

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator	Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
	Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
		with the partner organizations. The interviewees were appreciating the role of the external consultancy companies, which are ensuring a solid support for dealing with the complex administration of a cooperation project.	instrumental for a smooth project implementation.		the success of the implementation. The level of maturity of the projects (including solid risk assessments) represents a key factor for successful implementation.	
E.IP.03	**In case weak points (e.g. irregularities, budgetary corrections, breaches from the application of the Project Implementation Manual) have been detected within project implementation, could a pattern be identified in relation to their cause and their influence on the overall implementation of the programme's specific objectives?**	Incorrect public procurement procedures were the ground for declaring a considerable amount of reported costs as ineligible. The Programme was investing efforts in informing the partners about the rules which must be applied during the implementation, including the relevant public procurement rules. Nevertheless, there is a considerable amount of reported funds declared as ineligible because of mistakes related to these procedures				The capacity of the beneficiaries to apply correctly the public procurement procedures is the major weakness in project implementation identified as a pattern, which leads in certain cases to irregularities and budgetary corrections.	IP.03. The recommendation is to continue providing support to the beneficiaries in dealing with the public procurement procedures. The information events organized in cooperation with the first level control bodies represent very good instruments in this sense, being recommended to insist on the applicable, relevant procedures. Additionally, the programme may encourage the development of informal networks of experts dealing with public procurements at the level of project partners. Such platforms may represent a valuable resource during the implementation, since they could provide the beneficiaries access to verified approaches and solutions for problems of

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
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							similar complexity occurring during the public procurement procedures. One method of such support would be to develop a forum section of the programme website, moderated by the communication managers, where the interested beneficiaries can exchange their experiences.
E.IP.04	What are the major difficulties faced by the beneficiaries? What measures could be taken to overcome them?	The public procurement procedures were causing many problems to the beneficiaries, being one of the most important difficulty identified during the documental analysis; Another challenge revealed was the volatility of the partnerships (changes in the composition) and changes in the circumstances of the beneficiaries (different administrative competences) which causing serious delays in the implementation of several projects.	The interviewees were highlighting the language barriers which impose challenges for project generation and implementation, as well as the different legislative environment of the two countries, which makes it difficult to synchronize the documentation and the implementation steps. A recurring difficulty affecting the project implementation is related to the frequency and intensity of control procedures. The interviewees were suggesting a more proportionate approach during these activities.	Budgetary challenges are by far the most serious difficulties which were identified by the respondents. Within this category, the budgetary corrections imposed during implementation represented serious challenges for the beneficiaries. When it comes to the causes which generated the difficulties, the respondents were mentioning a large diversity of		The heterogeneity of the socio-economic, administrative and legislative environments specific for territorial cooperation programmes proved to be in many cases challenging for the beneficiaries. The control procedures are perceived as complex and too bureaucratic, with too many levels of programme governance involved. The budgetary corrections are imposing serious challenges on the beneficiaries, especially related to securing the cash-flow of the projects.	IP.04. The Programme should seek solutions for further simplifying the control procedures and the implementation rules, as much as the relevant regulations and the principle of sound financial management allows for that. The wider usage of SCOs during the next programming period is expected to contribute to the reduction of the administrative difficulties encountered by the beneficiaries during the implementation.

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
				reasons. Interestingly enough, the poor quality of planning the project was identified in several cases, together with the complexity of the programme procedures, or the challenges imposed by the national legislation.			
E.IP.05	Are the beneficiaries sufficiently supported to prepare projects and implement them?	The Programme organized a high number of events aiming to support the project generation and implementation. There is a set of templates available on the programme website, which represent a strong support for the projects - e.g. template for List of participants compliant with the GDPR rules. A comprehensive list of Q&A was available (more than 200), covering a wide range of topics (Eligibility – applicant, costs, actions, Annexes, application form, rules laid down in the Applicant's Guide).	The interviewees were highlighting the good communication with the Joint Secretariat. Moreover, they appreciated the support provided by the programme authorities in solving situations related to the withdrawal of partners from the implementation of projects.	The respondents were declaring in 82% of the cases that they've received support during project preparation and implementation, half of them considering the support as very useful. Only 6% rated the support as (completely) not useful.		The Programme is providing a comprehensive set of support services to the applicants and beneficiaries. Whenever needed, the support proves to be efficient and appreciated by the beneficiaries	IP.05. The Programme should continue providing this support to the beneficiaries, encouraging effective communication in between different categories of stakeholders, since a good communication between the Programme management and the beneficiaries is essential for the successful implementation. A relationship based on mutual trust can help the identification of possible problems on time, and the implementation of proper measures and solutions.

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N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
E.HP.01	**Are the actions taken to promote equality between men and women and to promote non-discrimination working? Are the actions taken to promote sustainable development working?**	• In line with the EU regulations, the Project Implementation Manual lays down that: "projects should reflect the horizontal principles in their activities, outputs and results. Beneficiaries should find the most suitable ways to promote sustainable development, equal opportunities and non-discrimination, and equality between men and women, including via the approach they take and the solutions and outputs they develop". • Project beneficiaries shall not only comply with horizontal principles, but they should apply them to achieve added value. • This approach is implemented with specific questionnaires addressed to project beneficiaries. Each horizontal principle is treated separately. This means that – in principle – they are addressed with more accuracy by project beneficiaries. • Interestingly, the questionnaires combine closed and open-ended questions in order to gather quantitative and explanatory information from respondents. This is in line with the overall approach of going behind the minimum requirements laid down by horizontal principles.	Compared to the 2007-2013 programming period, when the participants were asked to describe how they are going to tackle horizontal principles, **these principles became compulsory**. Interestingly, **extra points** have been introduced for the introduction of innovative ways for horizontal principles. For the current programme, the **website became accessible for people with disabilities**, which is an added value in the application of non-discrimination principle compared to the previous programming period.	Less than half of the respondents (43%) are highly satisfied by the measures and initiatives taken at programme level when it comes to the initiatives and measures to promote gender equality. Another significant part of the respondents is satisfied (37%) and fairly satisfied (8%). More than half of the respondents (57%) stated that the actions taken at ensuring sustainable development have been fully in line with their expectations, whereas a substantial minority considered		From the documental analysis, it is possible to identify a comprehensive and ambitious approach to horizontal principles. Each horizontal principle is treated separately which is – in principle – a good starting. The horizontal principles are applied in a satisfactory way according to both programme management bodies and project beneficiaries. No major issues emerged, while those concerning sustainable development are perceived as being more effective. These results mean that what it has been carried out at programming level is sufficient, but the next programming exercise should continue on the same wavelength and achieve even more.	No specific recommendations for this EQ.

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
				these actions as fairly or barely effective.			
E.HP.02	**How do the financed projects contribute to the application of equal opportunities and non-discrimination horizontal principle, especially as regards the equality between men and women?**	Projects concerning educational activities (i.e. Collective Education, Young PM) apply horizontal principles by ensuring a substantial gender equality towards the targeted stakeholders' group Projects in the field of institutional cooperation adopt the same approach, aiming at the involvement of a diverse audience Infrastructural projects are less concerned by the application of Horizontal Principles		The vast majority of the respondents commented about the high commitment carried out within their projects in support of the equal opportunities and non-discrimination principle. Many of the respondents mentioned best practices concerned the equality between man and women, but another significant part regarded people with disabilities and discriminated ethnic groups.		These results mean that what it has been carried out at programming level is sufficient, but the next programming exercise should continue on the same wavelength and achieve even more.	No specific recommendations for this EQ.
E.PM.01		Out of all the calls 855 projects were submitted, out of which 199 were selected (23%) and 168 contracted (20%); The high	Application pack is generally seen as user friendly and simple:	The applicant's guide and pack enabled the	While RO-BG Programme did not consider	The applicant's guide and pack are useful and tailored around the needs	PM.01.1. The quality of the applicant's guide and pack

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator	Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
	Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
Did the applicant's guide and pack enable the potential beneficiaries to prepare well-written applications? Are the project assessment, selection and contracting systems efficient? Is the project monitoring system efficient?	number of projects submitted compared to the contracted proves that the application process was quite accessible for applicants.

The rules and procedures on selection, evaluation and contracting of projects are clear, efficient and transparent. The process complies with the European guidelines and rules. The functions of selection, evaluation and contracting are performed directly by the staff of the management bodies (MA and JS) without any outsourcing to external support. In some cases, external experts have been hired to assess specific technical aspects of the applications, without however being responsible in assigning scores for assessment criteria | however, only few beneficiaries, the strongest from the institutional point of view, appear having elaborated the funding application without the support of specialized consultancy; there is evidence of consultancy firms having specialized on the Programme; their role in involving a wide number of potential beneficiaries, which normally could not afford to apply, is considered important: as a matter of fact, some potential beneficiaries are lacking time and human resources to take care directly of the application process, and they would probably resort to external consultancy irrespective of the level of user-friendliness of the process and the guidelines. Most stakeholders confirm that the Programme is a well written and a well-thought-out | potential beneficiaries to prepare well-written applications to a good extent (57% considered it very useful/useful). In general, beneficiaries have not encountered difficulties in submitting project applications. The suggestions that came from the beneficiaries include: the chapter for indicators should be better developed and detailed, need for a Romanian version of the application pack, more transparency from Programme bodies. The respondents are satisfied with the project assessment system, as 53% of them stated that | "strategic projects" as a specific target of its calls, based on the experience from 2007-2013 when strategic projects were financed under the programme, this was the case for both RO-HU ("flagships" projects) and IT-SI. The 2-step call procedure, adopted by RO-BG in the third call, is in place within RO-HU programme for the strategic project proposals (flagships) – phase 1 Concept Note & phase 2 Full Application. Differently from RO-BG, both RO-HU and IT-SI programmes | of the applicants, enabling them to submit good applications. However, for the less structured applicants, consultancy is still needed. The programme significantly progressed the project assessment and selection processes compared to the previous programming period. More important, the beneficiaries have high levels of confidence in the project selection and assessment processes and believe that project assessment, selection and contracting processes are efficient The eMS system appears to have a high level of accessibility and user friendliness for programme beneficiaries and potential applicants | should be maintained at the current level. PM.01.2. The introduction of the use of the electronic signature for documents submitted in application phase should be considered, especially for the fact that it implies less need of control in the pre-contracting phase.

PM.01.3. The duration of the project assessment and selection process did not represent a major problem for programme implementation mainly because calls were issued in the first part of the programming period. Should the MA strategy change in the future programme – for example to reserve some funding for projects generated in a later phase– a reduction of this duration should be strongly targeted.

PM.01.4. Related to the pre-contracting phase, a re-design of the role of the on-the spot visit should be considered: the utility of the visit, for all projects, is not under question: however it should be explicitly switched from |

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator	Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking	Conclusions	Recommendations
	programme, with well written guides, covering all information needed for potential beneficiaries to prepare well-written applications. The project assessment, selection and contracting systems are generally well appreciated by stakeholders, first two clearly seen as efficient and effective. There are certain requests for improving the contracting process as it takes longer than the maximum 2 months stipulated in the Project Implementation Manual; and it is sometimes seen as troublesome and challenging. Good mechanisms are in place covering the monitoring system. eMS is considered to be a very useful, well developed instrument. It increased the level of simplification and transparency across the	the system is very efficient/ efficient. No one stated in the survey that the system is inefficient 61% of the respondents see eMS as user friendly. The most common improvement recommendations were related to: increasing eMS storage capacity, so that larger documents can be uploaded; allowing the selected options/informati on already filled in to be retained from one reporting period to another; a media section to be made available for reporting purposes (as the Programme requires pictures as deliverables for many activities, video and audio	have the project assessment organized in 3 phases, out of which one is dedicated to State aid assessment.		the formal aspects (check of correspondence of original documents) to the information and learning purposes, similarly to the approach adopted in the IT-SI programme. PM.01.5. As regards the eMS, dedicated workshops on the use of the online reporting system should be organized, targeting the beneficiaries. PM.01.6. Tools and procedures must continue in the effort of reducing the administrative burden of applicants and beneficiaries, fine-tuning online procedures.

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator	Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking	Conclusions	Recommendations
		entire monitoring procedural workflow..	files etc.), improving page loading, too many revisions of the Project Implementation Manual etc.			
E.PM.02 Is the overall management and control system efficient?	The description of the management and control system follows correctly the EC regulations. The procedure set in place at programme level clearly points out the division of tasks – clear programme implementation structure - and the role played by each authority/body involved in the management and control system	Romanian stakeholders interviewed are globally satisfied with the overall management and control systems. On the other side, some Bulgarian respondent consider that projects are suffering from too many levels of control and monitoring. The auditing system is perceived as "over-controlling", and auditors seen as hunting for the minimum irregularity. Thus, this approach led to frequent financial corrections which – in several cases – affected the implementation of projects. Several interviewees report cases of duplication of controls over the expenditure reported by project beneficiaries. This	The respondents are satisfied with the overall management and control system, as 69% of them stated that the system is very efficient/ efficient. No one stated in the survey that the system is inefficient.		The management and control structures of the programme have been properly identified, their tasks have been defined in accordance with the communitarian regulations. The adequacy of human resources and of administrative capacity to manage the programme have been verified, as well as the measures to reduce the administrative burden on beneficiaries. The field research – interviews and survey - has revealed a perception that there would be duplications in the performing of the FLC function (national FLC bodies + MA). However, the description of the management and control system does not reveal, under the formal point of view, the presence of a	PM.02.1. It is recommended to maintain the current architecture of the management and control system, avoiding unnecessary changes for the future programming period. PM.02.2. The FLC function should be organized – as it is currently - as to avoid any unnecessary duplication, in respect of the spirit of the FLC as established in the. Moreover, it is recommended that the Programme Authorities monitor if the FLC practice is aligned with its description in the management and control system, as approved, and, if needed, agree on measures of avoiding unforeseen and unjustified duplications of the FLC function.

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
			would be mainly related to the first level control function, which is performed by the country specific FLC units, but in many cases also repeated by the MA. This phenomenon is reported to be connected to recommendations expressed by the Audit Authority in occasion of a system audit performed on the programme of the previous programming period.			systematic duplication of this function, with the MA only supposed to verify that the national FLC bodies have performed the controls. Unjustified and generalized duplications of controls are not only a source of inefficiency, but also a violation of the "single audit" principle established in the Regulations.	
E.PM.03	Did the use of simplified cost options prove to be efficient?	The programme adopted Simplified Cost Option in line with the EC Guidance on Simplified Cost Options, Regulation 1303/2014, Regulation 1303/2014, regulation 1299/2014. The methodology for using flat-rate for office and administrative costs for the Programme was approved by the MC in March 2015. The Simplified Cost Options (SCO), consisting in flat rates, apply for the following categories of expenditure: Staff costs and Office and administrative costs. The methodology and flat rates applies suffered some changes during the 3 calls for proposals	The local stakeholders and project beneficiaries consider that the use of simplified costs proved its efficiency and utility, giving good results in implementation. Also, their opinion is that it facilitates the way of reporting and verification at the level of management and control structures. Some project beneficiaries chose to use simplified cost options in certain	The results of the survey for the beneficiaries indicate that the adoption of the simplified cost options proved to be a success. The respondents consider highly efficient the use of simplified cost options, as 61% of them stated that this measure is fully effective, while 24% considers it fairly		The approach based on flat rates appears the most efficient, also considering the types of costs covered, and does not require a disproportionate elaboration effort. As frequently reported in other countries and programmes, problems have been reported with reference to the auditing of SCOs, as auditing procedures and approaches might have not yet been adapted to	PM.03.1. In the perspective of the future programming period, it is recommended to confirm and possibly extend the use of SCO (e.g. by envisaging the possible use of lump sums to cover the preparation costs of other types of SCO to cover travel costs). PM.03.2. It is however recommended to activate/intensify consultation and exchange with the Audit Authority to a greater extent as previously done, in order to reach useful

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
			projects and direct costs in other.	effective. No one stated in the survey that the system is inefficient.		the introduction of SCOs in the EU legislation	solutions and to prevent/solve any problems for beneficiaries and managing bodies due to the misalignment of audit procedures with the EU Regulations regarding SCOs.
E.PM.04. E.PM.05.	**Are there any specific factors hindering the effective use of Technical Assistance funds?** **Are there any steps in the use of Technical Assistance funds that could be made more efficient?**	The TA Priority Axis has an overall budget of 19.914.966,00 Euro. At the end of 2019, 842019, 84,4% of this amount (16,810 Million Euro) has been contracted to TA projects. Reported expenditure at the same date is 4,277 Million Euro (21, 47%). TA is used for ensuring an effective and efficient programme implementation, mainly by supporting the operation of the Programme bodies (MA, NA, AA, JS and Ro FLC); 15 TA financing contracts have been implemented/under implementation; the majority of resources (around 57%) is allocated to the functioning of the JS (including staff costs). The TA interventions are funded and implemented based on the Multi-Annual Technical Assistance Strategy 2014-2020 (MATAS) approved by the Monitoring Committee in 2015.	One problem related to the use of TA is the ineligibility of expenditures for judicial defence in courts. As JS had to face contestation in Court for its selection and monitoring functions, it needs to pay lawyers and other judicial expenses. As these expenses are ineligible in ERDF, they are covered by using BRCT own budget. Some local stakeholders have remarked the need of TA to be designed more wisely, especially envisaging support for project beneficiaries in designing their project ideas. However, this type of intervention does not appear eligible as TA, unless limited to awareness raising.		TA costs covered by the three programmes are similar (salary costs, publicity events for beneficiaries and applicants, project evaluation, thematic workshops etc); while RO-HU & RO-BG programmes used the TA funds mostly to cover the running cost of the internal structures of the MA and JS, the IT-SI programme used TA funds to cover procurements of external TA	TA funds play an important role in contributing to the achievement of programme's objectives. The implementation of the TA priority appears to progressing well. Even if targets are not established, physical indicators show important numbers. As regards financial implementation, the rate of contracting is in line with the implementation period (15,6% of resources to be contracted for the last 3 years of implementation), while the rate of reported expenditure (21%) is extremely low, considering that the supported activities are performed on a continuous basis, and without the involvement	TA.1. A particular attention should be dedicated to improve the rate of reported expenditure for TA TA.2 It is recommended to improve the efficiency of strategic approach to TA expenditure, by including in MATAS a deeper recognition of TA needs. TA.3. In case of no major changes in TA needs and in the management and control system, it is recommended to continue to invest TA resources to cover the cost of internal staff, which proved to be prepared, efficient and effective in covering all programme management tasks. TA.4. It is recommended to take full advantage from the new flat-rate regime of TA resources announced with

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
					services performed by consultancy companies. For Ro-Hu programme, the TA budget is similar: 22,7 mil. Euro. TA beneficiaries may submit annual or multiannual application forms, provided that the activities are in line with the MATAS and Programme documents.	of external service providers.	the proposals of new Regulations, and adopt all possible simplifications in the financial relationships between MA and TA beneficiaries, including a generalized recourse to SCOs.
E.PM.06	Are the actions taken to reinforce the capacity of	According to annual implementation reports, building administrative capacity of programme bodies and beneficiaries has been a priority throughout the programming period: the programme bodies are continuously implementing measures to increase their capacity to operate, share and confront ideas, practices and methods; for example, for MA, JS and NA, dedicated seminars, trainings and technical meetings were organized, mostly related to eMS, programme and project implementation, communication and information etc.	General perception of adequateness of administrative capacity and number of staff involved at programme management level; Some needs of intensification of capacity building are recorded with reference to audit bodies and procedures, which appear not to be fully aligned with the latest development of EU ESI		With IT-SI Programme, PA 4 is specifically focused on the pivotal role given to institutional cooperation, enhancing capacity building and CBC governance (20% of allocation)	The programme authorities/bodies appear to have an advanced capacity to cover their tasks. This is proven by the achievements of the Programme, by the scarce use of external expertise and by their involvement in international networks/EU level studies as pilot case. However, this is also due to their openness to continuous	PM.06.1. The current level of attention to capacity building for authorities and bodies of the management and control system should be maintained. PM.06.2. Some additional specific actions of capacity building should be considered in the future with reference to audit bodies, whose approaches and procedures are not perceived as fully aligned with the latest

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
	authorities and beneficiaries to administer and to use the EU funds under this programme efficient and relevant?		Funds legislation – for example the introduction of SCOs		For RO-HU, similar capacity building initiatives as for RO-BG are in place.	learning and the related use of TA resources for capacity building purposes. Some uncovered needs of capacity building appear to be identified in audit bodies in relation with the latest developments of EU legislation (for example SCOs). Form the beneficiaries' point of view, the actions undertaken for their project management capacities are seen as satisfactory. However, a constant and increasing support to face public procurement procedures is felt as needed.	evolution of EU legislation (ex. SCOs) PM.06.3. A more technical and specific support for beneficiaries is needed, with reference to public procurement procedures. It is recommended to focus these initiatives on irregularity prevention, efficient planning, organization and implementation of the procurement procedure, and on raising the awareness of the most common problems related to procurement procedures and correspondent solutions.
E.PM.07		The Monitoring Committee for the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme is a bilateral partnership structure, without legal personality, with a strategic decision-making role in the implementation of the Programme, according to the provisions of Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013, Regulation (EU) No 1301/2013; As regards its composition, the MC includes an overall number of 49 subjects from the national, regional and local administrations, NGOs, civil society and the academic environment. Of these	The Programme beneficiaries and stakeholders state that there are sufficient relevant stakeholders involved in the MC. On the other hand, the presence of certain line Ministries is mentioned as important, for the appreciation of the consistency of certain important projects (ex. Min of Transport, Infrastructure and		As for IT-SI Programme, the members with advisory/non-voting capacity are many, mostly the representatives from both countries of Chambers of Commerce, Worker trade Unions, Local Action Groups,	Partnership principle appears to be consistently applied along with the actions and decisions taken at programme level. The institutions and organizations selected in the MC have been engaged throughout the various implementation stages of the programme, including in monitoring, assessment of performance, and	PM.07. For the establishment of the MC for the next programming period, in line with the principle of partnership established by the Regulations, it is recommended to put efforts in trying to enlarge the representatives of civil society of the programme area in the Monitoring Committee, while considering reducing the presence of central public administration bodies. The idea is that the programme

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
	Is the right balance of relevant stakeholders involved in the implementation of the programme, including as regards their participation in the Monitoring Committee, from the point of view of applying the partnership principle?	subjects, 21 belong to the Romanian side and 28 are representatives from the Bulgarian Side. However, to keep a balanced representation of the 2 sides, for the academic members from Bulgaria there is the principle that only one member (of the total 7) has voting rights on rotation basis.	Communications, National Agency for Public Procurement etc). The civil society in the programme area has a very low level of organization and representatives of its interests. It has been difficult to find relevant stakeholders to involve in monitoring committee;		Research institutions, NGOs, minorities etc. In comparison with RO-BG programme, both countries are represented as full voting members by public bodies only. On the hand, the composition of the MC for the RO-HU Programme is similar to the RO-BG programme where also the public bodies are greater represented in number (88% out of the total members are public officials).	analysis of the annual implementation reports, through the periodic MC reunions.	MC should be an important engine for empowering programme area in taking part to strategic decisions related to its future. Considering the structural lack of organized interests in the programme area, it is recommended to adopt less formalized procedures for the identification of the MC members: rather than a competitive procedure, the identification could go through an open consultation process on the territory, to be possibly brought on in parallel with public consultations for the drafting of the new Programme.
E.PM.08		Improvements have been made since the previous programming period, around project submission/selection/contracting/ implementation/ and monitoring phases. The programme bodies have, compared to the previous programming period, introduced changes in the delivery mechanisms with a view to increasing the	The findings collected during the interviews with programme authorities suggest also that a significant step forward is represented by the introduction of	Analysing the data collected within the survey, it can be observed the fact that most of the programme beneficiaries are		The programme has shown a constant attention towards simplification and reduction of administrative burden on beneficiaries. The	PM.08. The MA/JS should maintain the use of SCOs and exploring possible extensions of their use, also considering the adoption of lump sums to cover specific categories of costs. The MA/JS should

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N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator	Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
	Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
Are the actions taken in order to reduce the administrative burden on beneficiaries working? What can be improved?	efficiency, simplification and harmonization of programme procedures and processes and to increasing the programme result orientation and programme effectiveness	eMS, the electronic monitoring system which supports the beneficiaries throughout the entire project life cycle, starting from the application submission and continuing with the assessment, approval, contracting, implementation, monitoring and payment. Introducing simplified cost options represents a significant step in reducing administrative burden	aware of several changes/tools implemented to facilitate beneficiaries' participation in Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme in order to reduce the administrative burden; among the most common changes or actions taken, the following are mentioned, in order of recurrence: - training and exchange of experiences; - simplification of monitoring, reporting and control; - use of simplified cost options; - guidance materials/manual and the modifications brought during the calls; - simplification and the use of		adoption of SCOs and the progressive transfer of document exchange on digital platform are the most tangible achievements and they encounter the appreciation of the target group: data from the survey reveal that both eMS and SCO are appreciated by the beneficiaries for their benefits in terms of reduction of administrative burdens.	continue working on the improvement of the eMS platform and building capacities of applicants and beneficiaries for its use in both the application and reporting process. A complete abandoning of the physical transmission of documents should be targeted by next programming period. The introduction of the digital signature of documents could be of great help. In order to support this approach, all support structures (for example, the legal unit, the control unit etc) should align to the electronic use and to the use of digital signature.

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
				online tools as the best way to simplify the project implementation together with user friendliness of eMS, as well as its level of accessibility and usefulness; - standardization of rules and procedures; - reduction of archiving requirements etc.			
E.PM.09	**Is the communication between beneficiaries and Joint Secretariat efficient? How about Antenna?**	The managing bodies of the Programme, with the JS as the main player, maintain contact with the beneficiaries of the programme by providing through the programme website, social media tools, e-mail regular up-to-date information about the programme rules, documents, events and other relevant information important for the smoothly implementation of the programme. For ex, in support of beneficiaries several tutorials have been organised (e-MS User assignment; e-MS – How to create partner report; e-MS Procurements), published on the website and Facebook page of the programme.	The level, frequency and scope of the communication between JS (including Antenna) and beneficiary is considered good. The beneficiaries appear to trust Joint Secretariat and its personnel. The communication follows both formal and informal channels. Not all the beneficiaries communicate with the JS to the same intensity. The level of communication	The communication activities implemented by the programme are considered very efficient/efficient for more than 93% of the respondents, a remarkable result.		The communication measures carried out between beneficiaries and Joint Secretariat/JS Antenna are in line with the foreseen measures and activities of the Communication Strategy and the Communication Plan. The quality and the scope of the communication have a very good perception among all the players. The MA intends however to evolve the system, by moving JS even closer to the needs of beneficiaries,	PM.09.1. While every evolution of the intensity and quality of the communication between JS and beneficiaries, in the sense of a closer support to them, should be welcome, attention should be paid to capitalize on the very good communication and reciprocal perception achieved so far. PM.09.2. It is recommended to rethink the mission of the antenna, which at the current moment appears unclear and scarcely perceivable. It would need some organizational visibility and autonomy.

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator	Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
	Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
		between JS and beneficiaries is good. All beneficiaries/stakeholders interviewed are very much satisfied with the level of communication with JS. The only problematic aspect underlined during the interviews refers to the geographical location of the Joint Secretariat which imposes certain logistic challenges for some project beneficiaries, especially from the Bulgarian side of the border			enhancing its support and guidance role.	
E.PM.10	**Do the anti-fraud activities carried out by the programme authorities lead to the achievement of the objectives set out in the Anti-fraud Strategy? Which actions were the most relevant and effective in managing the risk of fraud and dealing with fraudulent activity?**	The Anti-fraud strategy is developed in compliance with the EU legal provisions and sets out clearly the Programme management structure joint approach to managing the risk of fraud and dealing with all aspects of fraudulent activity that may occur at the Programme level. An action plan for preventing and mitigation of the fraud risks identified at programme level is set in place and closely monitored. A comprehensive set of monitoring fiches has been elaborated for each fraud risk identified, including a risk assessment (based on probability and intensity) and related measures with a clear division of tasks.	Based on the opinions of the key actors interviewed during the evaluation of the Programme implementation, no major or recurrent errors were encountered in relation with the first level control. The Programme authorities also referred to the training sessions conducted with beneficiaries, which represented an			The anti-fraud activities carried out by the Programme bodies led to the achievement of the objectives set out in the Anti-fraud Strategy considering the following: - Through information sessions, trainings and dissemination of the relevant information related to preventing, detecting and correcting irregularities and fraud, the chances for	PM.10. No relevant recommendation is considered needed on this aspect. However, an increase of the exchange of experience with MAs of similar Programmes can be considered to improve – in both directions – the relevance of the risk assessment.

N. Evaluation questions (EQ) As apprehended by the evaluator		Findings				Conclusions	Recommendations
		Desk research	Interviews	Questionnaire	Benchmarking		
			opportunity to raise awareness about the risk of fraud, including by addressing the topics regarding the risk of errors occurring in the preparation of payment documents.			individuals to commit fraud were minimized. -The additional measures taken by the Programme authorities (Practical Guide on fraud for applicants and beneficiaries) raised awareness of the fraud risks and ensured that effective anti-fraud measures are in place. -The human resources involved in the Programme management have sufficient know-how, competences and methodological tools to assess the fraud risk and predict risks in the area vulnerable to fraud. The staff also participates to dedicated seminars, trainings workshops, conferences and technical meetings tackling anti-fraud and related fields (integrity, conflict of interest, incompatibilities etc) -Effective and proportionate anti-fraud measures were put in place as necessary.	

Annex 2 – Analysis on the progress implementation

Annex 2.1 Achievement of the Indicators

SO 1 - Improve the planning, development and coordination of cross-border transport systems for better connections to TEN-T transport networks						
ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Achievement	%
R 1.1	Cross-border population served by modernized infrastructure leading to TEN-T	Number	626,140	1,250,000	721,540	15.29%
CO 14	Roads: Total length of reconstructed or upgraded roads	km	0	120	30.61	25.51%
7b.1	Number of joint mechanisms (e.g. route guidance, incidents/emergencies detection and management, studies on traffic flows, feasibility studies addressing cross-border transport issues, traffic safety measures, black-spot maps, awareness raising activities	Number of mechanisms facilitating connection	0	30	2	6.67%

SO 1.2 - Increase transport safety on waterways and maritime transport routes						
ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Achievement	%
R 1.2	% of the RO-BG CBC Danube length and Black Sea where safety of the navigation have been improved	Percent	1.29	25	This indicator shall be measuredwhen information from projects is available	0.00%
CO16	Inland waterways: Total length of improved or created inland waterway	km	0	20	0	0.00%
7c.1	Number of studies, strategies and action plans to improve safety of the navigation on the Danube and the Black Sea supported	Number of strategies, action plans	0	5	1	20.00%

SO 2.1 - To improve the sustainable use of natural heritage and resources and cultural heritage						
ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Achievement	%
R 2.1	Number of tourist overnights in the CBC region	Number of overnights	6,668,515	7,200,000	8,826,399 (cut-off -date 31st of December 2018; measurement carried out in 2019 based on the	406.01%

SO 2.1 - To improve the sustainable use of natural heritage and resources and cultural heritage						
					information provided by the national statistical institutes)	
CO 09	Sustainable Tourism: Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attractions	visits/year	0	10,000	58,324	583.24%
6c.1	Number of integrated tourism products/services created	Number of mechanisms facilitating connection	0	100	34	34.00%
6c.2	Number of common strategies, policies or management plans for valorising (including raising awareness) the cultural and natural heritage through its restoration and promotion for sustainable economic uses	Number of common strategies/management plans approved	0	50	16	32.00%

SO 2.2 - To enhance the sustainable management of the ecosystems from the cross-border area						
ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Achievement	%
R 2.2	NATURA 2000 sites from the cross-border area with coordinated management tools improved	Number	2	10	13	137.50%
CO23	Nature and biodiversity: Surface area of habitats supported to attain a better conservation status	Hectares	0	20,000	27,058.50	135.29%

SO 3.1 - To improve joint risk management in the cross-border area						
ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Achievement	%
R 3.1	The quality of the joint risk management in the CBC area	The satisfaction degree of the	2	3	3.5 (based on the survey carried out in 2019, cut-off	150.00%

ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Achievement	%
				stakeholders in the area		date 31st of December 2018)	
CO 20	Risk prevention and management: Population benefiting from flood protection measures	Persons	0	1,250,000	0	0.00%
CO 21	Risk prevention and management: Population benefiting from forest fire protection measures	Persons	0	1,250,000	0	0.00%
5b.1	Population benefiting from actions of risk management	Persons	0	2,500,000	304,370	12.17%
5b.2	Number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response	Number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response	0	50	7	14.00%

SO 4.1 To encourage the integration of the cross-border area in terms of employment and labour mobility						
ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Achievement	%
R 4.1	Population that have access to joint employment initiatives	Number	200,000	500,000	974,698	258.23%
CO 44	Labour Market and Training: Number of participants in joint local employment initiatives and joint training	Persons	0	10,000	18,474	184.74%
CO 46	Labour Market and Training: Number of participants in joint education and training schemes to support youth employment, educational opportunities and higher and vocational education across borders	Persons	0	2,000	9,096	454.80%
8e.1	No. of initiatives (trainings, education schemes, websites, agreements, networks, job-fairs etc.) that activate workforce mobility in the cross border area	Number	0	50	162	324.00%

SO 5.1 To increase cooperation capacity and the efficiency of public institutions in a CBC context						
ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Achievement	%

R 5.1	Level of co-ordination of the public institutions in the eligible area	Intensity of cooperation between crossborder stakeholders	3	4	4 (based on the survey carried out in 2019, cut-off date 31st of December 2018))	100.00%
11b.1	Number of supported cross border mechanisms (agreements, networks, regulations, studies, policies, strategies, information exchange tools) to enhance cooperation capacity	Number	0	100	62	62.00%

Annex 2.2. Forecast Indicators

The forecast values of indicators are made based on the forecast provided by the beneficiaries in the applications form.

ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Forecast	%
SO 1 - Improve the planning, development and coordination of cross-border transport systems for better connections to TEN-T transport networks						
R 1.1	Cross-border population served by modernized infrastructure leading to TEN-T	Number	626,140	1,250,000	6,101,150	877.60%
CO 14	Roads: Total length of reconstructed or upgraded roads	Km	0	120	219.31	182.76%
7b.1	Number of joint mechanisms (e.g. route guidance, incidents/emergencies detection and management, studies on traffic flows, feasibility studies addressing cross-border transport issues, traffic safety measures, black-spot maps, awareness raising activities	Number of mechanisms facilitating connection	0	30	46	153.33%

ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Forecast	%
SO 1.2 - Increase transport safety on waterways and maritime transport routes						
R 1.2	% of the RO-BG CBC Danube length and Black Sea where safety of the navigation have been improved	Percent	1.29	25	100	416.32%
CO16	Inland waterways: Total length of improved or created inland waterway	Km	0	20	470	2350.00%
7c.1	Number of studies, strategies and action plans to improve safety of the navigation on the Danube and the Black Sea supported	Number of strategies, action plans	0	5	2	40.00%

ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Forecast	%
SO 2.1 - To improve the sustainable use of natural heritage and resources and cultural heritage						
R 2.1	Number of tourist overnights in the CBC region	Number of overnights	6,668,515	7,200,000	8,984,545	435.77%
CO 09	Sustainable Tourism: Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attractions	visits/year	0	10,000	287,719	2877.19%
6c.1	Number of integrated tourism products/services created	Number of mechanisms facilitating connection	0	100	178	178.00%

ID	Indicator	Unit		Target value 2023	Forecast	%
6c.2	Number of common strategies, policies or management plans for valorising (including raising awareness) the cultural and natural heritage through its restoration and promotion for sustainable economic uses	Number of common strategies/management plans approved	0	50	87	174.00%

SO 2.2 - To enhance the sustainable management of the ecosystems from the cross-border area						
ID	Indicator	Unit		Target value 2023	Forecast	%
R 2.2	NATURA 2000 sites from the cross-border area with coordinated management toolsbeen improved	Number	2	10	17	187.50%
CO23	Nature and biodiversity: Surface area of habitats supported to attain a better conservation status	Hectares	0	20,000	27,058.50	135.29%

SO 3.1 - To improve joint risk management in the cross-border area						
ID	Indicator	Unit		Target value 2023	Forecast	%
R 3.1	The quality of the joint risk management in the CBC area	The satisfaction degree of the stakeholders in the area	2	3	3	100.00%
CO 20	Risk prevention and management: Population benefiting from flood protection measures	Persons	0	1,250,000	4,200,000	336.00%
CO 21	Risk prevention and management: Population benefiting from forest fire protection measures	Persons	0	1,250,000	4,200,000	336.00%
5b.1	Population benefiting from actions of risk management	Persons	0	2,500,000	4,200,000	168.00%
5b.2	Number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response	Number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response	0	50	55	110.00%

SO 4.1 To encourage the integration of the cross-border area in terms of employment and labour mobility						
ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Forecast	%
R 4.1	Population that have access to joint employment initiatives	Number	200,000	500,000	1,434,687	411.56%

ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Forecast	%
CO 44	Labour Market and Training: Number of participants in joint local employment initiatives and joint training	Persons	0	10,000	54,071	540.71%
CO 46	Labour Market and Training: Number of participants in joint education and training schemes to support youth employment, educational opportunities and higher and vocational education across borders	Persons	0	2,000	9,866	493.30%
8e.1	No. of initiatives (trainings, education schemes, websites, agreements, networks, job-fairs etc.) that activate workforce mobility in the cross border area	Number	0	50	293	586.00%

SO 5.1 To increase cooperation capacity and the efficiency of public institutions in a CBC context						
ID	Indicator	Unit	Baseline value	Target value 2023	Forecast	%
R 5.1	Level of co-ordination of the public institutions in the eligible area	Intensity of cooperation between cross-border stakeholders	3	4	4	100.00%
11b.1	Number of supported cross border mechanisms (agreements, networks, regulations, studies, policies, strategies, information exchange tools) to enhance cooperation capacity	Number	0	100	127	127.00%

Annex 2.3. Performance Framework (at the level of 31st of December 2018)

ID	Indicator/Key Implementation Step	Unit	Milestone 2018	Achievement	%
CO 14	Roads: Total length of reconstructed or upgraded roads	km	Km of reconstructed or upgraded roads	7.68	
1K1	Number of KM of roads to be upgraded or reconstructed for which tenders have been launched	Number of km	60	123.07	205.12%
1F1	Certified expenditure	EUR	8,000,000	8,022,462.12	100.28%
CO 09	Sustainable Tourism: Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attractions	Visits/year	1,000	49,718	4971.80%
6c.1	Number of integrated tourism products/services created	Number	10	32	320.00%
2F1	Certified expenditure	EUR	5,100,000	9,975,330.14	195.59%

ID	Indicator/Key Implementation Step	Unit	Milestone 2018	Achievement	%
5b.2	Number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response	Number	10	6	60.00%
1F1	Certified expenditure	EUR	4,500,000	15,105,886.36	335.69%
8e.1	No. of initiatives (trainings, education schemes, websites, agreements, networks, job-fairs etc.) that activate workforce mobility in the cross border area	Number	10	121	1210.00%
4F1	Certified expenditure	EUR	1,000,000	9,375,897.77	937.59%
11b.1	Number of supported cross border mechanisms (agreements, networks, regulations, studies, policies, strategies, information exchange tools) to enhance cooperation capacity	Number	10	14	140.00%
5F1	Certified expenditure	EUR	1,000,000	5,339,299.55	533.92%

At the level 31st of December 2019

Priority axis	Ind type	ID	Indicator	Measurement unit	Milestone for 2018 total	Final target (2023) total	2019
PA 1	O	CO14	Roads: Total length of reconstructed or upgraded roads	km	Km of reconstructed or upgraded roads	120.00	30,61
PA 1	F	1F1	(Certified) Expenditure	EUR	800,0000	96,450,936.00	13,904,770.59
PA 1	I	1K1	Number of KM of roads to be upgraded or reconstructed for which tenders have been launched	Number of KM	60	0.00	175.70
PA 2	O	CO09	Sustainable Tourism: Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attractions	Visits/year	1000	10,000.00	58,324
PA 2	F	2F1	(Certified) Expenditure	EUR	5,100,000	63,454,564.00	17,982,064.69
PA 2	O	6c.1	Number of integrated tourism products/services created	Number	10	100.00	34
PA 3	F	3F1	(Certified) Expenditure	EUR	4,500,000	48,225,468.00	17,043,333.37
PA 3	O	5b.2	Number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early	Number	10	50.00	7

			warning and emergency response					
PA 4	**F**	**4F1**	(Certified) Expenditure	EUR	1,000,000		17,767,279.00	12,235,499.94
PA 4	O	8e.1	No. of initiatives (trainings, education schemes, websites, agreements, networks, job-fairs etc.) that activate workforce mobility in the cross border area	Number	10		50.00	162
PA 5	**F**	**5F1**	(Certified) Expenditure	EUR	1,000,000		12,690,913.00	8,453,888.79
PA 5	O	11b.1	Number of supported cross border mechanisms (agreements, networks, regulations, studies, policies, strategies, information exchange tools) to enhance cooperation capacity	Number	10		100.00	62

Annex 2.4. Financial Implementation (as of 15th of February 2020)

	ERDF Contracted	Amount included in the requests for payment to EC	Percentage	Amount certified by FLC	Percentage
PA1	107,803,932	14,922,627	13.84%	20,702,462	19.20%
PA2	50,942,521	17,136,657	33.64%	24,283,880	47.67%
PA3	36,842,210	10,823,086	29.38%	20,368,230	55.29%
PA4	14,025,066	10,593,232	75.53%	13,127,563	93.60%
PA5	12,216,956	7,295,459	59.72%	9,190,594	75.23%

Annex 2.5. Decommitment

Year	SO 1.1		SO 1.2		SO 2.1		SO 3.1		SO 4.1		SO 5.1		Total	Cummulative 79,069,279	Target
	No	ERDF	No	ERDF	No	ERDF	No	ERDF	No	ERDF	No	ERDF			
2020	4	15,031,177	1	3,254,739	30	12,486,444	10	5,330,846	3	790,492	2	360,494	37,254,192	116,323,471	54,125,062
2021	5	28,338,947	1	4,686,832	13	13,548,076	7	3,976,196	0	-	3	2,711,101	53,261,152	169,584,623	89,007,357
2022	4	20,742,782	1	5,021,586	2	1,586,449	1	4,188,224	0	-	0	-	31,539,041	201,123,664	124,716,746
2023	2	13,530,534	0	-	0	-	1	5,037,215	0	-	0	-	18,567,749	219,691,413	161,269,771
End of the programme	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	-	219,691,413	215,754,513

* The table presents the no of projects about to finalize in the specific years, as well as their ERDF allocation

** The amounts are calculated by deducting the amounts already certified by the first level control, or declared ineligible.

*** The amounts related to the TA expenditures are included in the cumulative amounts already certified (79069279), but not in the amounts for the upcoming years.

**** The target values are cumulative

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Annex 2.6. Eligible Expenditures

SO	No of projects	Total project budget	Certified expenditure		Costs declared ineligible		Amounts pending at FLC		Budget left	
			Amount	Percentage	Amount	Percentage	Amount	Percentage	Amount	Percentage
1.1	17	107,832,538	17,171,957	15.92%	438,267	0.41%	5,336,591	4.95%	84,885,723	78.72%
1.2	3	18,995,617	3,530,505	18.59%	214,337	1.13%	60,043	0.32%	15,190,732	79.97%
2.1	67	58,591,471	23,328,259	39.82%	749,447	1.28%	1,955,527	3.34%	32,558,238	55.57%
2.2	2	1,340,907	955,621	71.27%	14,089	1.05%	-	0.00%	371,197	27.68%
3.1	26	43,343,777	20,368,230	46.99%	345,174	0.80%	752,357	1.74%	21,878,016	50.48%
4.1	33	16,500,078	13,127,563	79.56%	339,066	2.05%	173,659	1.05%	2,859,790	17.33%
5.1	18	14,372,893	9,190,594	63.94%	329,184	2.29%	17,764	0.12%	4,835,351	33.64%
TOTAL	**166**	**260,977,281**	**87,672,729**	**48.01%**	**2,429,564**	**1.29%**	**8,295,941**	**1.64%**	**162,579,047**	**49.06%**

* The amounts are related to total amounts (ERDF + national contribution)

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Annex 3 – List of evaluation questions

Relevance

EQ 1.1.1 Is the programme still relevant in the policy context and is the use of funds properly addressing the current development needs of beneficiaries in the programme area?

EQ 1.1.2 To what extent does the programme add benefits to the cross-border region development and how has the programme complemented and enhanced the effect of other related policies or strategies?

EQ 1.1.3 What is the programme contribution to the implementation of EU Strategy for the Danube River objectives?

EQ 1.1.4 Are there more stringent uncovered needs that could be tackled under a future cross-border programme?

Effectiveness/implementation – Programme Level

EQ 1.2.1 Which is the actual implementation progress regarding each specific objective? Which is the achievement level of programme indicators? Which is the achievement level of performance framework indicators as compared to the milestones for 2018?

EQ 1.2.2 What stands behind the over-reaching of certain output indicators?

EQ 1.2.3 Will the progress to date (given the current trends) lead to the achievement of target values of programme and performance

EQ 1.2.4 In case of non-achievement risk for the performance framework indicators target values, which are the main causes and how can they be addressed?

EQ 1.2.5 Is there any de-commitment expected to take place at programme level? What specific actions should be taken in order to minimize the de-commitment risk?

EQ 1.2.6 Are there any risks/unsolved problems hindering the smooth programme implementation that are emerging both in programming period 2007-2013 and the current one and what could be done, in order to mitigate/ overcome them?

EQ 1.2.7 What are the external factors that have led to the results of the programme?

Effectiveness/implementation – Project Level

EQ 1.3.1. To what extent have the objectives of the projects financed under this programme been achieved or are about to be achieved? What are the possible internal and external factors affecting the achievement of the objectives (e.g. human resources, financial capacity)?

EQ. 1.3.2. Are there any patterns that could be identified for successful project implementation?

EQ. 1.3.3. In case weak points (e.g. irregularities, budgetary corrections, breaches from the application of the Project Implementation Manual) have been detected within project implementation, could a pattern be identified in relation to their cause and their influence on the overall implementation of the programme's specific objectives?

EQ.1.3.4. What are the major difficulties faced by the beneficiaries? What measures could be taken to overcome them?

EQ.1.3.5. Are the beneficiaries sufficiently supported to prepare projects and implement them?

Effectiveness/horizontal principles

EQ. 1.4.1. How do the financed projects contribute to the application of equal opportunities and non-discrimination horizontal principle, especially as regards the equality between men and women?

EQ. 1.4.2. Are the actions taken to promote equality between men and women and to promote non-discrimination working? Are the actions taken to promote sustainable development working?

Effectiveness/programme management

EQ. 1.5.1. Did the applicant's guide and pack enable the potential beneficiaries to prepare well-written applications? Are the project assessment, selection and contracting systems efficient? Is the project monitoring system efficient?

EQ. 1.5.2. Is the overall management and control system efficient?

EQ. 1.5.3. Did the use of simplified cost options prove to be efficient?

EQ. 1.5.4. Are there any specific factors hindering the effective use of Technical Assistance funds?

EQ. 1.5.5. Are there any steps in the use of Technical Assistance funds that could be made more efficient?

EQ. 1.5.6. Are the actions taken to reinforce the capacity of authorities and beneficiaries to administer and to use the EU funds under this programme efficient and relevant?

EQ. 1.5.7. Is the right balance of relevant stakeholders involved in the implementation of the programme, including as regards their participation in the Monitoring Committee, from the point of view of applying the partnership principle?

EQ. 1.5.8. Are the actions taken in order to reduce the administrative burden on beneficiaries working? What can be improved?

EQ. 1.5.9. Is the communication between beneficiaries and Joint Secretariat efficient? How about Antenna?

EQ. 1.5.10. Do the anti-fraud activities carried out by the programme authorities lead to the achievement of the objectives set out in the Anti-fraud Strategy? Which actions were the most relevant and effective in managing the risk of fraud and dealing with fraudulent activity?

Annex 4: Detailed analysis of the evaluation activities and of the methodology

In order to evaluate the Programme relevance and effectiveness in terms of implementation of the programme, the consortium used a set of main methodological tools to answer the related evaluation questions. The methodological toolbox encompassed the following activities, as presented in the table below:

Methodological Tool	Details regarding the methodological tools
Literature review	The team considered as sources previous studies on similar programmes as well as academia and scientific literature
Survey	Online survey that might differ in structure based on their specific purposes and to whom they are addressed such as different groups of respondents
Interviews	Interviews with the Institutions/bodies involved in programme management and most relevant stakeholders and online/phone interviews with other stakeholders or beneficiaries
Matrix based analysis	The matrix was built on results from the documental review, the web survey and on the information gathered through the interviews.
Stakeholder analysis	Stakeholder identification matrix was based on the influence-implementation-grid in order to identify the actors according to their involvement
Benchmarking Analysis	Benchmarking identified the qualitative and quantitative standards by which to compare the performance of programmes and interventions
Focus Group	The focus group was organized with key stakeholders and actors regarding the communications activities of the programme.

The Consortium planned and organized the application of the on-the-field activities (interviews, survey and focus group). The application of the interviews, surveys, and focus group have been strengthened by the Managing Authority that had issued an address of support, facilitating the contacting of the beneficiaries. The Managing Authority, through the approval of the Inception Report for Implementation Evaluation, approved the interviews and survey structures, as well as the focus group agenda.

Semi-structured Interviews

In order to evaluate the Programme relevance and effectiveness in terms of implementation of the programme, semi-structured interviews were organized with national and local authorities considered to have a particular relevance in the research. The interviewed actors were selected based on the role played in Programme implementation and/or on their representativeness in the Programme area. The semi-structured interviews were generally carried out face-to-face or online, based on the availability of the respondents. The interviews were based on a grid of interview and an indicative structure of the interview grid that was send to the interviewed before the organization of the interview. The interview grid was previously approved by the MA in the Implementation Evaluation Inception Report.

Between 26th of February – 13th of March, 15 interviews were conducted as follows: 3 with the programme authorities (Managing Authority, National Authority and Joint Secretariat), and 12 with the Romanian and Bulgarian beneficiaries of the programme (as presented in the tables below):

Type of actor	No. of interviews Romania	No. of interviews Bulgaria	Total interviews
Programme Bodies	2	1	3
Local Authorities	4	2	6
Local Stakeholder	1	5	5
Total	**7**	**8**	**15**

Institution	Country	Date
Managing Authority for the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme 2014-2020	Romania	26th of February
Ministry for Territorial Development (National Authority for the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme 2014-2020)	Bulgaria	27th of February
Joint Secretariat (JS)/CBC RO Calarasi for the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme 2014-2020)	Romania	5th of March
Vidin District Administration	Bulgaria	3rd of March
Eurointegra Association	Bulgaria	5th of March
Vratsa District Administration	Bulgaria	4th of March
Association Regional Partnerships for Sustainable Development	Bulgaria	26th of February
Bulgarian Industrial Association	Bulgaria	27th of February
Association Centre for Development	Bulgaria	26th of February
Centre for Environmental Information and Education	Bulgaria	28th of February
Mehedinți City Council	Romania	28th of February
Olt City Council	Romania	26th of February
Teleorman City Council	Romania	2nd of March
Giurgiu City Council	Romania	10th of March
South East Regional Development Agency	Romania	5th of March

The analysis and interpretation of the information collected through interviews were based on the interview reports written as results of the interviews. The findings obtained from the interviews were integrated in the elaboration of Implementation Evaluation Report.

Survey for Beneficiaries

As part of the consultative process, an online questionnaire, addressed to the Programme beneficiaries, was conducted all over the Programme area. The survey was launched online, through the Microsoft Forms platform, and it was disseminated by the Provider with the support of the Managing Authority. A support address issued by the MA was attached to the invitation e-mail sent to potential respondents to the survey. Out of 150 invitation that were sent to the Romanian and Bulgarian beneficiaries, the final number of respondents that filled in the survey was 49, 22 Romanian respondents and 27 Bulgarian respondents. The survey for the beneficiaries was launched in February for a period of 14 days, as presented in the tables bellow: (as presented in the tables bellow):

No. of surveys Romania	No. of Surveys Bulgaria	Total surveys
22	27	**49**

Name of the institution/association/organization	Country
Agigea Town Hall	Romania
Alexandria Municipality	Romania
Alexis Project Filiasi	Romania
Arete-Sport	Bulgaria
Association Access for All (Branch Constanta)	Romania
Association "Center for Development Montanesium"	Bulgaria
Association AISSER Calarasi	Romania
Association Sport Club ACTIS	Romania
Associations for Development of North- West Bulgaria	Bulgaria
Belene Municipality	Bulgaria
Boynitsa Municipality	Bulgaria
Business Support Centre for Small and Medium Enterprises	Bulgaria
Byala Municipality	Bulgaria
Calafat City Hall	Romania
Calarasi County Emergency Situations Inspectorate	Romania
Civil Association for Development	Bulgaria
National College Barbu Ştirbei	Romania
Danube Alternative Association	Bulgaria
Directorate General Fire Safety and Civil Protection	Bulgaria
Face for Art and Culture Foundation	Bulgaria
Foundation Sustainable development and prosperity	Bulgaria
Free Youth Centre	Bulgaria
Future Today Association	Bulgaria
General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations	Romania
GIEDD	Romania
Giurgiu County Council	Romania
Global Libraries - Bulgaria Foundation	Bulgaria
Harsova Town	Romania
Mare Nostrum NGO	Romania
Mehedinti County	Romania
Mehedinti County Gendarmes Inspectorate	Romania
Municipality of Dobrichka	Bulgaria
NGO Agengy for Economic Development and Investments - Silistra	Bulgaria
NGO 'Paralel-Silistra'	Bulgaria
Olt County Council	Romania
Open hand foundation	Bulgaria
Ovidiu Municipality	Romania
Regional administration Ruse (Ruse District Administration)	Bulgaria
Regional Development Agency and Business Centre 2000 Montana	Bulgaria
Regional Historical Museum – Silistra	Bulgaria
Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water - Veliko Tarnovo	Bulgaria

Name of the institution/association/organization	Country
Romanian Naval Authority	Romania
RPSD-Vidin	Bulgaria
Ruse Municipality	Bulgaria
S.N.C.R.R. (ROMANIAN RED CROSS) - DOLJ BRANCH	Romania
The University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Bucharest	Romania
Videle Municipality	Romania
Vidin chamber of commerce and industry	Bulgaria
Youth Organisation for European Silistra	Bulgaria

The information obtained from data processing and analysis of the questions's answers where been synthesized and integrated in the context of the Implementation Evaluation Report.

Focus Group

The team of experts organized one focus group with key stakeholders and actors targeted by the programme. The focus group's main purpose was to evaluate the communications tools used within the Programme and to gain information about the participants' views and experiences on this topic.

The organization of the focus group was discussed with the Contracting Authority and planned accordingly. The focus group was organized on 6th of March. Out of 15 invitation sent, 4 participants were present to the focus group, along with 4 members of the evaluation team, as presented in the table below:

Participant	Institution
Mrs. Marcela Goldeanu	Managing Authority
Mrs. Alina Anton	Managing Authority
Mr. Razvan Zamfir	Joint Secretariat
Mr. Nici Mardale	Giurgiu City Council
Mrs. Roxana Aștefănoaiei	National Institute for Cultural Research
Mr. Andrea Floria	ACZ Consulting
Mrs. Cristina Cojoacă	ACZ Consulting
Mrs. Anela Pleșcan	ACZ Consulting
Mrs. Andreea Dobrița	ACZ Consulting

The agenda of the Focus Group included, as presented below, the following:
- Introduction and presentation of the Focus Group objectives
- Group discussions on the preliminary related findings on implementation
- Group discussions on the communication strategy and the communication instruments used during the implementation of the Programme
- Conclusions on the implementation and communication strategy

Time	Sessions	Participants involved
9:00 – 9:30 AM	**Welcoming the participants**	
	1. Presentation of the objective of the focus group and of the participants (10 minutes):	Team of experts

Time	Sessions	Participants involved
9:30 – 9:40 AM	• Introduction - participants will be presented general information about the rules of the discussion; • General information about the object of the contract - general information about the general objective and the specific objectives of the contract and more specific information about the focus group objective; • Presentation of participants - Each participant is invited to present in approximately one minute.	
9:40 – 10:10 AM	2. Session of discussion about the preliminary results on EQs about implementation/effectiveness, at programme level and project level. (30 minutes)	
10:10 – 10:30 AM	3. Session of discussions regarding the communication activities carried out by the programme authorities (20 minutes).	The participants to the focus group, through the facilitation realized by the team of experts
10:30 – 11:00 AM	4. Discussion session on the evaluation of information and publicity tools and activities - questions will be addressed to participants regarding information and publicity tools and activities. Finally, the moderator will note the most relevant opinions to use as information that will underpin the subsequent analysis of the focus groups (30 minutes).	
11:00 – 11:15 AM	**Coffee Break**	
11:15 – 11:45 AM	5. Collection of suggestions and recommendations (30 minutes) Discussion session on favourite information channels - participants will be invited by the moderator to express their opinions on favourite information channels;	Team of experts
11:45 – 12:15 PM	End of the session - The moderator summarizes the general topics and then requests a final feedback and recommendations (30 minutes).	
12:15 – 13:30 PM	**Lunch**	

Annex 5. Web-survey questions and charts

Section I – General information on the project

Figure 1. Details on the beneficiaries that undertaken the survey

Beneficiaries	N.	%
Romania	22	45%
Bulgaria	27	55%
Total	**49**	**100%**

Figure 2. Details on the beneficiaries that undertaken the survey, Calls

Call	Count	%
First Call		
Romania	3	50%
Bulgaria	3	50%
Total	**6**	100%
Second Call		
Romania	9	56%
Bulgaria	7	44%
Total	**16**	100%
Third Call		
Romania	10	37%
Bulgaria	17	63%
Total	**27**	**100%**

Figure 3. Details on the beneficiaries that undertaken the survey, Specific Objectives

Specific Objective (OS)	N.	%
Specific objective 1.1: Improve the planning, development and coordination of cross-border transport systems for better connections to TEN-T transport network	5	10%
Specific objective 1.2: Increase transport safety on waterways and maritime transport routes	0	0%
Specific objective 2.1: Improve the sustainable use of natural heritage and resources and cultural heritage	17	35%
Specific objective 2.2: To enhance the sustainable management of the ecosystems from the cross-border area		2%

| Specific objective 3.1: To improve joint risk management in the cross-border area	9	18%
Specific objective 4.1: To encourage the integration of the cross-border area in terms of employment and labour mobility	9	18%
Specific objective 5.1: To increase cooperation capacity and the efficiency of public institutions in a CBC context.	8	18%

Figure 4. Were you a project partner in the previous programming period (Romania-Bulgaria Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013)?

Yes	35%
No	65%

Figure 5. Have you ever applied to other EU programmes? If yes, could you state which type of programmes?

Yes	73%
No	27%

Figure 6. Please describe the three main positive aspects of your participation in the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme.
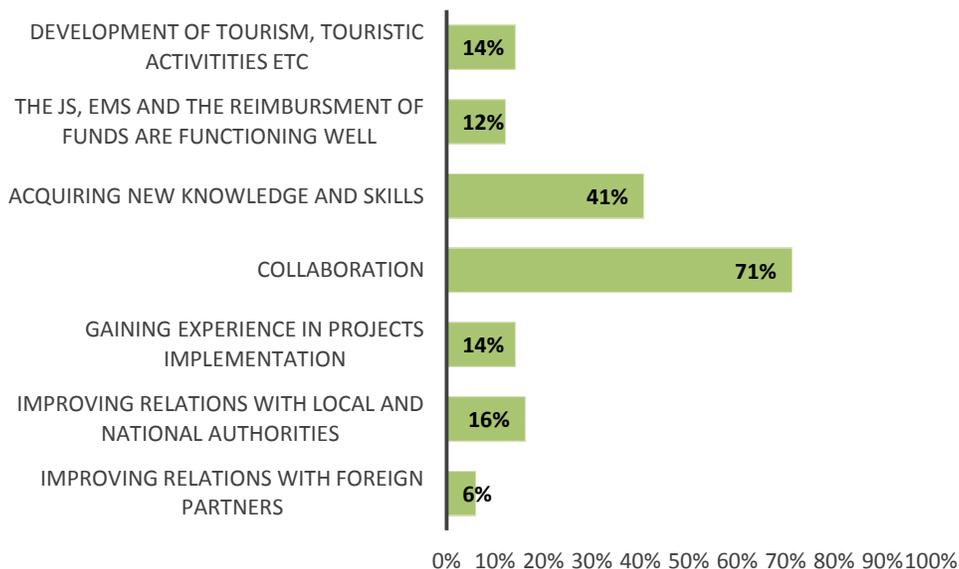
Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 7. Please describe the main three shortcomings perceived while participating in this programme
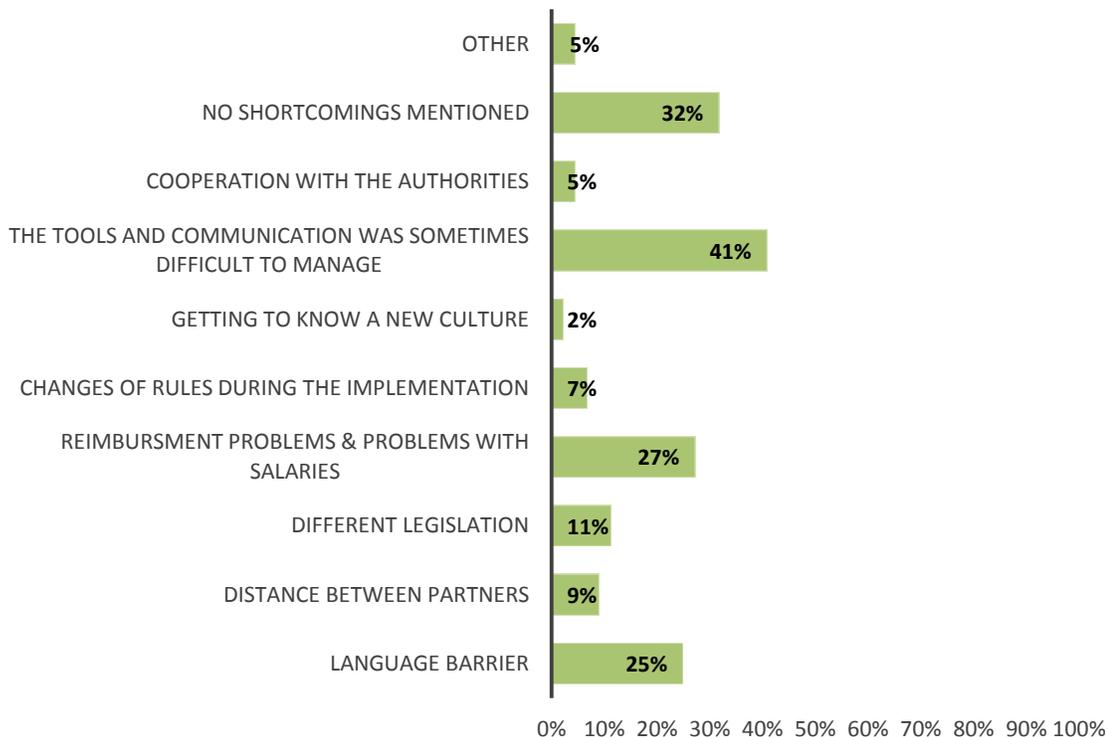
Source: Data collected by the research team

Section II – Management and implementation

Figure 8. How useful was the applicant guide and pack for you in preparing well-written application forms? (Please tick a score from 1 to 10, where 1 means very dissatisfied, and 10 means very satisfied)
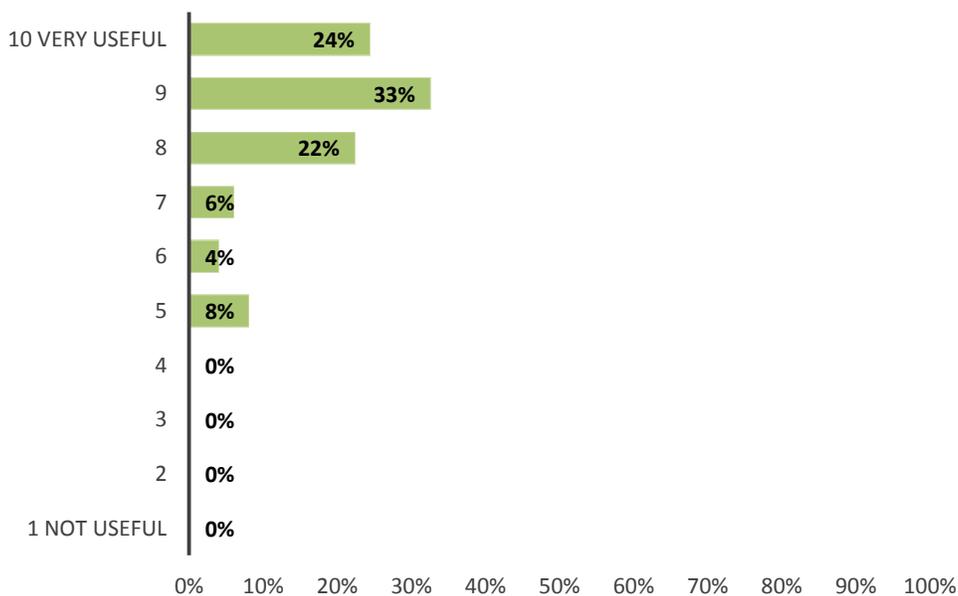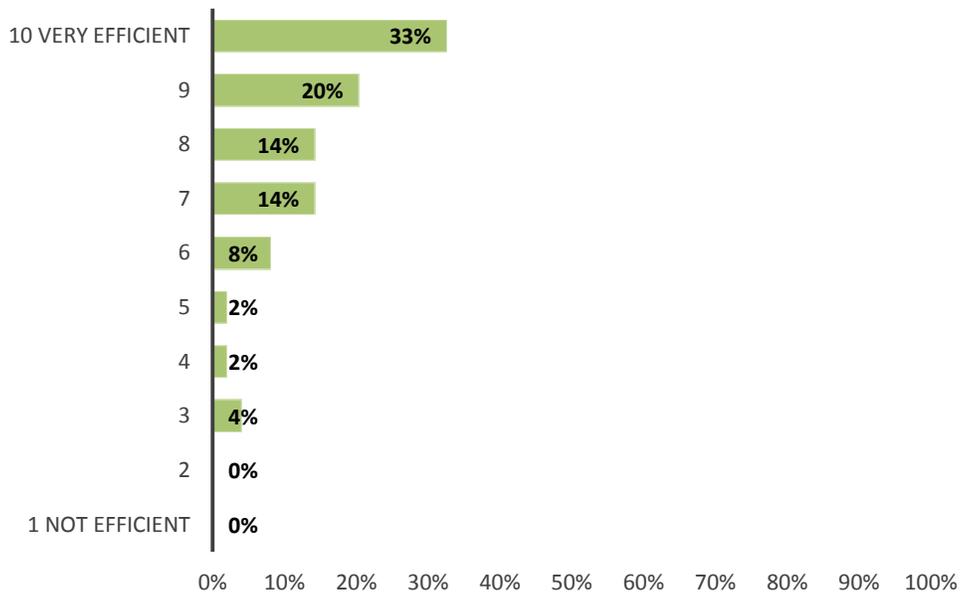
Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 9. Do you consider that the project assessment system is efficient?
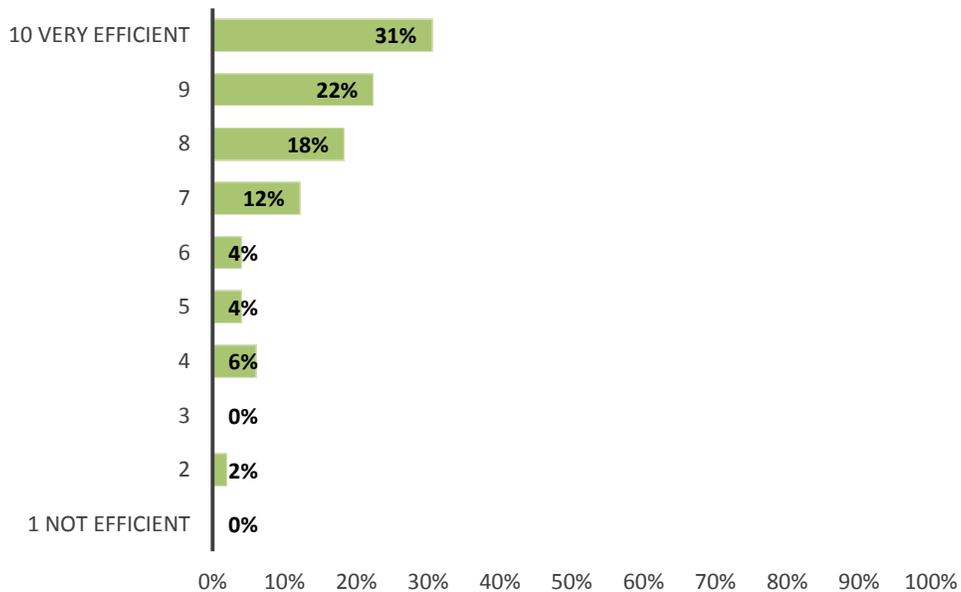
Source: Data collected by the research team

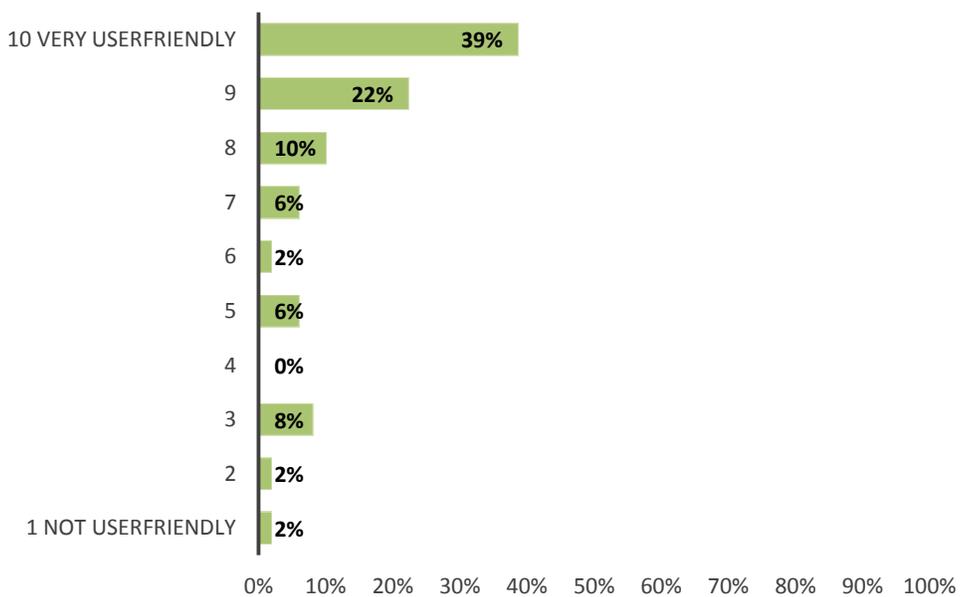**Figure 10. Do you consider that the project selection system is efficient?**

Source: Data collected by the research team

**Figure 11. Do you consider that the project contracting system is efficient?**

10 VERY EFFICIENT	33%
9	31%
8	16%
7	6%
6	2%
5	2%
4	0%
3	4%
2	2%
1 NOT EFFICIENT	4%
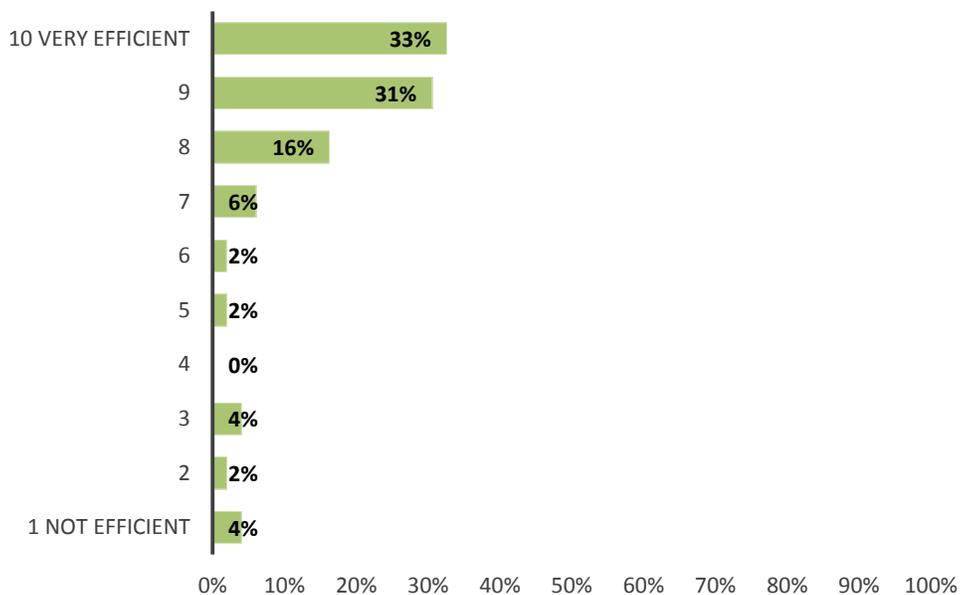
Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 12. How would you rate the user-friendliness of eMS?

10 VERY USERFRIENDLY	39%
9	22%
8	10%
7	6%
6	2%
5	6%
4	0%
3	8%
2	2%
1 NOT USERFRIENDLY	2%

Source: Data collected by the research team

Interreg

Figure 13. Do you consider that the project monitoring system is an efficient one?
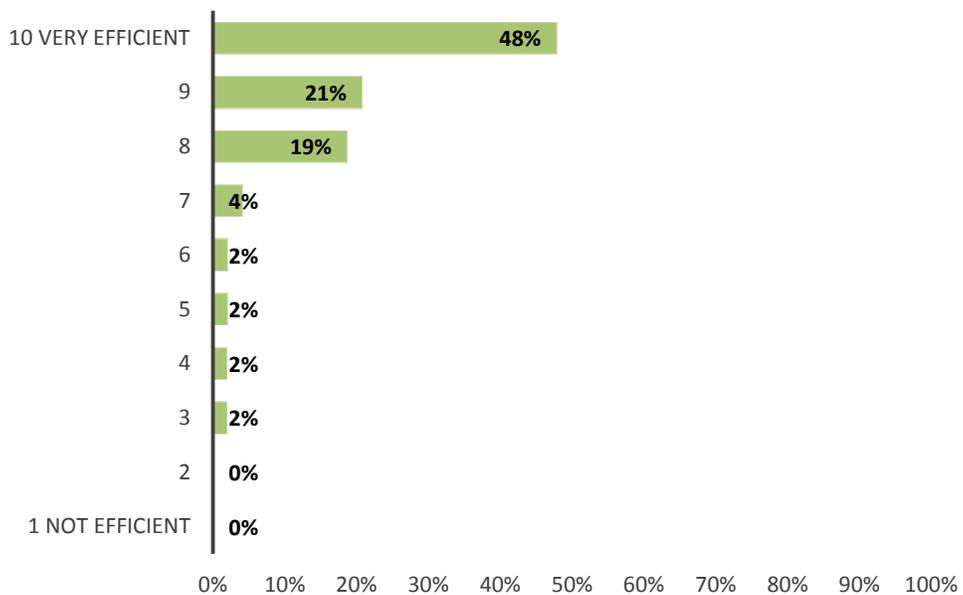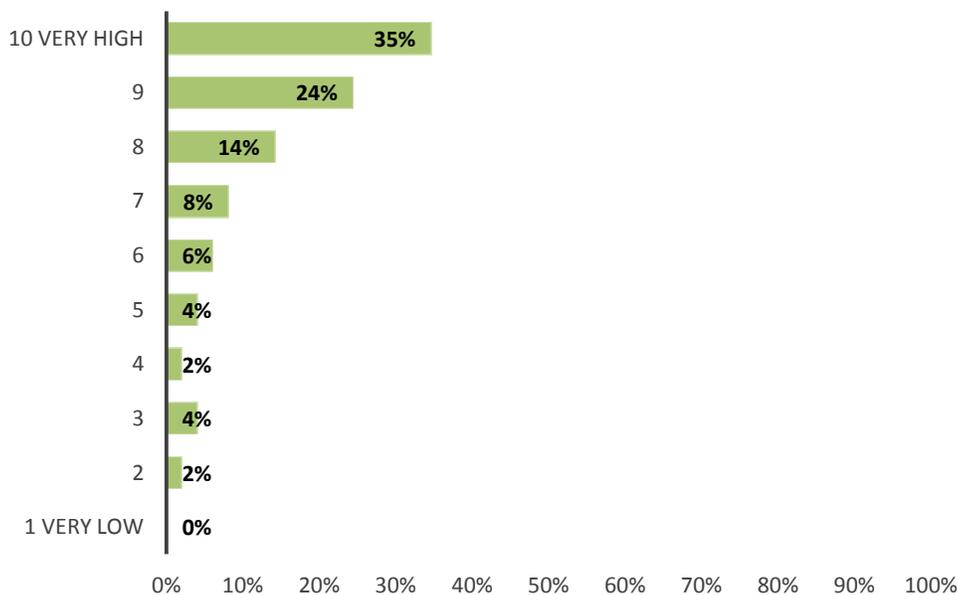

Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 14. Is the overall management and control system efficient? (Please tick a score from 1 to 10, where 1 means very inefficient, and 10 means very efficient)
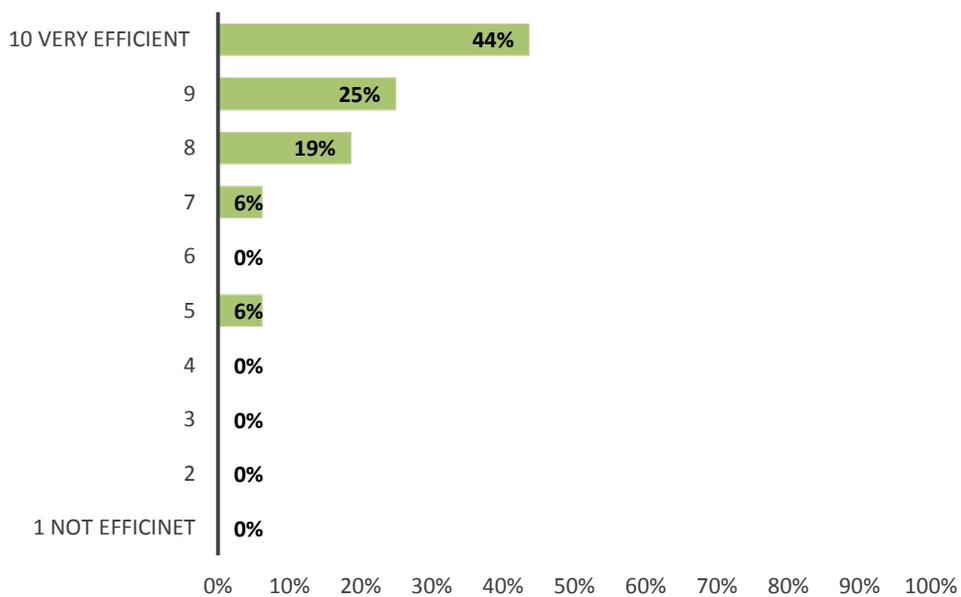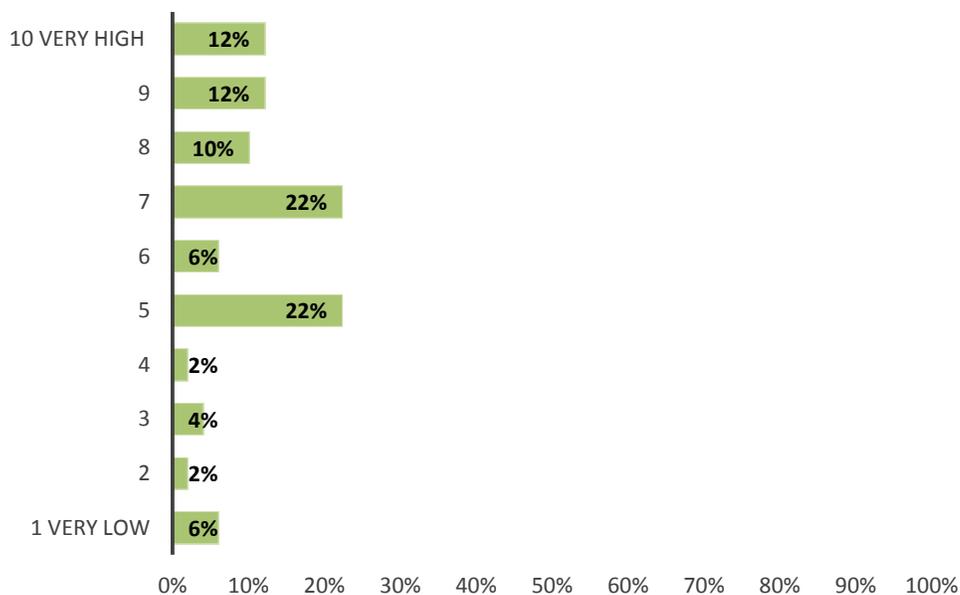

Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 15. What is your level of confidence towards the transparency of project assessment, selection and contracting processes? (Please tick a score from 1 to 10, where 1 means not trustworthy at all, and 10 means very trustworthy)

Score	Percentage
10 VERY HIGH	35%
9	24%
8	14%
7	8%
6	6%
5	4%
4	2%
3	4%
2	2%
1 VERY LOW	0%

Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 16. How would you rate the volume and complexity of documents to be submitted by beneficiaries in the application phase? (Please tick a score from 1 to 10, where 1 means few documents, with a low level of complexity, and 10 means many documents, with a high level of complexity)


Score	Percentage
10 VERY HIGH	12%
9	12%
8	10%
7	22%
6	6%
5	22%
4	2%
3	4%
2	2%
1 VERY LOW	6%

Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 17. How would you rate the volume and complexity of documents to be submitted by beneficiaries in the contracting phase? (Please tick a score from 1 to 10, where 1 means few documents, with a low level of complexity, and 10 means many documents, with a high level of complexity)

Source: Data collected by the research team
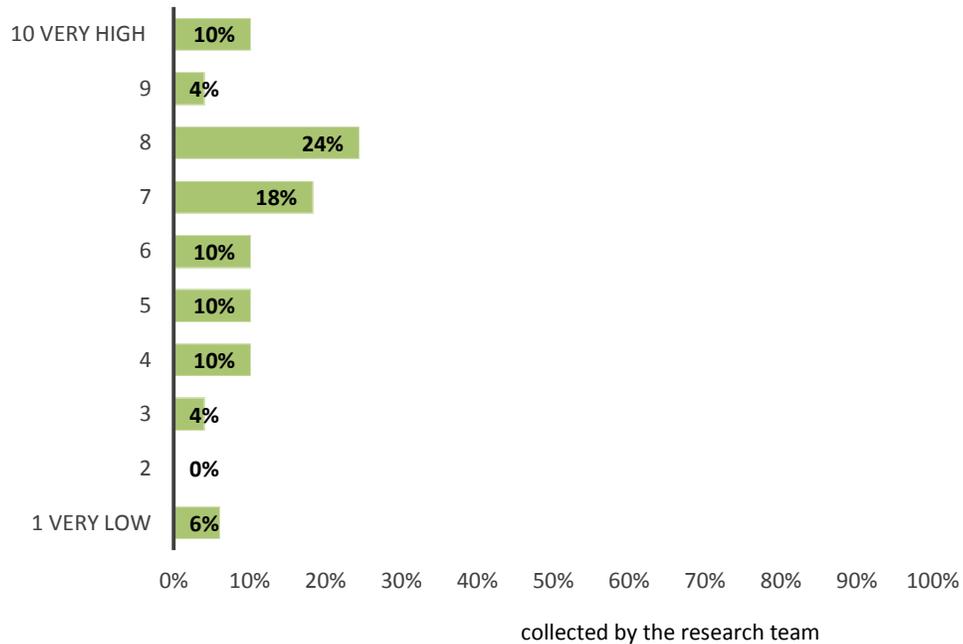
Figure 18. According to your perception, could project assessment, selection and contracting be accelerated?

Yes	69%
No	31%

Figure 19. Have you proposed/already put in place any specific measures to reduce the risk of corruption or fraudulent activities that may occur within the project?

Yes	51%
No	49%

Figure 20. Are you aware of/have you ever heard about the whistleblowing instrument set up at Programme level for reporting any concern, suspected fraud or irregularity?

Yes	49%
No	51%

Figure 21. Do you see necessary to raise awareness of the whistleblowing instrument?

Yes	55%
No	45%

Figure 22. Did you receive any support from the Programme bodies?

Yes	82%
No	18%

Figure 23. If yes, how would you rate the support provided by programme authorities to help beneficiaries in preparing and implementing projects? (Please tick a score from 1 to 10, where 1 means very poor and 10 means very good)
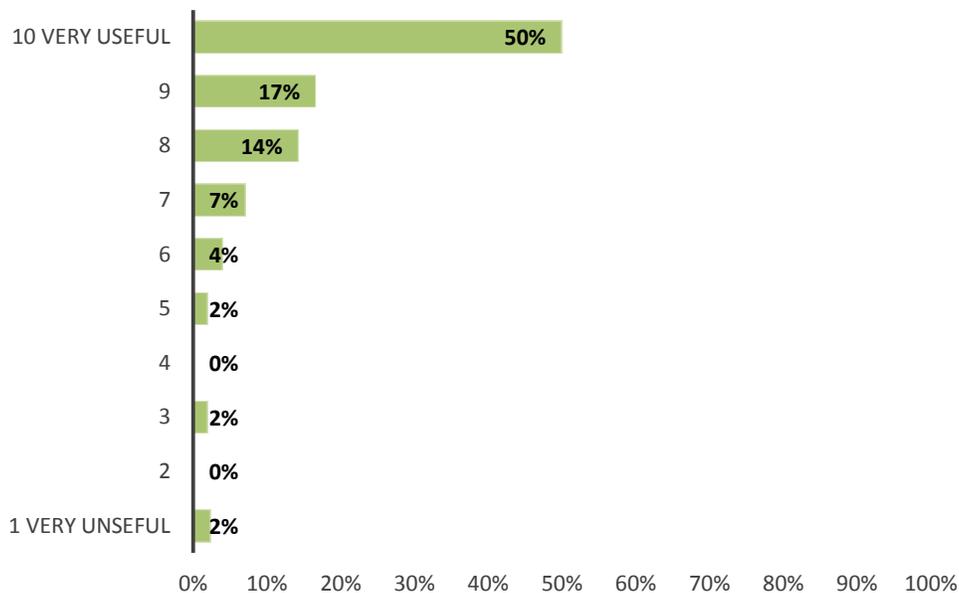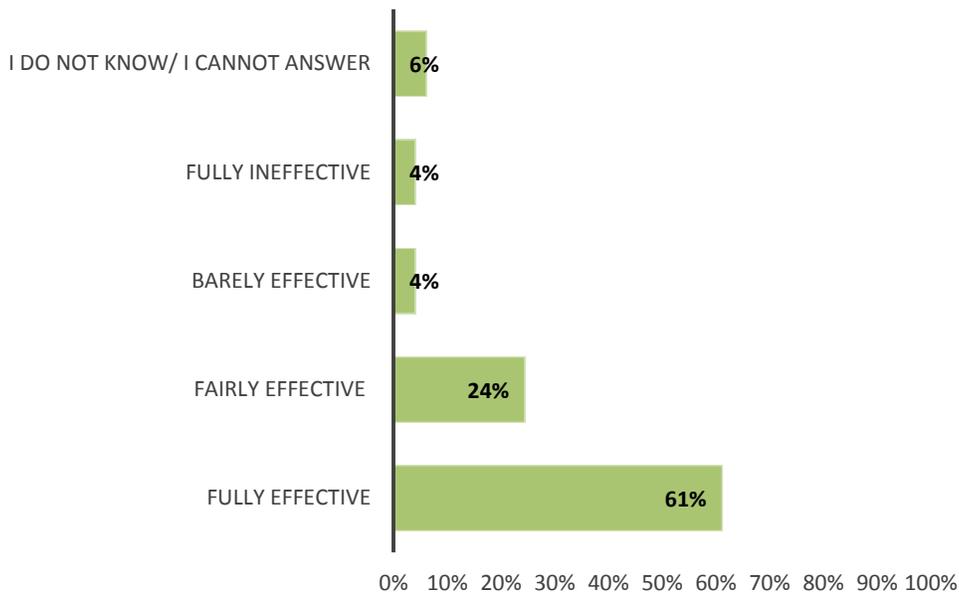

Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 24. To what extent have the objectives of the project been achieved so far?

Level of achievement	N.	%
<10%	3	6%
10-30%	4	8%
30-50%	4	8%
50-70%	5	10%
70-100%	33	67%
Total	**49**	**100%**

Figure 25. Do you think the target values for the project outputs will be easily reachable (with reference to the Programme output indicators)?

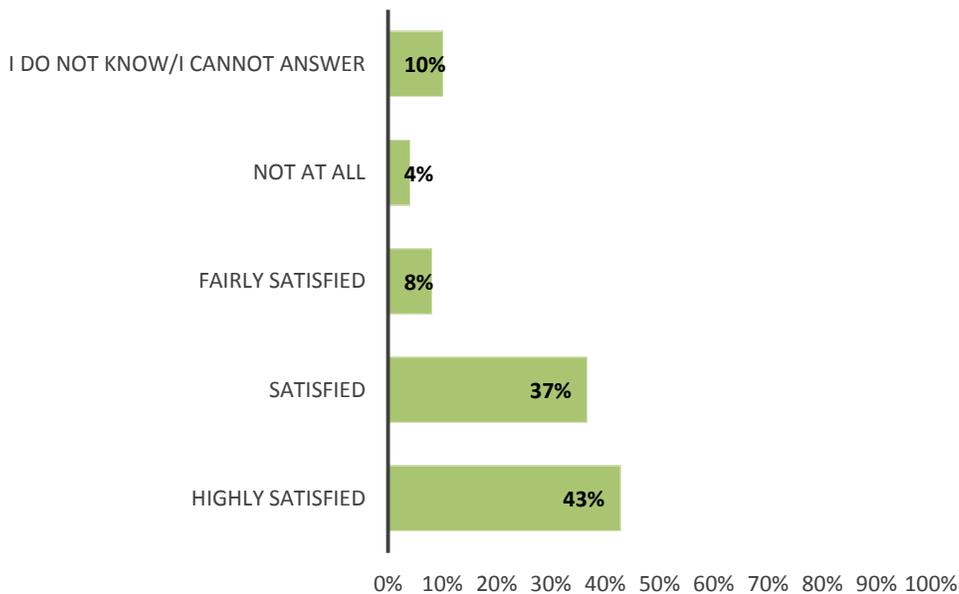| **Yes**	**80%**
No	**18%**
Not certain	**2%**

Figure 26. How do you consider the use of simplified cost option in the project implementation?

Source: Data collected by the research team

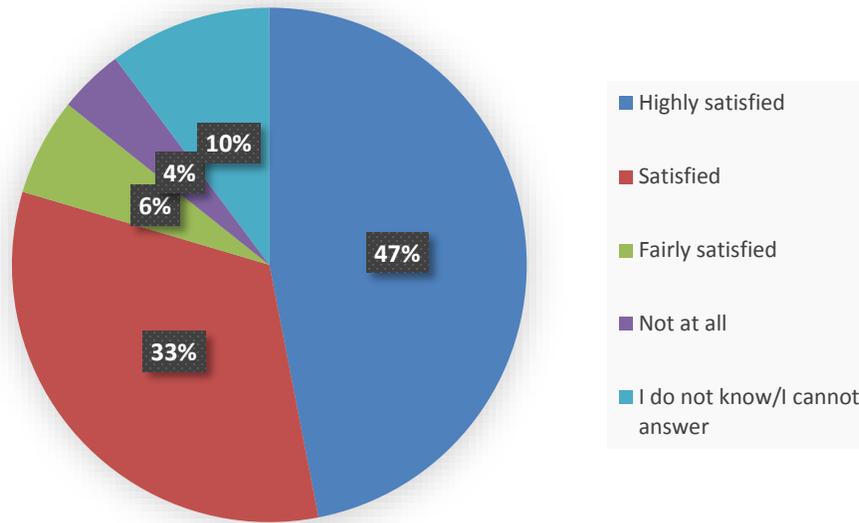## Section II – Horizontal principles and relevance

Figure 27. Are you satisfied with the measures/initiatives taken at programme level to promote gender equality?

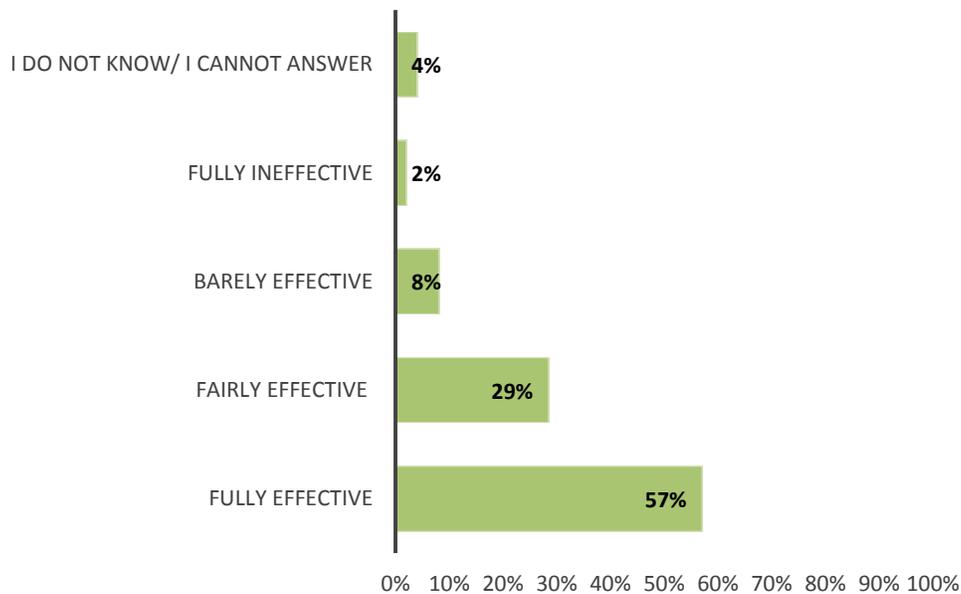Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 28. Are you satisfied with the measures/initiatives taken at programme level to promote non-discrimination?

Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 29. How do you consider the specific actions aimed at ensuring sustainable development (i.e. environmental regulation, eco-friendly incentives, etc.)?
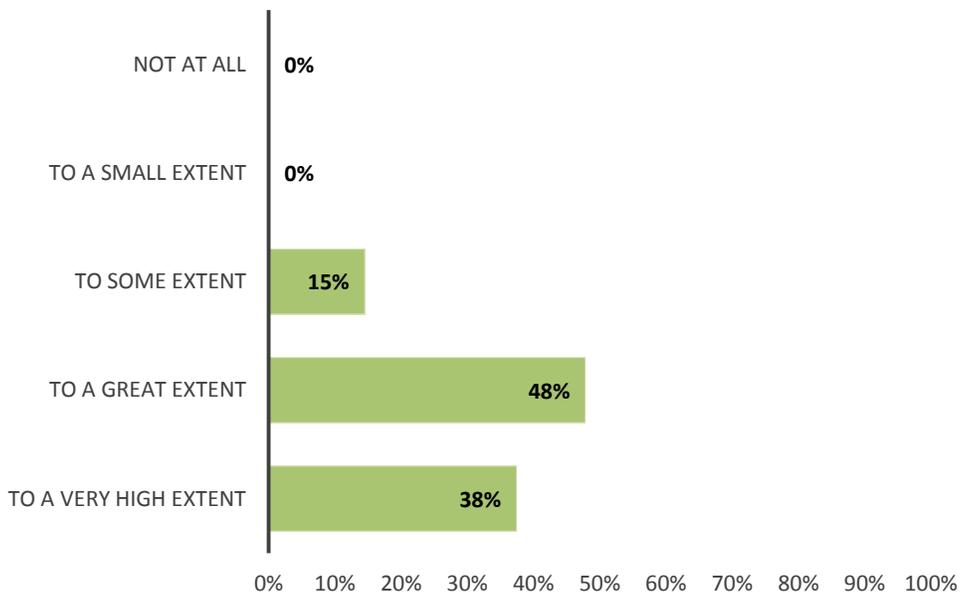

Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 30. Do you consider that the programme is relevant in the policy context?

Yes	82%
No	0%
Partly	16%

Figure 31. Do you consider that the programme encourages positive synergies with other existing policies tool?

Yes	83%
No	0%
Partly	17%

Figure 32. To what extent does the use of funds properly match the development needs of beneficiaries in the programme area?

Category	Value
NOT AT ALL	0%
TO A SMALL EXTENT	0%
TO SOME EXTENT	15%
TO A GREAT EXTENT	48%
TO A VERY HIGH EXTENT	38%

Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 33. Do you consider that the programme delivered added benefits by creating synergies with other policies implemented in the area?

I DO NOT KNOW/ I CANNOT ANSWER **4%**

THERE WERE NO ADDED BENEFITS **0%**

SOME ADDED BENEFITS CAN BE IDENTIFIED BUT THEY ARE NOT SIGNIFICANT **6%**

THE PROGRAMME DELIVERED ADDED BENEFITS BUT IT IS DIFFICULT TO ASSESS THE EXTENT **51%**

THE PROGRAMME CREATED VIRTUOUS **39%**

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
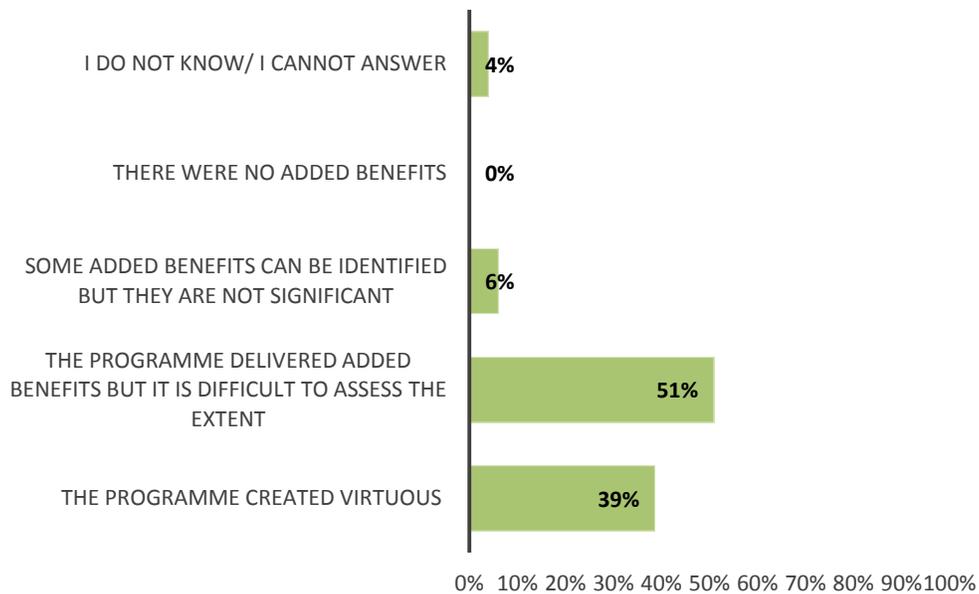
Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 34. Do you consider the project being complementary to other policies implemented in the area?

- To a very high extent
- To a great extent
- To some extent
- To a small extent
- Not at all
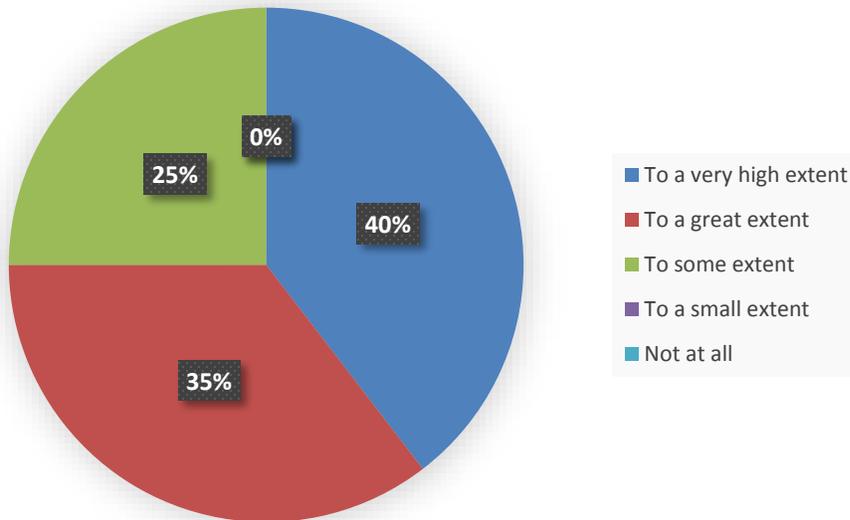
Source: Data collected by the research team

Figure 35. Does the programme contribute to the implementation of EU Strategy for the Danube River objectives?
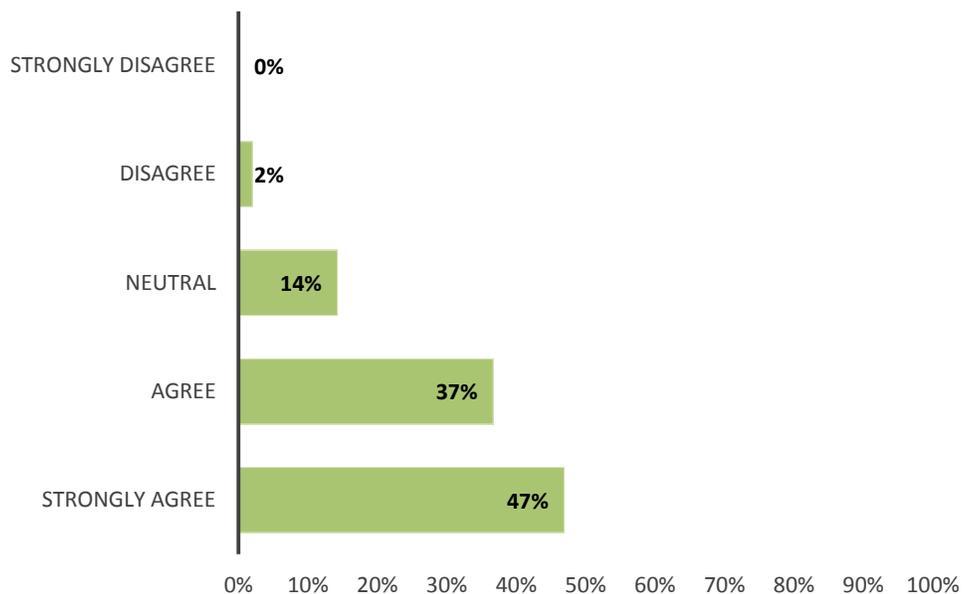
Source: Data collected by the research team

Annex 6 - Interviews with Programme Management Authorities and beneficiaries

Interviewees: Mrs. Ioana Manțog, Mrs. Marcela Glodeanu, Mrs. Valeria Paice, Mrs. Mihaela Piroi - Managing Authority for the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme 2014-2020
Date: 26.02.2020

Topics: Programme relevance, programme implementation, implementation at project level, horizontal principles, programme management and communication

Main aspects highlighted during the interview:

- The needs identified in the eligible area at the moment of designing the Programme are still valid.
- The relevance of the financed projects from the cross-border point of view (joint approach) is a key aspect that has been followed by the Programme's structure since the beginning. In the opinion of the MA, no project should exists if the joint approach is not evident, and this aspect is carefully verified since the first stage of the project.
- The Programme has created a particular grid, whose role is to ensure the quality criteria by checking how strong the cross-border cooperation is guaranteed in each project. The existence of such a grid/criteria has the role to avoid the financing of mirror projects, where the cooperation is not fully ensured. The cooperation dimension is an additional evaluation criteria, representing a pre-condition for receiving the financing.
- One example in this regard is represented by a project financing health infrastructures in Romania and Bulgaria (creation of different sections in hospitals) and although at a first glance the cooperation criteria is not so evident, the possibility that the doctors work together and develop common procedures and approaches makes the cooperation more evident in the end.
- The border regions are the poorest in the country so this is why Romania and Bulgaria need diverse interventions. The countries need everything that can be imagined (investments in companies, roads, infrastructure, etc.) so addressing all the needs will need a bigger budget compared to the one available in the Programme. The budget is clearly very limited in comparison with the needs of the eligible area. The interventions from 2007-2013 programming period were concentrated on some very specific areas of interventions. In the current programming period, the priority axis and the interventions are more concentrated and focused, permitting in this way to cover real needs of the territory. Considering that the actual Programme proved to be successful, it is considered that the new Programme covering the 2021-2027 period, should have the same approach and goal. The border areas still need massive interventions and national programmes in order to solve the very diverse and specific problems.
- When designing the Programme, the MA is looking first at the needs of the area, afterwards they look at the potential of the area to know what can be financed (the territorial analysis on the cross border area). After that phase, the stakeholders are involved in the process and confirm what can actually be done, there are many consultations with the experts in order to decide on what the fund could concentrate more.
- There was a large number of the applications for projects since the beginning and this high level of application was maintained during all the calls for projects, this showing the high level of interest in the Programme as well as the relevance of the problems addressed by the projects.

- The MA is satisfied with the level of reaching the indicators. The level of achieving the indicators in the current programming period is better than what was achieved during the 2007-2013 period. The indicators from previous programming period were affected also by the economic crisis. Everything that works better in the actual programming period is also a consequence of the lessons learnt in the previous one.

- The MA had a great contribution in obtaining the satisfactory results and achievements of the Programme, by being proactively involved in the implementation and monitoring of the Programme and by taking a lot of specific measures in order to keep the deadlines and achieve the quality of projects. Team cohesion of the Programme structures greatly contributed to the results obtained.

- The structure of the Ministry had changed during the current programming period. The certified unit from the Ministry of Finance was brought at the premises of the MA, which was a huge progress that helped the bodies managing the Programme to be more efficient (the cash-flow was easier to be ensured, the procedures were simplified due to the electronic access to the applications).

- In what concerns the indicators proposed for the first call of projects, they were not reached as expected. Due to some administrative blockages and to some consensus that needed to be taken, the Programme's indicators had some issues in reaching the targets. Even so and considering the measures taken by the MA (changes in the selection grids and calls), the Programme managed to achieve a high level of realization.

- The call for proposals was improved, it was made even clearer and the interventions received more focus.

- The Monitoring Committee does not change things on the way: only in the worst case scenario. The proposed guides are consulted with the Bulgarian authorities and then with the MC, after which a specific time is dedicated to the public consultations. As a final step, the Monitoring Committee approves the guide taking into considerations all the observations raised during the consultations.

- The indicators are monitored permanently in order to take all the measures necessary to reach the right levels.

- There is the issue of public procurement procedures in Romania that cause some difficulties and delays in project implementation for the beneficiaries. The same problem of public procurement is also an issue for the Bulgarian beneficiaries. To overcome these difficulties, the MA has organized training for the staff and beneficiaries in order to help them understand how to deal with the specific problems, such as public procurements issues, electronic platforms, guides for applicants, reporting and so on.

- There were some beneficiaries that, due to the delays in implementation, they were forced to cancel the projects.

- The constitution of the partnerships for the projects is one of the most important factors that influence the implementation of the projects. Because of this reason, the Programme's bodies have tried to support the applicants in identifying the best partners, although there were lots of applicants who have built partnership already from the previous programming period.

- The involvement of the consultants in the preparation of the application documentation is different from case to case. There are companies supporting the applicants in submitting the financing requests, but sometimes there are beneficiaries that did not have consultants and had

managed to write good projects, capitalizing also on the previous similar experience to apply for funding.

- The Programme's bodies supported the beneficiaries in the application phase, by organizing training sessions on how to write the applications and by organizing caravans on the border area.

- The MA mentioned as important the monitoring of the projects' results and their sustainability (for example, the elaboration of strategies and studies need a particular monitoring so that they become sustainable and relevant in the cross-border area). At the project level, the beneficiaries should better understand the meaning of sustainability.

- There is one specific measure decided by the MA, whose role is to ensure a good implementation rate of the projects contracted, which refer to the setting of the rule that a beneficiary should not have more than four projects in implementation in the same time. This measure contributed to the success of the projects, although there were registered some complaints from the beneficiaries about this.

- Compared to the 2007-2013 programming period, when the participants were asked to describe how they are going to tackle horizontal principle, in the current Programme these principles became compulsory. If there were innovative ways in which the beneficiaries applied the horizontal principles, the application form received extra points for these criteria.

- More than that, in the current Programme, the website became accessible for people with disabilities, which is an added value of the application of non-discrimination principle compared to the previous programming period.

- The application of this principle seems balanced from the point of view of the composition of the Monitoring Committee, this being a rule respected since the beginning (the same number of Romanian and Bulgarian actors involved).

- The MA propose to do more in the sustainability phase in what concerns the application of the horizontal principles, also by integrating the green deal packages and by elaborating a series of documents that emphasise their principles. Another initiative refers to the involvement of the Programme in actions to plant trees. For the next period, the Programme will avoid the financing of normal cars and white paper (this possibility will be kept only for exceptional cases).

- During the current programming period, the decision of the Programme's authorities was to realize the evaluation of the financing application in-house and not going for external evaluators, because this was not successful in the previous programming period.

- JS is now outsourcing some thematic evaluation for the parts where they do not have the technical expertise. This solution is the best among all the others they had tried.

- For contracting phase, a lot of time was dedicated for the performing of on the spot visits. For the future, the MA will consider the option of creating a sample for on the spot visits, so that they decrease the number of these visits and they reduce the time for these verifications.

- The evaluation process consisted in a 2-step evaluation, which was applied for all the projects, in the 2014-2020 programming period there were no strategic projects financed by the Programme.

- In the next programming period, the MA wants to intensify the use of the simplified costs. From this reason, the intention is to elaborate a methodology for establishing the simplified costs and the type of documents that should be received in order to prove the costs.

- First level control is very important because gives the capacity to keep the costs updated. In 2007-2013 they were verified by the auditors at 80%, now the level is 30-35%.

- The TA covers the needs of MA.

- Joint Secretariat has a team-building exercise twice a year. They attend internal workshops. This type of exercise should be extended to all the authorities involved in the Programme because this will create team cohesion at Programme level.
- Irregularities are different from the antifraud activities. Antifraud strategy is just an umbrella because under this strategy there are a lot of procedures and documents established. The EC provides the MA with a tool to use in order to tackle the risk of fraud.
- After the creation of this tool and its correspondent procedures and measures, the MA started to monitor the risk of antifraud and to create individual fiches for each risk.
- There are various public campaigns for the information and communication activities organized every year.
- The Programme also make a step forward on social media – promotion tool used are Facebook and Twitter. The MA received feedback from EP and EC to increase the level of communication and understanding between the institutions at different level of governance
- In order to present what the Programme obtained in terms of results and for exchanging experiences with others, the MA was invited as speakers to different events.
- There is an interest in attracting new beneficiaries, not only the same beneficiaries that apply all the time.
- In terms of beneficiaries there have been registered a great progress. Now the beneficiaries promote their results. They also received video made by beneficiaries about their projects. In 2021-2027, they will do a guide with standard communication measure in order to establish the same level of exposure to all the projects. The majority of beneficiaries did not know how to sell their projects.
- The communication with beneficiaries is also maintained through the website where they publish everything that is new in term of legislation and all the documents that they need.
- The JS should be also the tool that helps the projects, not only a monitoring tool.
- For the beneficiaries is nothing imposed in terms of visibility
- Previous evaluations show that the beneficiaries were aware of the Programme.

Interviewees: Mr. Milen Obretov - Ministry for Territorial Development (National Authority for the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme 2014-2020)
Date: 27.02.2020

Topics: Programme relevance, programme implementation, implementation at project level, horizontal principles, programme management and communication

Main aspects highlighted during the interview:

- The Ministry for Territorial Development is the most responsible institution for the RO-BG Programme and other Interreg Programmes (such as BG – SER and BG – Turkey). The Interreg RO-BG is the biggest one in terms of regions covered (the Bulgarian-Romanian border is the second longest in Europe)
- It is the only National Authority from the Bulgarian side. Thus, the Ministry is involved in several activities:

- It sits on Monitoring Committee and prepares/coordinates National Positions;
- It is charge of National Control System and design controllers
- It overviews the national co-financing and it has a key role in the programming phase.

- As compared with the initial needs' assessment, there were no major changes. Thus, the Programme retains its relevance in the region.
- Being amongst the less developed regions in the EU, there is a wide range of needs to be assessed.
- The needs assessment had been carried out with a bottom-up approach. This proved to be successful, yet there is room for improvement as local stakeholders may been involved to a higher degree (especially on technical issues).
- On the other hand, we observed a clear continuity with the previous Interreg Programme and the PHARE Programme dating back to the pre-accession phase.
- The continuity created a local network where the actors have been the same in the last 15 years.
- Yet, the Programme could be more relevant to the region – especially in terms of connecting the both side of borders. The Danube – rather than being a connectivity factor – remains a significant physical barrier for the two sides of the border, which should be taken in consideration in the design of cooperation Programmes.
- The cross-border dimension – while improved in the last programming period – remains not fully exploited. The issues of mirroring projects remain common.
- This is because it can be easy to create "artificial cooperation" for establishing partners in order to have access to funding.
- It should also be noted that – as long as physical barriers (i.e. lack of infrastructures) are significant, together with soft ones such as language – it is harder to create real "cross-border projects".
- The cross-border relevance is in fact more visible in projects where these physical barriers are less visible and offer larger scope for cooperation. This is the case of Tourism and Cultural heritage projects – where cross-border partnerships are very successful. This is also true for Environmental and Climate change adaptation related projects – especially in risk prevention – where municipalities cooperate in the purchasing of instrument putting into place a common procurement system.
- The EU Danube Strategy is indeed very relevant for the Programme and there are substantial synergies in terms of objectives. For instance, Romania and Bulgaria manage jointly one of the Priority Areas of the EU Danube Strategy that is Tourism.
- The Interreg Programme is also aligned with the National Strategy in the area. Indeed, a reform of the national strategies concerning cross-border links is currently in the pipeline. This will furtherly increase relevance with the Interreg Programme.
- The current reform aims at a more detailed assessment of specific needs at the regional level. It will combine a top down approach from the national perspective with a bottom up approach ensured by extensive consultation from local stakeholders. The experience of the Interreg Programme has had some influence on this strategic rethinking. For instance, both the national strategy and the following Interreg Programme will give more importance to the Maritime aspect.

- Given the extent of the challenges affecting the Region, it is hardly impossible to fully cover all the needs. However, the policy makers, in respect of the Draft Regulations, are considering the pre-selection of one or two projects of strategic importance for the cross-border Region for the next programming period. These will be integrated projects – i.e. encompassing different fields of intervention.
- These strategic projects will be designed with a clear cross-border feature, able to cover the whole territory. The Romanian authorities share this view. There are two strategic projects in the pipeline for the next programming period:
- Integrated transport infrastructure relevant for the EuroVelo 6 and the Danube River Navigation. This project will also include measures aimed at boosting the local economy, as there is a huge untapped potential along the Danube.
- Investment in new bridges, but also the reconstruction of the existing docks and ports on the Danube to improve its navigability from one to the other side of the border.
- For the next programming period, it is important to address also Maritime issues, which are not considered under the current Programme, as there are cross-border Regions that face the Black Sea.
- To conclude, it should be stated that the Programme is substantially relevant with needs and other policies and that the cross-border dimension has improved significantly. Yet, mirroring projects are still relatively common.
- Overall, the effectiveness of the project implementations is satisfactory.
- However – many project beneficiaries – reported that the project implementation is over-controlled. This is because the Programme has different layer of governance – each of those requiring a check.
- Thus, from a project beneficiary perspective, there is the perception of being constantly under auditing and controlling.
- This level of control is different from other Interreg Programme in which the Ministry is involved. For instance, the BG-GR Interreg Programme is much more streamline and the control system are significantly less burdensome.
- The auditing system is perceived as "over-controlling": project beneficiaries often pointed out that the auditors were looking for the minimum irregularity
- This approach led to frequent financial corrections, which – in several cases – led to the decommissioning of projects. Regrettably, this is a major waste of money and time.
- Concerning the implementation phase, it should be highlighted that it is quite easy to find partnership – this is due to the efficient local network that has been established throughout the previous programmes. This avoided many projects decommissioning.
- Another successful factor is the lack of political conflicts between the two Countries.
- Even though the National Authority is not in the Programme implementation - thus it does not have any role in project selection – it considers that the cooperation with the Managing Authority is efficient. The coordination is very functional, and the partnership is working well.
- As far as project selection is concerned, the National Authority does not need to approve each project. However, certain projects implemented by the regional administrations which require

letter of support from the Council of Ministers. This is because – despite being independent institutions – they do not have their own budget. As beneficiary need to provide their own resources, the approval of the Council of Ministers is needed. They mostly focus on the relevance and financial soundness of the projects.

- This applies only to regional administration – municipalities and ministries do not need to go through this process, as they possess their own budget.

- This procedure will change in the future. In the strategic document, the law for regional development will be changed. Regional councils will be involved in the implementation of EU funded projects. This will ensure better coordination between projects implemented guaranteeing consistency amongst the project goals and the regional priorities and needs. On the other hand, the regional councils will have a more important role in projects' selection and relevance in the future. For now, the major check by the government concerns the financial soundness.

- Given the level of under-development and the challenges faced by the region, there is room for very big set of interventions. Yet, these interventions need to be consistent with the challenges that the region concretely faces, in the next programming period.

- Auditing is by far the most difficult issue.

- The language barrier is also an issue. Bulgarian and Romanian are very different and local stakeholders are not fluent in English.

- The beneficiary receives almost 100% of the total costs of the project. This is a good incentive for projects take up.

- This approach should be applied also in the next programming period. Given the lack of local financial resources, this very high co-financing rate is probably the only way to guarantee project delivery.

- The auditing is exaggerated. It lacks proportionality. It should be adjusted to the size of the project.

- In addition, the overall approach of looking for the frauds is not appreciated.

- Sometimes the issue only concerns 5 euros of ineligible costs, but this is enough to stall a project. Not to mention the time wasted in investigating into it.

- The relation is good. However, the geographical location of the Joint Secretariat poses logistic challenges for project beneficiaries.

- It would be better to have more small info points in the Programme area.

- The technical assistant budget is very big (about EUR 20M) but it can be designed more wisely. It can be improved, especially envisaging support for project beneficiaries in designing their project ideas

- In general, it is difficult to assess the impact at this stage. Thus, rather than actual findings, we will deal with perceptions

- Sustainability in the long term is difficult to assess. This is the goal for this programming period, knowing that it was an issue in the previous.

- There has been an improvement in the last programming period, as project beneficiary better understood the concept of sustainability.

- The criteria for ensuring sustainability are also stricter.
- If more SMEs will be involved as project beneficiary, this would help project's sustainability, as their goal is to keep their business going.
- Sustainability criteria: example – Ministry of Interior beneficiary. The key area is risk prevention. Within this project, many expensive equipment is bought, and they need maintenance. As they are visible expenditures, the project beneficiary invests in maintenance; otherwise, it would be clear they are wasting public money. Flagship projects are usually more sustainable, as project beneficiaries put more effort in that. While soft measures projects are usually less sustainable long term. (i.e. study or action plan are unlikely to be used in the long term). Once the sustainability period expires, these projects are usually forgotten.
- Then, there is the issue of project repetition and overlapping which is often not tackled enough.
- The sustainability assessment is developed enough. Project beneficiaries may simply sign a declaration without any strict check. The assessment should be carried out more at an early stage – considering also local needs. The more relevant is the project, the more likely it would sustainable.
- In Bulgaria, regional councils will check the relevance at very early stage – which will help the selection of sustainable project.
- Diverging political objectives may also hinder sustainability.
- Hard measures are usually more likely to deliver impact.
- However, it is difficult to isolate the specific impacts of the Programme, as there a lot of complementary policies/investment in the area.
- In order to ensure higher impact, a balance between hard and soft measures is advisable.
- The cross-border region is still facing significant transportation challenges, especially on the Danube navigation. To some extent, the navigability was better 30 years ago when state-run boats ensure daily crossings.
- So far, impacts on Danube navigability are hardly visible.
- The new Programme shall have more focus on supporting infrastructural investment. Given the limited financial resources, the INTERREG cannot directly finance major infrastructural investments but it may support their impacts.
- Road Infrastructure Agency in Bulgaria should have some data, but they may be outdated.
- Socio-economic analysis of Bulgaria is a relevant document for the impact analysis.
- TEN-T can be a benefit for delivering higher impact – but there is a whole OP on that so overlapping is a key risk.
- Municipal roads improvements will probably have a more significant impact on the local development.
- This is particularly true also for the Danube Strategy. The EU strategy ensures traffic on the Danube but not from one side to the other.
- The Programme did not have a significant impact on that. The key limitation is capacity.
- In addition, this type of projects should not have open call as only public entities can deliver these complex infrastructural projects.

- Municipalities were invited to submit projects, but they lacked the basic skills (i.e. they are not fluent in English).
- We can observe a good impact on heritage in the area thanks to the Programme. It is arguably the sector where the impacts are strongest.
- This is because the heritage sector offers many possible interventions: Romania and Bulgaria share a common cultural background.
- In this sector, the cross-border dimension is particularly relevant.
- Like the heritage, also the environment offers significant scope for cross-border cooperation. Indeed, both sides of the borders are facing the same challenges (especially flood management).
- The cross-border dimension in this field is difficult to assess. Likewise, it is quite difficult to assess impacts at this stage.
- So far, it is possible to highlight that the Programme has improved the cross-border information sharing concerning environmental risks.
- Natura 2000 has been a facilitating factor in the delivery of impacts.
- Labor mobility is not well developed. A major obstacle is the lack of infrastructures connecting both sides of the border.
- For instance, Ruse and Giurgiu are connected by a bridge, which makes interregional projects and flows easier and more effective.
- Overall, it would be over optimistic to think that the Interreg Programme may significantly change the current situation in the labor market. The structural unemployment is a long-lasting challenge for the region and would require massive policy interventions.
- In the last years, we noticed a slight improvement, but this is hardly attributable to the Programme.
- The Programme had limited impact on specific type of employment – especially for minorities such as Roma population.
- Labor mobility is mainly obstructed by the lack of proper infrastructure allowing the circulation of people and goods
- Improving institutional capacity is a feasible target for the target.
- Most of the impacts are at the local level – meaning that it is possible to see an actual improvement in the cooperation on both sides of the borders.
- As previously said, one of the key impacts of the Programme was to create a well-established cross-border network.
- Partnership agreements create positive spill overs: partners share their experience.
- This also happens between public authorities – for instance our cooperation with the Romanian MA.
- This institutional cooperation may have some impact on daily citizen's life. For instance, exchanging of best practices may lead to an overall better administration of the concerned areas.
- Networking is as import as infrastructural investments. However, the actual impacts will be observed in the next future. The impacts will be also facilitated by other national Programme.
- Considering the budget of the Programme, it is impossible that the situation changes in a couple of years.

- The EU contribution is essential, but most of the issues in the region should be national priority.
- Thematic concentration – in line with EU Cohesion policy – was an added value and supported a more efficient use of the funds
- However, probably, local beneficiary and stakeholder would say the opposite.
- The ERDF contribution was a benefit and far better than national programmes. There are stricter rules. ERDF helps local and national planners to concentrate on the real needs. Focus resources on certain topic, which are priority. National funds – on the other hand – are more influenced by political and personal views.

Interviewees: Mr. Bogdan Mușat - Joint Secretariat (JS)/CBC RO Calarasi for the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme 2014-2020)
Date: 05.03.2020

Topics: Programme relevance, programme implementation, implementation at project level, horizontal principles, programme management and communication

Main aspects highlighted during the interview:

- The Programme is still in the socio-geo-political context of the area. The interest for the opportunities offered by the Programme and by the cooperation between and RO and BG is still huge. More beneficiaries are already preparing for the next programming period and they are trying be updated with everything that is related with the next programming period.
- The beneficiaries are interested to know if in the next programming period the road infrastructure will still be financed because in the area the infrastructure had a need of a lot of investments, but there is still place for much more; they also want that the crisis to be financed. Equally, they are interested that the small projects (people-to-people projects) will still be financed in the next programming period.
- There were been organized meetings recently for the preparation for the next programming and it had been heard that there is also an interest in receive finance for common agriculture and fishers projects, but the ERDF does not cover this areas.
- The Jerome project, implemented by MAI from RO and BG together with an institute that realized an action plan for interventions in CBRM cases. Indeed, this project is really cross-border, sustainable, that even received a prize from the European Commission. This is the most visible project, but there are also projects that have the same results, but their effects perhaps is more locally.
- The Programme is in real complementarity with the national policies. There are no contradictions.
- Other programmes replicated to Interreg V-A RO-BG. The replication of projects were not identified. When projects are not supported by a good partnership basis, they really do not have a cooperation added value, the partnership is weak, and there were cases in which partnerships failed in the end, before submitting the application or during implementation.

- There is a project implemented by the maritime executive agency from Bulgaria and the naval authority from Romania in order to improve the safety of transportation on the Danube for the common portion. It developed a cross-border urgency system.
- There are projects that aims to strengthen the riverbeds, or to raise the awareness for citizens to keep the Danube clean.
- The transport on Danube is more important at a local level because there are only two bridges, than the transportation on a larger scale (to Vienne for example).
- At Programme level, there are 201 projects, among which 185 contribute to the EU Strategy for the Danube River and they received extra points. The other 16 projects does not contribute, but does not mean they are in contrast with this strategy.
- The beneficiaries are interested to know if in the next programming period the road infrastructure will still be financed because in the area the infrastructure had a need of a lot of investments, but there is still place for much more;. Equally, they are interested that the small projects (people-to-people projects) will still be financed in the next programming period.
- There were been organized meetings recently for the preparation for the next programming and it had been heard that there is also an interest in receive finance for common projects in agriculture and fishers, but the ERDF does not cover this areas.
- There is always place for improvements. The projects developed well, the indicators are achieved, and the objectives are where they have to be. There are some indicates that are already exceeded.
- The selection from 2016 from the first call for "hard" projects was a real problem of the Programme at that moment that determined a delay of the implementation of the projects and the Programme. In the end, it was resolved, but that moment created a crisis.
- The mandatory mid-term financial target came as a measure of safety, based on the negative experience that happened in the last programming period that resulted in some case in automatic recommitment. Hence, it was considered unfair for the other beneficiaries to have the projects closed only because some of them did not performed well. This measure is in conclusion a measure that helps the beneficiaries to be more vigilant and perform well from the beginning of the project to the end. The rule was well explained in advance to the beneficiaries, so consequently it is not perceived as an important burden for the beneficiaries.
- The mid-term expenditure targets were theoretically left free to beneficiary's discretion. However, in the pre-contracting phase, the establishment of the mid-term turned to be the result of a consultation/negotiation between beneficiaries and the JS. JS took care that the targets were set in a realistic way: not too ambitious, but not even too limited. It had to be consistent with the plan of activities.
- There were eventually some projects that have been losing resources because of the rule. No more than 10% of the projects. The revocation is of course proportionate with what they realised. If they realized less than 75%, they have been penalized with 10% and the one that realized 50% penalized with 25%. In the guidelines, it is detailed.
- The resulting budget cut was managed based on beneficiary's preferences. Normally, their choice was to reduce chapters where there were already economies.

- The rule establishing a maximum of four projects to have funded as leader partner or partner is due to lesson learnt from the previous programming period. There were situations of beneficiaries that had 6 projects but they did not have the human capital and the finances to finish the projects.

- This over-reaching of the projects should not be treated as a failure of an error, and it should be look at as an answer, a natural perspective of what had been initially provided. The beneficiaries had seen an opportunity in the Programme and there are many needs even if the budget is small.

- A project came with 480 km instead of 20 km with the same money, because the initial project idea was extended to the whole of the Danube coastline.

- There were not been identified any risk that could be considered. The public procurement process is an external factor that can to some extent influence the good development of the projects.

- There is not a pattern because any projects is different, with its particular aspects.

- The key elements are related to a good partnership: communication and respect between the partners. The communication between partners could be done in any way: by phone, e-mail, meetings, formal or informal. Important is to communicate and share. Partnership with scarce communication or reciprocal respect/consideration, are often failing

- Human resources, is indeed an important factor: there is a duty from the beneficiaries to update themselves about the legislation that had been modified and the rules of the Programme. If they do it well, because they are structured to do it, it is a positive factor.

- The level of communication between JS and beneficiaries is good; it follows formal and informal channels. Not all the beneficiaries communicate with the JS to the same intensity. Some of them are strong form the institutional and HR point of view and are very prepared.

- Communication between partners, the degree of assistance required and provided by JS to the beneficiaries and the self-knowledge and preparation of the beneficiaries about the legislation and the Programme.

- There are no patterns. Among recurrent external causes, there were situations of modification of the legal representatives of the partners (mayors, presidents of NGOs), with the incoming one not wanting to continue and support some projects that were elaborated by the ones previously in charge, seen as "politically labelled". A phenomenon that was not massive, but anyway recurrent, both in Romania and Bulgaria. There are also situation in which was a change of partnership. Some beneficiaries tried to find other partners but this created obviously a situation of delay. In addition, changes in general legislations led to the delaying of financing contracts.

- About the partner withdrawal phenomenon, something could be done. Like establishing financial penalties for the beneficiaries that withdraw, because they put at stake the success of the Programme. They should also not be so confident in keeping the funding that was already reimbursed at the moment of withdrawing.

- The beneficiaries are fully supported in the application phase and they normally apply with good quality projects. The sensation is that the majority of the application is however written by consultancy firms for beneficiaries, but some "big" beneficiaries have the internal resources to apply without such a service.

- The beneficiaries , if appropriately experienced and staffed, do not necessarily need a consultant to apply; however many potential beneficiaries are not experienced in applications, and the

presence of the consultancy firm is very beneficial in these cases: it maintains the "market" open, allowing also those who cannot afford resources for applying to have chances of funding.

- The sensation is that there are consultancy firms with a specialized preparation for the Programme. They also accompany the clients to meetings, JS accepts informally their presence but the relationship is always with the beneficiary. There can be cases in which the project is more the result of the consultants need than the applicant's is, but normally they are not successful: in CBC if the project is not based on a solid need and partnership, it is highly probable that it fails. However, there are also examples of projects that started in a wrong way, from this point of view, but before the application, they adjusted and became good projects.

- There are projects that do not present a real need in the application. However, as said these are normally failing in the selection process.

- The choice of not externalising the assessment and selection phases paid well. It is true that it represents quite a workload for the JS, but overall it's feasible. Internal evaluators know the Programme, the territory and are well prepared to assess applications. We should not exclude completely for the future the choice of outsourcing, as we do not know the number of projects that might come under the new programming period. In any case, it would be more a logistical choice, due to workload, rather than on results of the selection, which has always been successful.

- The contracting procedure is still under the responsibility of JS. It works well. About the pre-contracting on-the spot visits, their main role is to verify the correspondence of the documents submitted with the original ones. Nevertheless, the utility of the visit is much beyond that: it is an occasion to know each other (JS and beneficiary), to explain rules and limitations, and to inform, to coach. It is a dedicated moment to the project and it is very precious for the implementation period that will follow.

- Most of them are well-based projects with real needs and strong chances for sustainability of the projects.

- For the JS, The procedures have been realised after the MA's procedures. There have been transformed in Joint Secretariat's procedures.

- For beneficiaries the procedure is not complicated, is either easy, it is medium. If it was complicated there were less results, but the results prove that it is not that complicated.

- The Programme is quite mature, and bad aspects were identified and resolved during the first part of implementation of the Programme, and also during the previous one

- The continuity of the same people that are working on this Programme is helping the well-functioning of the Programme. In addition, the lessons learnt from the previous programming period have a big impact of the well development of the actual Programme.

- The simplified cost are very useful and it is a measure that reduce the administrative burden of beneficiaries and joint secretariat or other authorities.

- Even if this the introduction of this measure may be problematic, it helped to reduce the time of verification and because of that the money could have been reimbursed faster.

- Important problems are related to the understanding of this measure from the point of view of the Audit Authority whose approach considers that all the money spent should be justified. But the Regulation is clear and there is confidence that problems can be solved

- TA covers the full operatively of the JS. JS staff and activities are covered by TA projects, with funding contracts on a period of three years since 2018. Before there were only one year.

- One problem related to the use of TA is the ineligibility of expenditures for judicial defense in courts. As JS has to face contestation in Court for its selection and monitoring functions, it needs to pay lawyers and other judicial expenses. However, the TA cannot cover these. It is then the budget of BRCT affected – until now it has been enough.

- The national political levels should be more involved in what is happening at the borders. Bordering areas are often neglected, not only in the content of legislations, but also in their system of applying and functioning.

- For examples, the public procurement legislations take into consideration the acquisition that are happening at the borders of the countries, in a very limited way

- The communication is good. The beneficiaries have trust in Joint Secretariat and its personnel.

- Antenna is not a separated body compared to the JS. It is a part of the staff delegated in a premise in Bulgaria, without any autonomous organization.

- The Programme is quite visible because there were events in the entire eligible area. There are target groups that are informed and we send them all the information they need. There are also group that are more social categories and this information has no interest for them.

- The young people had projects addressed primarily for them and they were really happy and involved in those projects. Most of them are informed and they know about the Programme.

- The potential beneficiaries receive all the information they need. In each county and districts were organized info days for each call period and afterwards there have been a specific orientation (in some districts were more events that in other districts).

Interviewees: Mrs. Albena Georgieva – Vidin District Administration
Date: 03.03.2020

Topics: Programme relevance, programme implementation, implementation at project level, horizontal principles, programme management and communication

Main aspects highlighted during the interview:
The Vidin Regional Administration did not implement a project under the said program. Furthe, please be aware that the beneficiaries have no obligation to inform the regional administration about the projects they are implementing.

For the purposes of the attached interview, information ha been used, both from the database of the Vidin Regional Administration and from the official websites of institutions and organizations.

- The Vidin District Administration did not implement the Interreg V-A Romania - Bulgaria 2014-2020 project. A non-governmental organization from Vidin has implemented a project under Priority Axis 1 of the Program related to the Establishment of an Electric Bicycle Network in the

Cross-Border Area between Bulgaria and Romania, with a view to better realizing individual mobility and sustainable transport.

- Key improvements related to transport could not be identified given the fact that institutions and organizations have not implemented infrastructure projects on the Territory of Vidin County along Interreg V-A Romania - Bulgaria 2014-2020.

- About the key gaps and needs that should be addressed in the near future, a local stakeholders opinion was that it should be improved the rail connection between Vidin and Calafat, respectively between Vidin and Craiova. In this way, those wishing to visit the respective cities have the opportunity to leave in the morning from their country and go back home in the evening. Another inconvenience is that, at the moment, the train travelling between Vidin and Craiova passes by Calafat but does not enter the station and continues to Golentsi (a settlement well beyond the borders of Calafat) which makes it difficult for travelers.

- The perception of the local stakeholder about the progress in improving the secondary and tertiary nodes connections to TEN-T infrastructure in the cross-border area in the las 5 years was that there has been real progress within some of the administrative areas covered by the Romania-Bulgaria Programme. With regard to Vidin District, the construction and maintenance of the transport infrastructure is carried out with funds from the central budget and/or other operational programmes.

- The main aspects identified by the local stakeholder that have undergone a change were social contacts in the cross-border region that have been increased. Cultural exchange that has been improved. Inter-institutional communication that was enhanced.

- The factors that have most influenced/determined such changes mentioned by the beneficiary were:
    - The conditions laid down in the Program, the projects to be implemented in Bulgaria and Romania by legal entities on both sides of the border;
    - The free movement of goods and persons.

- Changes to the transport infrastructure contribute to achieving some of the goals and measures of the Government Program's Priority "Effective Maintenance, Modernization and Development of Transport Infrastructure". The changes resulting from the implementation of the Romania-Bulgaria Programs contribute to the implementation of public policies.

- The program provides quite a wide range of options for solving specific problems. The key is now the evaluation and selection of projects.

- With regard to Vidin district - the construction and maintenance of the transport infrastructure is carried out with funds from the central budget and / or other operational programs and we could not answer whether there was a fair prevention of undesirable effects.

- Sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage is one of the main factors for improving tourism in the cross-border region and one of the areas with the largest intervention under the Romania-Bulgaria Program. The changes resulting from the implementation of the Romania-Bulgaria Programs contribute to the implementation of public policies

- As a key result of the implemented projects under the Romania-Bulgaria Program in the field of cultural heritage is its preservation and promotion. Through various project interventions, the

population in the cross-border region is able to get to know the cultural heritage of the neighboring country. This also helps in the development of new tourism products, respectively to maintain a sustainable tourism infrastructure.

- The local stakeholder mentioned three key factors that have facilitated the contribution of the OP to the progress in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving the tourism in the cross border area, such as:
    - Active non-governmental organizations;
    - Effective inter-institutional communication and good partnerships;
    - Established partnerships between Romanian and Bulgarian institutions, agencies, organizations.
- The opinion of the beneficiary was that the OP internal factors that are important was the simplification of the application procedures.
- The experience gained by the beneficiaries from previous periods and the overall institutional framework are a prerequisite for the effective implementation of the projects.
- Public awareness of Natura 2000 sites is increasing. Social responsibility is increasing. The main aspects that have undergone a change were the increased awareness and social responsibility. Increased awareness of protected areas and increased public involvement in environmental protection in cities and Natura 2000 sites. The changes resulting from the implementation of the Romania-Bulgaria Programs contribute to the implementation of public environmental policies.
- The local stakeholder mentioned three key factors that have facilitated the contribution of the OP to the management and protection of NATURA 2000 sites in the cross border area:
    - Active non-governmental organizations;
    - Effective inter-institutional communication and good partnerships;
    - Established partnerships between Romanian and Bulgarian institutions, agencies, organizations.
- About the progress in preventing and managing the capacity of mitigation and disaster resilience in the cross-border area in the last 5 years the respondent mentioned that inter-institutional communication between Romanian and Bulgarian response forces has been improved. Partnerships have been established in the field of early warning and emergency response. The capacity of the specialized units has been increased. Different types of emergency, disaster and emergency management equipment are provided on site.
- The main aspects that have undergone change are related to both the enhancement of the capacity of the specialized units for joint prevention activities and the provision and / or improvement of the available equipment.
- The factors that have most influenced/determined such change were:
    - Effective inter-institutional communication and good partnerships;
    - Established partnerships between Romanian and Bulgarian institutions, agencies, organizations;
    - A common understanding of the need for uniform and coordinated action in risk prevention and management processes.

- The changes resulting from the implementation of the Romania-Bulgaria Program projects contribute to the implementation of public policies in the field of disaster protection.
- About risk, it was mentioned that an important contribution is the fact that two municipalities in the Vidin region have purchased some of the equipment they need to deal with disasters.
- Risk management is a key issue in any state policy and ensuring continuity of support from the Romania-Bulgaria Program is important for both countries.
- The key factors that facilitated the contribution of the OP to the progress in preventing and managing the capacity of mitigation and disaster resilience in the cross-border area were:
    - Effective inter-institutional communication and good partnerships;
    - Established partnerships between Romanian and Bulgarian institutions, agencies, organizations;
    - A common understanding of the need for uniform and coordinated action in risk prevention and management processes.
- In terms of employment, progress has been made, notably in measures to increase information and promote labor mobility, as an opportunity to tackle unemployment.
- The key factors that influenced such a change were to raise public awareness of labor mobility.
- Factors that reduce the effect of labor mobility in the cross-border region are:
    - Lack of accessible and understandable information on job vacancies;
    - Language barrier;
    - Different regulatory requirements / recognition or non-recognition of a particular education / qualification;
    - Social issues (housing, transport, medical care, insurance);
    - Difficulties in the pay gap.
- In employment field, the key factors that facilitated the contribution of the OP were:
    - Active non-governmental organizations;
    - Effective inter-institutional communication and good partnerships;
    - Established partnerships between Romanian and Bulgarian institutions, agencies, organizations.
- About regional development, at the local level, improvements have been noted in the areas of tourism, environmental protection, and promotion of cultural and historical heritage, improvement of partnerships and enhancement of inter-institutional dialogue in the cross-border region.
- The program has a positive impact on regional development.
- The main aspects that have undergone such a change were:
    - Tourism;
    - Environmental protection;
    - Promotion of cultural and historical heritage;
    - Improving partnerships;
    - Enhancing inter-institutional dialogue in the cross-border region.

- The above-mentioned areas of intervention, especially in the soft measures part, are most accessible to the beneficiaries, both in terms of administrative capacity and in terms of co-financing.
- The changes resulting from the Romania-Bulgaria Program projects help to implement the various public policies.
- At this stage, the withdrawal of EU intervention will have a negative effect on local policies.
- In principle, stakeholders welcome EU intervention through relevant programs.

Interviewees: Mr. Momchil Mladenov – Vratsa District Administration
Date: 04.03.2020

Topics: Programme relevance, programme implementation, implementation at project level, horizontal principles, programme management and communication

Main aspects highlighted during the interview:
- From a local stakeholder perspective, significant improvements were perceived in some aspects related to impact in the transport domain, such as accessibility, travel time, safety and connectivity.
- As the main key improvements in the transport area, the beneficiary mentioned that the improvements are related to reconstruction and upgrading the roads, as well as to the fact that more people are using the upgraded infrastructure leading to TEN-T.
- The perception of the local stakeholder about the progress in improving the secondary and tertiary nodes connections to TEN-T infrastructure in the cross-border area in the las 5 years was that the Programme has a positive role to play in developing its transport infrastructure.
- The progress in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving the tourism in the cross-border was emphasized as follow:
    - Implementation of activities to support the identity and traditions of local communities. Collaboration between local cultural and educational institutions (museums and theatres, libraries, community cultural centers) to promote cultural heritage, renew, and support local cultural traditions, preserve cultural, artistic and ethnic values.
    - Creation of common products in culture, arts (festivals, performances, exhibitions, art workshops) and traditional crafts.
    - Common cross-border initiatives in the fields of education, youth and sport.
- Largely, the positive effects of the implementation of the Program and the implementation of public policies can be taken into account. Participation in projects gives the opportunity to extend and improve the experience gained by designing it outside the national territory and comparing it with the experience of partners. Becoming partners in ongoing projects, participants create a wide network of connections and contacts that are particularly useful in future work.

- Among key contributions that were achieved the local stakeholder mentioned Organization of conferences, festivals, business meetings and exchange of experience in creating partnerships between Bulgarian and Romanian tourism businesses, as well as promoting cultural monuments and cultural and natural heritage. Among the economic impacts were mentioned:
    - Established regional partnerships for sustainable development.
    - Established cultural information centers on the territory of Vratsa and Craiova, in which citizens of the two border regions are free to use the means of communication - IP telephones, Internet and videoconferencing. In this way, the two communities have the opportunity to be acquainted with the lifestyle and culture of the population of the neighbouring country, with the opportunities for tourism and business, and to discuss and solve common problems.
    - A common web portal was created between the two largest public libraries in the two border regions - Vratsa and Dolj with free access to the valuable digital wealth from the collections of the two libraries. Hristo Botev Regional Library digitizes 5 collections from the fund of the Department of Local History.
    - Integrated tourism products / services, common strategies, policies or management plans for the valorisation (including awareness raising) of cultural and natural heritage through its restoration and promotion for sustainable economic use.
- The continuity of supported fields at project level from the previous Programme promote cross-border cooperation between people and communities by enhancing social and cultural exchange, leading to the sustainable development of cross-border areas.
- The local stakeholder mentioned three key factors that have facilitated the contribution of the OP to the progress in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving the tourism in the cross border area, such as:
    - Joint actions aimed at tourism infrastructure, respectively the general design of key tourism products and services based on natural and cultural heritage; contribute greatly to the economic, social and cultural sustainable development of the area.
    - Raising the awareness of the communities concerned about the cultural and natural resources of the area in order to be valued and preserved in the future.
    - Creating a stable and lasting partnership between beneficiaries on both sides of the Danube as a tool for sustainable Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border cooperation in order to overcome the physical and socio-cultural barriers.
- The opinion of the beneficiary was that the OP internal factors that are important was the use of grants.
- Cross-border and cross-border problems are being addressed and opportunities are exploited to the best of their ability. Partnerships, improved coordination, and intensive cooperation between decision-makers at local, regional, national and European level are also needed to the mutual benefit of from the point of view of the common interest in a problem, the advantage of having the problem solved on both sides.

- Disaster prevention and shared risk management are among the main cross-border priorities. Stakeholders, as well as civil society, through the results of the previous programming period, are aware of the benefits of cross-border cooperation in this area and the implementation of measures and joint projects to ensure effective management of common problems. A higher level of disaster risk prevention can be achieved through cooperation and coordination, as well as through joint management of common risks at cross-border level.
- The main aspects that have undergone this change were:
    - Ensuring better coordination and effective response of authorities in emergency situations caused by natural disasters
    - Exchange of experience and knowledge on prevention and effective risk management in the cross-border area, including training programs, training initiatives.
    - Provision of technical equipment and specialized equipment.
    - The implementation of the projects contributes to the progress in joint risk management in the Dolj-Vratsa area.
- Among the factors that have determined/influenced these changes were mentioned the following:
    - Identifying common measures that can best address disasters and shared risks.
    - Support for investment / joint risk management and risk prevention measures.
- The current and expected contribution of the interventions under the Programme related to risks that were mentioned are the following:
    - Specialized equipment and equipment for emergencies purchased.
    - Conducted training on effective disaster, accident and catastrophe management. Experience exchange.
    - The implementation of projects under the Program has improved cooperation between authorities in the event of disasters, accidents and catastrophes in the cross-border area and increased early warning capacity. Training was provided for effective disaster, accident and disaster management and public awareness and emergency equipment was delivered. The specialized equipment purchased can be used in the event of emergencies and disasters - floods, earthquakes, landslides, technological incidents, industrial accidents, radiation accidents, as well as serious road traffic accidents with trucks.
    - The projects are of real benefit to the citizens of both countries, to local and regional authorities from the cross-border region and to the institutions directly responsible for disaster management and emergencies.
- The implementation of the projects under the Program enables the joint work of institutions and organizations from Bulgaria and Romania to achieve results that contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the Romania-Bulgaria Cross-border Cooperation Program in the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 programming periods. .

- Good practices resulting from projects implemented in 2007-2013 can help to prevent and manage other risks as well. Collaborative research on flood forecasting and prevention and a common cross-border approach to the problem can be extremely useful.
- Joint actions in the cross-border area, together with prevention and emergency response measures, are not only a success factor but also a path to building a more secure region.
- About the progress in integrating the cross-border area in terms of employment and labor mobility, the respondent affirmed:
  - Implement various activities to promote the development of a more integrated labor market in the cross-border area. Mechanisms for training, support and facilitation of the workforce in the cross-border region.
- The main aspect considered to have undergone this change was the increased labor mobility in the cross-border area
- Among the factors that have most influenced/determined such changes were mentioned the following:
  - Develop strategies, plans and joint studies on cross-border mobility and identify key sectors that can activate labor mobility.
  - Creation and development of cross-border business incubators and virtual incubators to encourage the recruitment of staff on both sides of the border
- Among the key factors that have facilitated the contribution of the OP to employment, the beneficiary mentioned:
  - Studies to improve employment;
  - Initiatives that activate labor mobility in the cross-border area;
  - Self-assessment tools to support job seekers;
  - Stakeholder affiliate network and information resources;
  - Various information campaigns, trainings and roundtables
- In the context of depopulation, population aging and migration from the cross-border area, one of the important issues is employment. The demand for and supply of jobs is not balanced. The implementation of various projects under the Program has an impact on increasing mobility and outreach in the labor market by promoting initiatives aimed at both workers and entrepreneurs. It helps to build cross-border networks that share best practices and strategies.
- Specialized equipment for emergencies purchased and delivered, which can be used in the event of accidents and disasters.
- About the benefits of the Programme that were added to the cross-border regional development the respondent mentioned that, in the light of the experience of the past years and the implementation of projects under the Program, people living together in neighbouring border areas want to cooperate more. The institutional benefit of cooperation leads to the active involvement of citizens, authorities, political and social groups on both sides of the border and long-term cross-border cooperation in structures that are able to work effectively. In doing so, they are contributing to the promotion of economic and social cohesion and cooperation. Cross-border networks at regional and local level have been set up, which not only facilitates economic

and infrastructural cooperation, but also promotes socio-cultural interaction by removing barriers.

- The main aspects that have undergone these changes were the risk prevention through the intermediation of cross-border cooperation, promotion of culture and tourism and direct contacts between people, as well as the improved institutional capacity and cooperation.
- Among the factors that have most influenced/determined such changes were mentioned the following:
  - Acquiring knowledge about the other;
  - Mutual understanding and confidence building;
  - The pursuit of subsidiarity and partnership.

Interviewees: Mr. Evtim Stefanov – Association Regional Partnerships for Sustainable Development
Date: 26.02.2020

Topics: Programme relevance, programme implementation, implementation at project level, horizontal principles, programme management and communication

Main aspects highlighted during the interview:

- From a local stakeholder perspective, significant improvements were perceived in some aspects related to accessibility, travel time, safety and connectivity. Hence, from the perspective of **accessibility**, local stakeholder interviewed emphasized that the Electric Bicycle Network project, implemented under the program code ROBG-01, accomplished its main goal. It improved the individual transport mobility for citizens and guests of all secondary and tertiary nodes to the TEN-T infrastructure in the cross-border region by creating a rental network of electric bicycles. About **travel time**, the interviewed local stakeholder mentioned that the individual mobility was enhanced though the electric bicycle network in 32 cities of TEN-T infrastructure. With regard to the network for electric bicycles the necessary **safety measures** have been taken which include: (1) cyclists' safety instruction provided to operators, (2) development of routes for cycling on roads with relatively low traffic, (3) marked black spots where wheeling is not recommended. As a result of the good work of the Electric Bicycle Network so far, there has been no serious incident by a cyclist who has used it.
- About the key gaps and needs that should be addressed in the near future, the local stakeholder mentioned that the roads on the Bulgarian side in the region of the village of Dobridol, Dolni Tsibar - Kozloduy, the town of Oryahovo - the island of Ostrov, the village of Krushevene, the town of Kardam - the village of Durankulak need to be improved. It is necessary to build a cycle lane along the whole Danube river or at least in the most conflict sections as a start, namely from Vidin to the village of Dobridol, from Svishtov to Rousse, from Ruse to Silistra.
- For the Danube navigation, the local stakeholder mentioned that the navigation on the Danube is mainly for passengers – cruise ships and that there are currently no transport schemes along the river. It was mentioned that only ferry connections work well.

- In terms of road infrastructure as a participant in the Danube Ultra cycle race over the last 3 years, the interviewed mentioned that there is progress, but there is more to be desired. Improving road infrastructure is key to increasing the number of cyclists in the cross-border region.

- Concerning the unintended effects of the Programme in transport, the local stakeholder affirmed that from his point of view there are no side effects to the implementation of the Programme.

- The local stakeholders considered that the projects implemented make a major contribution to the progress of the sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage, as well as in improving tourism in the cross-border region.

- About the key contributions that the line of interventions in transport achieved, the interviewed emphasized that this line of intervention made the most sense for the development of the region and its transformation into a tourist region. Because of the projects' implementation, the interviewed considered a major impact for tourism.

Interviewees: Mrs. Svetlana Doncheva, Mr. Stanislav Popdonchev – Bulgarian Industrial Association (Local Stakeholders)
Date: 27.02.2020

Topics: Programme relevance, Programme implementation, implementation at project level, horizontal principles, Programme management and communication

Main aspects highlighted during the interview:

- The Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA) is a project beneficiary and it is a local stakeholder operating in the area with regional offices. The BIA participated in the 2nd call for Specific Objective: Labor market and mobility with the aim of transferring experience to local actors

- As far as the relevance with local needs, the BIA considers that the Programme is well designed to address local challenges, especially from the point of view of unemployment and the development of Human Capital.

- There is an interesting complementary between the Interreg and the national policies in the area.

- The key issue is labor mobility from both sides of the borders – which is well below the potentialities and remain a key issue.

- The cross-border added value of the Programme is mostly resulted in the establishment of a cross-border network – which brings together the two communities and helps exchanging best practices.

- However, the issue of "mirroring projects" is still common and language barriers are significant.

- The establishment of partnership is relatively easy as it is built on previous experience. As project beneficiary, BIA found the relation with the Romanian counterpart excellent.

- On the other hand, the reporting procedure is perceived as burdensome and complex. Likewise, the monitoring phase is crippled by a heavy administrative burden. Most of the communication

must be printed and sent as physical copies to MA. This is a bit inconsistent with the green horizontal principle.

- In addition, as project beneficiary, BIA considers there are too many levels of control and monitoring. These results in time wasted by notify the same things/documents to different authorities.
- An interesting remark provided by BIA concerns the structuring of project indicators. They are not fully efficient as they measure the number of outputs but not the impacts.
- For instance, the project managed BIA had indicators which assess the "number of training courses held" without assessing their efficiency.
- BIA also pointed out that the indicators do not take into considerations lesson learnt and they argue for a more "learning by doing" approach in the next programming period.
- Indicators should be more ambitious and should be able to capture the added value.
- The selection criteria – on the other hand – are reasonable and efficient.
- A suggestion for the next programming period is to boost the involvement of SMEs as beneficiary. They should be eligible to directly receive grants as they are key local stakeholders and they know how to operate in the area.
- Applicants guide were efficiently designed
- More business-related projects should be taken into consideration, as they can tackle key issues in the area.
- In addition, some flexibility on administrative and legal issues should be adopted.
  - Small disparities in labor law can be major obstacles to the projects;
  - There is very little attention to the digitisation of administrative paperwork
  - More significantly, legal and technical requirements should be adapted to the area of intervention. Specific expertise is missing in the region and comply with extremely demanding and detailed procedure can simply be impossible for local stakeholders. For instance, BIA managed to fulfil all these obligations, but small municipalities may not be able to.
- Public authorities are somehow detached from the local realities and they should take a more bottom-up approach.
- There should be special and fast track procedures for beneficiary, which lacks technical expertise.
- BIA is not directly operating in the area; thus, it does not have a direct experience on the impacts on the territory. Being a project beneficiary under SO – Employment, it may have some inputs and opinions on this field.
- It is important to have realistic objectives, which consider externa factors.
- A long lasting and structure unemployment affect the area, which is a major obstacle to the impact of the Programme.
- In addition, there is a substantial lack of infrastructure to support labor mobility.
- EU Policy and EU Cohesion Funds can be helpful, but the challenge of underdevelopment and persisting unemployment shall be addressed mostly with national policy.
- The scope for cross-border interventions is not that visible, as the lack of physical infrastructure hinder any project related to labor mobility.
- To improve impacts, local stakeholders should have a more relevant and significant role in the designing of the Programme and in the need's assessment.

- Even though the stakeholder's consultation were useful, these were too formal and not fully efficient in highlighting the issue and problems.
- Results from the desk research are still over considered – more bottom up approach would be needed.
- To some extent, a National Programme would be perhaps more efficient in tackling unemployment. The needs assessment from a cross-border point view is not able to identify the differences amongst the regions involved.

Interviewees: Mr. Chavdar Hristov – Association Centre for Development (Local Stakeholder)
Date: 26.02.2020

Topics: Programme relevance, Programme implementation, implementation at project level, horizontal principles, Programme management and communication

Main aspects highlighted during the interview:
- From a local stakeholder perspective, significant improvements were perceived in some aspects related to impact in the transport domain, such as accessibility, travel time, safety and connectivity.
- As the main key improvements in the transport area, the beneficiary mentioned the improvements of roads in some sections of the region and rehabilitation of roads that bypass or lead to the same places, thereby reducing traffic on major roads.
- About the key gaps and needs that should be addressed in the near future, a local stakeholders opinion was that a need that should be addressed is safety of transport by the perspective of reducing road accidents.
- Regarding the Danube navigation, a local stakeholder mentioned that an overall improvement is an increase in the number of passengers.
- The perception of the local stakeholder about the progress in improving the secondary and tertiary nodes connections to TEN-T infrastructure in the cross-border area in the las 5 years was that there is no improvement, or that the improvement is so low that it is intangible. The local stakeholder mentioned that the main aspects that have undergone a change was the ring roads. Moreover, in local stakeholder's perspective, this change has numerous positive aspects such as traffic unloading in settlements, faster long-distance travel is faster, as well as avoiding urban traffic and traffic lights. This change can be attributed to the effect of public policies to a large extent, the local stakeholder affirmed.
- The beneficiary affirmed that at a local level there was a fair prevention of unintended effects of the investments and this led to a wider positive effect in the area.
- About the positive or negative unintended effect on local communities, the local stakeholder mentioned that there was a positive progress in all areas of socio-economic life in the region.
- The changes occurred in the heritage sector are, to a high degree, the effect of public policies due to the fact that are funded by public funds

- From a point of view of a local stakeholder, the heritage has achieved increased investments in joint and sustainable touristic infrastructure and cultural monuments, wider economic impacts such as creation of new business opportunities, improved mobility of factors etc.
- The local stakeholder mentioned three key factors that have facilitated the contribution of the OP to the progress in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving the tourism in the cross-border area, such as:
    - Creating an accessible transport network for cultural and natural attractions
    - The preservation and valorisation of the cultural and natural attractions through their rehabilitation
    - Comprehensively informing and engaging a wider and diverse range of CBC communities through various methods.
- The opinion of the beneficiary was that all the OP internal factors are important and must be synchronized and work together.
- The local stakeholder considered that the cross-border dimension as well as previously existing common institutional framework had been a success factor because when something spreads and develops, it first starts closest to the border.
- The beneficiary affirmed that there are no unintended effects of the Programme in the heritage field from the perspective of environmental and social effects.
- About the improvements in the management and protection of NATURA 2000 sites in the cross-border area, the local stakeholder affirmed that it has improved because of the fund available for the facilities.
- The main aspects that have undergone a change are site rehabilitation and storage.
- The local stakeholder affirmed that there are no unintended social effects of the interventions aiming at improving the management and protection of NATURA 2000 sites in the cross-border area.
- The perception about the progress in preventing and managing the capacity of mitigation and disaster resilience in the cross-border area in the last 5 years was that there was no noticeable progress.
- The aspects considered to undergo a change were:
    - Many machines have been purchased in connection with disaster and emergency work
    - Many projects have been implemented to increase the capacity of the relevant institutions in the area
- It was mentioned that his changes occurred to a high degree due to the effect of public policies
- The local stakeholder mentioned that improvements could be observed at a local level achieved, such as an increase in investments in the development of joint risk management in the cross-border area, environmental impacts and wider economic impacts.
- Three key factor that in the opinion of the local stakeholder facilitated the contribution of the OP to the progress in preventing and managing the capacity of mitigation and disaster resilience in the cross-border area were mentioned:
    - Purchased machinery and equipment
    - Increasing the capacity and expertise of institutions working in the field

- In employment field, the local stakeholder mentioned that some improvements were achieved, such as development of infrastructure directly linked to increase labor mobility, social impacts and wider economic impacts such as lifelong learning, respectively the creation of cross-border business incubators and virtual incubators for promoting employment. It has been mentioned that the continuity of supported fields at project level from the previous Programme represent an added value for achieving Programme's objectives.
- For the institutional capacity the local stakeholder affirmed that there is possible progress in this field that is related to:
    o Capacity building for civil servants
    o Upgrading cross-border cooperation mechanism
    o Developing specific skills
    o Improving public administration efficiency
    o Improving digitalisation of public administration and establishing common cross-border technical standards
- Improvements have been observed by the local stakeholder in all the regional development themes
- The main aspects that undergone a change mentioned were infrastructure, cultural and natural resources and ecology. These changes were influenced by the work of trained people to translate ideas into projects and write them so that they are good enough for funding and implementation.
- Some ideas and projects that have received EU funding will probably not be materialise, whatever, many things have already been done and many economies areas in the CBC regions have developed.

Interviewees: Mr. Daniel Popov – Centre for Environmental Information and Education (Local Stakeholder)
Date: 28.02.2020

Topics: Programme relevance, Programme implementation, implementation at project level, horizontal principles, Programme management and communication

Main aspects highlighted during the interview:
- From a local stakeholder perspective, significant improvements were perceived in some aspects related to impact in the transport domain, such as accessibility, travel time, safety and connectivity.
- As the main key improvements in the transport area, the beneficiary mentioned that the improvements are mainly in the quality of infrastructure and less in the organization of transport. There have been no interventions for modal switching from road to rail transport at border crossings-freight and passenger.
- About the key gaps and needs that should be addressed in the near future, a local stakeholders opinion was that there is too much emphasis on infrastructure and care is not taken to provide

adequate, quality and low-emission vehicles for local transport schemes. Another problem is that state authorities prefer to finance more infrastructure than common cross-border public services transport links.

- Regarding the Danube navigation, a local stakeholder mentioned that the improvement of the Silistra-Călărași ferry was funded.

- The perception of the local stakeholder about the progress in improving the secondary and tertiary nodes connections to TEN-T infrastructure in the cross-border area in the las 5 years was that there is no improvement, or that the improvement is so low that it is intangible. Overall, the passenger service of the Sofia-Bucharest railway has deteriorated.

- The local stakeholder mentioned that the calls were not so efficiently designed; they are usually subordinated to national transport priorities. The beneficiary considered that improvement is more about infrastructure than about citizen mobility.

- The respondent considered that his/her role in facilitating the results of the Programme in this field as being minimal in setting priorities and projects, even though he/she deals with the transport sector and national level.

- The changes occurred in the heritage sector are, to a high degree, the effect of public policies.

- From a point of view of a local stakeholder, the heritage has achieved increased investments in joint and sustainable touristic infrastructure and cultural monuments, wider economic impacts such as creation of new business opportunities, improved mobility of factors etc.

- The local stakeholder mentioned three key factors that have facilitated the contribution of the OP to the progress in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving the tourism in the cross-border area, such as:
    - National priorities and policies in the field of tourism, availability of important tourist sites

- The opinion of the beneficiary was that the OP internal factors that are important were the use of grants, stakeholders' consultation and needs assessment.

- The local stakeholder considered that the cross-border dimension as well as previously existing common institutional framework had been a success factor only to some extent because there is more to be desired.

- The local stakeholder affirmed that there are no unintended social effects of the interventions aiming at improving the management and protection of NATURA 2000 sites in the cross-border area. Most conservation areas have not yet been identified with conservation goals and priorities, so there is an infringement procedure of the European Commission against Bulgaria.

- It was mentioned that the above problem occurred because of managerial passivity and lack of interest in the protection of the NATURA sites in Bulgaria.

- It was affirmed that the calls were not efficiently designed to select most suitable projects to achieve overarching objectives and that there is no satisfaction with the current contribution of the interventions.

- The progress in preventing and managing the capacity of mitigation and disaster resilience in the cross-border area in the last 5 years was considered positive due to the construction of modern systems and improved administration.

- The changes have been possible because of the existence of disasters and the existence of clear European policies in the area.
- The local stakeholder mentioned that improvements could be observed at a local level achieved, such as an increase in investments in the development of joint risk management in the cross-border area, environmental impacts and wider economic impacts.
- **In employment** field, the local stakeholder mentioned that some improvements were achieved, such as development of infrastructure directly linked to increase labor mobility, actions plans for disaster resilience and mitigation, social impacts and wider economic impacts such as lifelong learning, respectively the creation of cross-border business incubators and virtual incubators for promoting employment. It has been mentioned that the continuity of supported fields at project level from the previous Programme represent an added value for achieving Programme's objectives.
- For the institutional capacity the local stakeholder affirmed that there are possible progress in this field that is related to:
    - Capacity building for civil servants
    - Upgrading cross-border cooperation mechanism
    - Improving public administration efficiency
- The EU intervention was perceived as being relevant and necessary.

Interviewees: Mehedinți City Council – Dl. Aladin Gigi GEORGESCU	
Olt City Council – Dl. Marius OPRESCU	
Teleorman City Council – Dl. Ionel – Dănuț CRISTINESCU	
Giurgiu City Council – Dl. Marian MINA	
South East Regional Development Agency – Dna. Luiza ȚIGĂNUȘ	
Date: 28th February – 10th March 2020	

Topics: Programme relevance, Programme implementation, implementation at project level, horizontal principles, Programme management and communication

Main aspects highlighted during the interview:
- The overall opinion of the local stakeholders is that there is a substantial alignment achieved between local needs and overall objectives of the Programme (convergence to meet local needs).
- All projects financed under Priority Axis 3: A safe region have related synergies with other projects financed under ROP 2014-2020, Priority Axis 8, Investment Priority 8.1.
- The Programme is in real complementarity with the national policies (for e.g. Regional Development Plans). There are no contradictions among the local stakeholders.
- Synergies with Horizon 2020 are seen as very important:
    - Health, demographic change and well-being
    - Sustainable food security, agriculture and forestry, marine research and maritime and inland water and bio-economy
    - Safe, environmentally friendly and efficient energy sources

- Intelligent, environmentally friendly and integrated transport
- Actions to combat climate change, environment, used resources and raw materials
- Europe in a changing world - inclusive societies, innovative and thoughtful
- Secure societies - protecting the freedom and security of Europe and its citizens

- Local stakeholders considered that the cross-border dimension provides response to a common need; their actions would not have had an effect / impact in the absence of the cross-border dimension. Their projects resulted in sustainable and solid partnerships.
- EU Strategy for the Danube River comes with additional complementary financing to address this eligible diverse area. Funding opportunity less attractive than the current Programme.
- The local stakeholders considered that the EU Strategy for the Danube River comes with medium contribution in terms of additional complementary financing.
- The local stakeholders' opinion is that the two strategies are rigorous and do not have such overlapping (previous research on the matter, from the project idea phase).
- Some appreciation on the specific needs perceived as urgent that could have been addressed better in the Programme were emphasized by the local stakeholders as follows:
    - More debates on what should be included in the next programming period to avoid future issues/problems.
    - The local stakeholders perceived as a good option to submit the project in 2 phases: phase I – concept note; phase II – full proposal – to be targeted as well for the next programming period.
    - Clear dimensioning of the indicators even through consultation with local stakeholders.
    - Specific financial ceilings to be set up from the very beginning (not happy with what happened during Programme's 3rd call)
- The overall opinion is that local stakeholders would be satisfied with more measures related to:
    - cross-border social assistance and cross-border healthcare
    - reducing carbon emissions, green methods and methodologies, education on these topics
    - Education, youth cooperation at cross-border level on topics such education, environment, leisure, sports etc.
- The local stakeholders offered some proposals regarding the future priority axes coming from County Councils:
    - Road infrastructure investments
    - Traffic congestion and road safety in the border area
    - Environmental friendly vehicles for the transport of goods and people
    - Soft measures: E-border tax; presenting the latest market opportunities for a greener transport in the area (fairs, seminars, webinars, exchanges of experience)
    - Traditions (passing on tradition to the younger generation; organizing local markets of crafts and arts)
    - Implementation of specific measures for adaptation to climate change (endowments, infrastructure etc.)
    - Promoting adaptation measures to citizens/private companies/public institutions / The territorial / construction planning regulations
    - Mitigating drought – specific measures to be taken by public authorities

- Educating farmers and land owners regarding the opportunities available in agriculture in the current climate change environment (less chemical treatments of the crafts, more measures to plant trees in deserted areas, using rain water, solar panels of households and local markets for seeds and plants in order to preserve local cultivating traditions)
- Measuring the pollution level land exchanging data between experts in order to help plan countermeasures and field policies in the border area (measuring Danube pollution with the help of innovation and knowhow from local universities and research centers).
- Green roads (for bikers, backpack tourists, etc., including infrastructure for nature stops – phone chargers, Wi-Fi internet, camping site, toilets etc.).
- Education for life – first aid, volunteering, environmentally friendly practices as leisure time, outdoors activities that encourage an active way of living for all genders, ages and mobility challenged people
- Healthier youth – practice of sports, preparing them for a better society, demographic changes and migration trends.
- Educating the youth from the border against the illegal human traffic at the border, drug traffic, counterfeited goods
- Awarding excellence in teaching and education through CBC actions
- Emphasize in a better way the *Priority Axis 4 - A skilled and inclusive region* – which should be focused on a healthier and more inclusive and active region
- In the future Programme, it is considered important to have an updated approach to important issues such as the health of the border area population (better prepared and endowed health units, exchanges of experience between the health system representatives and experts, both management and specific medical fields areas etc.).
- Awarding excellence in teaching and education through CBC actions.

- The local stakeholders considered that a risk/unresolved problems are the numerous legislative changes and several administrative reorganizations that induce risks and unsolved problems that cannot be provisioned at the initiation of the project. For example, the fact that in Bulgaria, the council of ministers has prohibited the district administrations to participate in projects; or the fact that some town halls from Bulgaria were not ready in due time with the documents, thus the project could not be submitted etc.
- Another risk/unresolved problem identified by the local stakeholders is the communication at national authority level from the two partner countries when taking the decisions to approve the list of projects in the MC. They consider that the communication could be improved.
- Such risks/unsolved problems should be addressed from the very beginning by the Programme so that potential beneficiaries are aware of what to expect.
- The Programme is considered to have and to be having in the future a positive impact. The Programme represented the chance to consolidate partnerships for joint problem solving. The communication with the authorities of the Programme in Romania was also close to the level required by beneficiaries.
- Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria is considered to be a very good opportunity for public institutions, academic and businesses environment, NGOs, etc. to cooperate in responding to their needs identified at cross-border level.

- The Programme continues beneficiaries' previous actions financed by Phare and CBC RO BG 2007-2013.
- Specific examples on how the implementation of the Programme positively affected the project beneficiaries: the partnerships, the level of cooperation, the mutual understanding of problems and how to avoid them.
- Specific examples on how the implementation of the Programme negatively affected the project beneficiaries
- Eliminating the rule: „One beneficiary cannot simultaneously have more than four projects in implementation. In case 5 projects are selected, the fifth one shall be put on a reserve list (and could be contracted after the finalization of at least one of the other projects, provided the Programme has the financial allocation available)''.
- By carefully analyzing the financing opportunities at national level in Romania, the local stakeholders stressed out that the same project ideas do not fit into any Operational Programmme or other funding opportunity. This might lead to the loss of an important financing opportunity for all beneficiaries of the Interreg VA Programme if the above rule is maintained for the next programming period.
- Delays in approving projects given the situation mentioned above (Better communication at national authority level from the two partner countries when taking the decisions to approve the list of projects in the MC).
- There is no pattern because projects are different, having particular aspects. Overall, the objectives of the projects are achievable given the condition that all involved actors are fully in charge with evaluating, monitoring and applying the risk management principles. They are not running the risk not to be achieved.
- For external risks, the kind that cannot be provisioned at the initiation of the project (e.g. like the fact that in Bulgaria, the council of ministers has prohibited the district administrations to participate in projects), the Programme authorities input was decisive and very helpful.
- Regarding the human resources, the technical part of the hard projects has many aspects which need to be handled out by experts, some internal, some hired externally. Usually, when necessitating external experts, it is necessary to have the financial resources (sometimes representing non-eligible expenditures for the beneficiary).
- The public procurements procedures take too much time and have many risks associated with them – presence of external evaluators of the Public Finances authorities, contestations, legal actions in court etc.
- Generally, the public institutions are seen as having sufficient human resources and financial capacity, while NGOs might run the risk of encountering problems due to lack of human resources or low financial capacity.
- There are some measures undertaken or occurred during the implementation of several projects that proved to be successful such as:
  - Choosing partners in a close range for handling better communication issues (such as signing of documents, project meetings, attending each other events, handling project issues easier etc.);

- Being honest about the project risks, if any, with the partner, and taking decisions together regarding the projects under implementation, even identifying new partners – when needed - with the help of the old partners;
- Making sure both partners agree with all important aspects related to implementation, such as addendums etc.;
- Having back-up solutions or plans B for every risk management situations and/or counting on internal experts to support such situations;
- Performing project management with internal resources (to have them in the team for the entire sustainability period)
- Strong and reliable partnerships given to previous experiences
- Communication between partners, the degree of assistance required and provided by JS to the beneficiaries and the self-knowledge and preparation of the beneficiaries about the legislation and the Programme.
- Encourage partnerships County Councils-NGOs.

- The local stakeholder emphasized that the applicant's guide and pack are well written and helped them largely to prepare well-written applications.
- The contracting of the projects should be done within 2 weeks from the announcement of the project selection. It usually takes around 2 months – period of time which could be better used for project implementation.
- The validation procedure inside the MC for the final list of projects to be financed takes a lot of time, it is troublesome and challenging – should be improved.
- Regarding the e-MS platform, local stakeholders considered that it is a very useful instrument, much better developed that the MySMIS.
- The application submitted are considered well-based projects with real needs and strong chances for sustainability of the projects. Still there is a high percentage of projects being rejected in the administrative compliance and eligibility check phase
- The overall opinion of the local stakeholders is that the use of simplified cost options has proved effective. Some county councils used both options in different projects – some projects used simplified costs options, others – direct costs. Both prove their utility.
- The overall opinion is that the simplified costs facilitates the way of reporting and verification at the level of management and control structures.
- Some local stakeholders underlined that the simplified cost options have proven high efficiency in regarding with administrative costs and personnel costs.
- The local stakeholders recommend some actions that should be taken to improve the capacity of authorities and beneficiaries to administer and use the EU funds as follows:
  - Amendments on the public procurement law to ensure shorter run time for given procedures
  - Working instruments to prepare the public procurement experts on how to better perform the procedures inside the Programme.
  - ''Green line'' on public procurement procedures and issues coming from performing them; need to consult on public procurement aspects even before the procedures are launched.
  - Exchanges/study visits between similar structures/institutions from different countries managing similar programs (seen as more efficient that local trainings).

- For the next cross-border programming period the local stakeholders raised some aspects that should be taken into consideration:
  - In preparing the projects, the Romanian beneficiaries encounter difficulties in following the documentation submitted by the Bulgarian partners due to different legislation regarding the investment objectives. For example, important information cannot be evaluated in the process of choosing one partner (if a road investment is relevant for a project submission by a Municipality or by a District Administration).
- The quality of the technical consultancy in Bulgaria sometimes is low; most of the partners of the Bulgarian public authorities encounter financial difficulties in contracting the consultancy related to the submission of projects.
- Often blockages occur at the last moment, the documentation submitted by the Bulgarian partners being incomplete or requiring additional time for its revision and integration at the project partnership level, which represents delays at the level of the whole project.
- No need for strategic projects, except e-border tax, crucial for the area.
- The national political levels should be more involved in what is happening at the borders. Bordering areas are often neglected, not only in the content of legislation, but also in their system of applying and functioning.
- Exchanges/study visits between similar structures/institutions from different countries managing similar programs
- The overall opinion of the local stakeholders about the stakeholders involved in the Monitoring Committee is that there are sufficient relevant stakeholders involved in the MC.
- The agree with the fact that the presence of certain Ministries is required for certain strategic projects (Min of Transport, Infrastructure and Communications, National Agency for Public Procurement etc.)
- The local stakeholders do not consider that there is a need for more relevant stakeholders in the implementation of the Programme and they sustain that the Programme functions very well as it is.
- The overall appreciation of the local stakeholders about the efficiency of the communication between beneficiaries and Joint Secretariat/Antenna as being very good.
- The overall opinion is that the instrument and actions of communications used are suitable for the desired results and there is no need to implement new instruments or actions.
- The local stakeholders considered that the info days were the most efficient in spreading the information about the Programme.
- The overall appreciation is that the objectives of visibility of the Programme had been achieved to a great extent.
- Some measures were recommended by the local stakeholders in order to raise the impact of information and publicity activities carried out by the Programme bodies:
  - Greater visibility in online to easily reach greater no of potential beneficiaries and people– costs to be also included in the TA budgets
  - The information and publicity activities on paper (using flyers, brochures etc.) provide no added value
- The local stakeholders considered that a good measure to capitalize the project results is the implementation of a database with all the projects and results.

Annex 7 – Indicative Action Plan for the implementation of the recommendations

Recommendation RE.01	Expand the role of local stakeholders in the needs assessment consultation	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Launching calendar of consultations with the local stakeholders for the needs assessment on specific domains and on both parts of the border	Managing Authority / External experts developing the new programme	Second half of 2020
Launch online consultations (web surveys) targeted on specific domain and invite the local stakeholders to deepen the needs assessment	Managing Authority / External experts developing the new programme	Second half of 2020

Recommendation RE.02.2	The use of the cross-border added value related assessment criterion in the project assessment grid could be made more effective by establishing more clearly how the proposed added value leads to a certain score.	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Fine tuning the cross-border added value related selection criterion, so that the cross-border dimension is more effectively evaluated (for instance, the scoring system should prioritize projects which prove that the cross-border intervention is the most suitable for assessing a given need)	Managing Authority	At the moment of preparing the calls for proposals for the 2021-2027
Training the potential beneficiaries during the seminars/events for launching the calls about the importance of ensuring the cross-border dimension of the projects and about the functioning of the related criterion	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	At the moment of preparing the calls for proposals for the 2021-2027
Training of the evaluators on the assessment of the cross-border dimension so that the approach is completely understood and can be appropriately scored	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	At the moment of preparing the calls for proposals for the 2021-2027

Recommendation RE.03	Better alignment between the EU Strategy for the Danube River and the Programme regarding the cross-border navigability of the Danube river	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Identify the directions, if the case, in which the EUSDR and the Programme can have a better alignment (i.e. crossing ferries).	Managing Authority / External experts developing the new programme	Second half of 2020

Recommendation RE.04	A more direct involvement of local stakeholders as well as an extended bottom-up approach may be useful to understand and subsequently assess uncovered needs.	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Launching calendar of consultations with the local stakeholders for the needs assessment on specific domains and on both parts of the border	Managing Authority / External experts developing the new programme	Second half of 2020
Launch online consultations (web surveys) targeted on specific domain and invite the local stakeholders to deepen the needs assessment	Managing Authority / External experts developing the new programme	Second half of 2020

Recommendation IM.01.2	Develop an early warning system on the achievement of indicators	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Develop a procedure to be applied in monitoring the achievement of the indicators already from an early stage of programme implementation (e.g. thresholds for selection adapted to the aggregated value of the assumed indicators)	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	First half of 2021
Introducing the different elements of the procedure in the relevant documents (e.g. Assessment Manual, CfPs, etc.)	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat, endorsed by the Monitoring Committee	The publication of the first Calls for Proposals

Recommendation IM.02.1	Avoid using indicators with values expressed in total number of population	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Based on the proposed specific objectives and indicative actions, select a set of indicators which do not relate to total number of population – whenever possible, based on relevant EU level regulations	Managing Authority / External experts developing the new programme	Programming phase of 2021-2027 Programme
Develop the methodologies for estimating the target values of the selected indicators by taking into account current trends in the socio-economic environment of the programme area, in addition to the experiences accumulated during the past programmes	Managing Authority / External experts developing the new programme	Programming phase of 2021-2027 Programme

Recommendation IM.04	Intensive monitoring of the projects contributing to output indicator 5b.2	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Identify the projects contributing to this indicator and assess their progresses towards the achievement of the assumed values.	Joint Secretariat	June 2020
In case needed, organize on-the-spot visits / direct meetings with the Lead Beneficiaries and their partners, in order to evaluate their status and to identify the possible risks and problems	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	September 2020, whenever needed
Take the necessary measures, if the case, in order to ensure the timely progress of the projects	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Whenever the case until the finalization of implementation

Recommendation IM.05.1	Close follow-up of the public procurement procedures related to the infrastructural investments	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Identify the projects with larger infrastructural components (e.g. investments exceeding 1 mil Eur at project level)	Joint Secretariat	June 2020
Collect data and assess the status of the public procurement procedures	Joint Secretariat	September 2020
Organize direct meetings with the Lead Beneficiaries and partners concerned, in cases where the procurement procedures are facing considerable delays. Prepare a calendar of key procedural steps in each case and follow-up on its progresses.	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	December 2020

Recommendation IM.06.1	Prepare theoretical alternative scenarios for gradually opening the Calls for Proposals	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Develop theoretical scenarios of gradually opening the Calls for Proposals. The allocation of the majority of funds (e.g. 70%) in the beginning of the Programming period shall be kept.	Managing Authority / External experts developing the new programme	Programming phase of 2021-2027 Programme
Decide on the strategy of opening the Calls for Proposals during the next programming period	Managing Authority / Monitoring Committee	First half of 2021

Recommendation IM.06.2	Further refine and fine-tune the 4 simultaneous projects / beneficiary rule	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe

Prepare an analysis of the experiences related to the application of the rule during the 2021-2027 period.	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	December 2020
Identify additional criteria to fine-tune the rule (as for example, public/private nature of the applicant, history of unsuccessful project implementation, capacity of implementing multiple projects)	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	First half of 2021
Decide about the opportunity of applying the additional criteria to the rule and, if the case, include the improved rule in the implementation documents of the next programme	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat, endorsed by the Monitoring Committee	Second half of 2021

Recommendation IM.07.1	Provide incentives for projects with a higher level of maturity	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Develop a system of scoring the quality of the projects by awarding those with a higher level of maturity	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	First half of 2021
Decide about the opportunity of applying such a system and include the procedure in the programme implementation documents – if the case	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat endorsed by the Monitoring Committee	The publication of the first Calls for Proposals

Recommendation IM.07.2–E.IP.03	Further develop the support services provided to the beneficiaries in project management related topics	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Include in the agenda of the information events (organized both during application phase, and during the project implementation phase) substantial parts dealing with the relevant procedures applicable in public procurements	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat / First Level Control Bodies	Application phase of the first Calls for Proposals and regularly afterwards
Encourage the exchange of know-how and experiences in between project beneficiaries. One method of such support would be to develop a forum section of the programme website, moderated by the communication managers, where the interested beneficiaries can exchange their experiences	Joint Secretariat / Managing Authority	Contracting of the first projects with constant maintenance afterwards
Explore the possibility of establishing a comprehensive list of FAQ, developed and updated throughout the implementation period, dealing with all the major elements of the project management cycle.	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat / First Level Control bodies	Application phase of the first Calls for Proposals and regularly afterwards

Recommendation PM.01.2	The introduction of the use of the electronic signature for documents submitted in application phase	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Assessing the applicability of using electronic signature for documents submitted in the application phase	Managing Authority	Start-up of the new programme
Creating the procedure for having all the documents related to the application phase electronically submitted	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new programme
Instructing the potential applicants on the introduction of the electronic signature	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new programme
Elaborating the applicant's guide and pack with the provision that the application documents are electronically signed by the applicants	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new programme

Recommendation PM.01.4	A re-design of the role of the on-the spot visit: it should be explicitly switched from the formal aspects (check of correspondence of original documents) to the information and learning purposes, similarly to the approach adopted in the IT-SI programme	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Drafting a new procedure for the on the spot visits, which should consider their role more focused on the training and preparation of the beneficiaries	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new Programme
Elaborating a centralized list with topics of interests for the beneficiaries, that could be considered for the information and learning purposes	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new Programme
Creating training materials/information for on the spot visits	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new Programme

Recommendation PM.02.2	The FLC function should be organized – as it is currently - as to avoid any unnecessary duplication, in respect of the spirit of the FLC as established in the Regulations and in line with the "single audit" principle.	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Verifying if the FLC practice is aligned with its description in the management and control system, as approved	Managing Authority / Audit Authority	Start-up of the new Programme

Recommendation PM.03.1	Extending the use of SCO	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Revising the procedure for SCO, by envisaging the possible use of lump sums to cover the preparation costs of other types of SCO to cover travel costs	Managing Authority	Start-up of the new Programme
Consultation and exchange with the Audit Authority to a greater extent as previously done, in order to reach useful solutions and to prevent/solve any problems for beneficiaries and managing bodies due to the misalignment of audit procedures with the EU Regulations regarding SCOs	Managing Authority	Start-up of the new Programme

Top partial row (continued from previous page):

If needed, establishing measures of avoiding unforeseen and unjustified duplications of the FLC function.	Managing Authority / Audit Authority	Start-up of the new Programme

Recommendation TA.2,4	Improve the rate of reported expenditure for TA and improve the efficiency of strategic approach to TA expenditure.	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Elaborate a clear analysis of TA needs, in order to have an indicative pre-allocation of resources for the various domains/beneficiaries, covering the whole implementation period	Managing Authority	Start-up of the new Programme
Analysing and using the new flat-rate regime of TA resources announced with the proposals of new Regulations	Managing Authority	Start-up of the new Programme
Adopt all possible simplifications in the financial relationships between MA and TA beneficiaries, including a generalized recourse to SCOs	Managing Authority	Start-up of the new Programme

Recommendation PM.06.2,3	Increasing the capacity building for audit bodies Increasing the capacity building for beneficiaries	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Needs assessment in the field of capacity building for the audit bodies	Managing Authority	Start-up of the new Programme
Technical and specific support for beneficiaries is needed, with reference to public procurement procedures	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new Programme
Training and preparation for the beneficiaries in specific domains: public procurement, use of	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new Programme

SCO, use of eMS, irregularity prevention, efficient planning, organization and implementation of the procurement procedure, and on raising the awareness of the most common problems related to procurement procedures and correspondent solutions

Recommendation PM.07	Trying to enlarge the representativeness of civil society of the Programme area in the Monitoring Committee, while considering reducing the presence of central public administration bodies	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Redefine the procedure for selecting the members for the MC, by allocating a specific number for the representatives of the civil society, and by maintaining the same level of importance for the public authorities	Managing Authority/ Monitoring Committee	Start-up of the new Programme
Consultation and agreement on the new selection procedure	Managing Authority/ Monitoring Committee	Start-up of the new Programme
Open consultation process on the territory, to be possibly brought on in parallel with public consultations for the drafting of the new Programme	Managing Authority/ Monitoring Committee	Start-up of the new Programme

Recommendation PM.08	Simplification in the administrative procedures for beneficiaries	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Use of SCOs and exploring possible extensions of their use, also considering the adoption of lump sums to cover specific categories of costs	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new Programme
Improvement of the eMS platform and building capacities of applicants and beneficiaries for its use in both the application and reporting process	Managing Authority	Start-up of the new Programme
Introduction of the digital signature of documents	Managing Authority	Start-up of the new Programme
Elaboration of guidance materials/manual in partners language	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new Programme

Recommendation PM.09.2	Reconsider the mission of the antenna, which at the current moment appears unclear and scarcely perceivable.	
Action	Responsible	Timeframe
Create a plan to increase the visibility and autonomy of JS antenna	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new Programme
Involve JS antenna in all events/seminars/meeting organized at the Programme level	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new Programme
Delegate specific tasks to the JS antenna staff	Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat	Start-up of the new Programme

Annex 8 – List of documents and literature reviewed

Previous studies on similar programmes

- A Sustainable Europe for a Better World: A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development;
- Annual Implementation Reports;
- Communications from the European Commission;
- Effects of cross-border co-operation of the Polish regions, 2004 – 2006;
- European Parliament. Effectiveness of cohesion policy: learning from the project characteristics that produce the best results);
- European Parliament. Effectiveness of cohesion policy: learning from the project characteristics that produce the best results);
- Ex Post Evaluation INTERREG III (2000-2006);
- Ex-ante Operational Evaluation of URBACT III Programme;
- Ex-post evaluation of Cohesion Policy Programmes 2007 – 2013, focusing on the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF);
- Gender equality and non-discrimination within the Interreg V-A Romania - Hungary Programme 2014-2020;
- Interim Evaluation of the Romania -Bulgaria cross border cooperation programme 2007-2013;
- Monitoring Committee minutes;
- Neighbourhood Programme Poland – Belarus - Ukraine INTERREG/TACIS CBC (Ex Post Evaluation);
- Operational Evaluation of Danube Transnational Programme;
- Operational Evaluation of ESPON Programme;
- Operational Evaluation of INTERACT Programme;
- Operational Evaluation of INTERREG Europe Programme;
- Overcoming obstacles in border regions;
- Project reports from EMS;
- The Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme;

Academia and scientific literature

- Arno van der Zwet (2012), Governance Approaches in European Territorial Cooperation Programmes: A comparison of INTERREG and Macro-regional strategies;
- Parvu, PhD thesis (2013). Cross border cooperation Romania Bulgaria 2007 – 2013;
- Radu Sageata (2010). Cross-Border Cooperation in the Danube-Lined Romanian/Bulgarian Border-Space;
- Sarbu (2017). Cross Border Cooperation: Romania Bulgaria;
- Zlateva. Challenges addressed to the investment project in context of the program of cross-border cooperation Interreg V-A in Romania – Bulgaria, 2014-2020;

Annex 9 – Answers to MA and ESC comments

Evaluation Question	Section	Comment	Answer
E.RE.01	Analysis	EC**:** I note in particular a reference in the draft Implementation Evaluation report that I would propose to delete in order to avoid potential ambiguities, as I understand that Commission representatives have not been interviewed for the purpose of this report; see below, from p. 11: From the interviews with Programme management bodies, the main findings are: • … • …~~In addition, the significant relevance of the programme and the quality of the needs assessment was also confirmed by the Commission.~~	Text deleted
E.PM.09	Recommendation	NA: we propose the first part of the last sentence of the recommendations' paragraph on p. 50 of the Implementation Evaluation Report "If an antenna is considered needed" to be deleted and to be changed to: "It would need some organizational visibility and autonomy."	Text changed
General	-	Evaluation Unit MEF: To include a chapter with general conclusions and recommendations, maybe structured on the criteria the analysis was made on (efficiency, effectiveness etc.)	Suggestion taken into account in drafting the executive summary
E.PM.01	Recommendation	MA: Formulate a clear recommendation about the following statement: Should the MA strategy change in the future programme – for example to reserve some funding for projects generated in a later phase– a reduction of this duration should be strongly targeted.	The statement is merely conditional to the case of a change of strategic approach in the organization of the calls, The change is not the object of any recommendation by evaluators. However, in case this change takes place, the recommendation is to shorten the duration of the assessment process. For these reasons we consider not to modify the text.
E.PM.03	Recommendation	MA: The current methodology was in fact consulted ex-ante with AA. So please make only recommendations for actions which were not taken, or in case you make a recommendation	Text modified. Recommendation to be read also combined with the one related to

Evaluation Question	Section	Comment	Answer
		for an approach which was already used, mention it accordingly.	the use of TA for training needs of the programme authorities.
E.PM.04/05	Recommendation	MA: We already allow 3 years contracts. Are you familiar with the flat rate proposed in the new regulations? Why not make a recommendation based on that? We plan to use SCOs (flat rates) under TA for all TA beneficiaries, this is also in line with the new Regulations. Such a recommendation would bring added value.	We consider our recommendation on the duration of contracts as correct and well grounded, so we would keep the text as it is. For the rest, we agreed on introducing SCOs related findings and recommendation, taking the step from the new regulations.

Annex 10 – List of ESC Members:

Evaluation Steering Committee Members:

- The Head of the Managing Authority (or his/her designate);

- A representative of the Bulgarian National Authority of the Programme;

- The Evaluation Unit staff;

- A representative of DG Regio;

- A representative of the Evaluation Unit with coordination role within the Romanian Ministry of European Funds.