



Impact Evaluation Report

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

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Executive summary

The current report seeks to assess the Programme's impact to the cross-border region's development and its sustainability over the long term based on each specific objective. The analysis of the Programme's impact involved the application of different evaluation methods and instruments, such as: desk research, interviews with the programme bodies and stakeholders, survey applied among the beneficiaries, case studies and benchmarking analysis. Based on the analysis of the resulting data, the following main findings were reached:

Main findings of the evaluation:

Impact on Transport

- More than 120 Kms of roads have been covered by modernisation projects and over 600,000 people have benefited from an improved road network leading to TEN-T.
- Romania and Bulgaria signed a co-operation memorandum in 2017 with the objective of carrying significant investments in local infrastructures, especially bridges. This convergence of priorities and objectives should – in principle – expand the possible impact of the Programme.
- The relevance of the interventions is indeed the strong point of this Programme. Most of the projects are needed due to the lack of functioning infrastructure in the area.
- The relevant indicators related to the Danube navigation safety, such as “Total length of new or improved inland waterway” reached 100% completion rate, covering the whole RO-BG CBC Danube length which corresponds to 470 km.
- A remarkable unintended but significant effect related to the improvements on roads safety is the spill over on the local economy. Improved connectivity brought about more internal mobility and thus the creation of new business and economic initiatives.

Impact on Heritage and Environment

- The number of tourists increased in comparison with the previous programming period. The Programme achieved with success the target value of the indicator *Number of tourists overnight in the CBC region* with a 406.01% success rate.
- The total number of accommodation establishments in the eligible area increased between 2015 and 2019 by 1,74%, with Silistra, Dobrich, Constanța and Dolj seeing the most significant increases.
- The joint intervention and joint approach of the projects had an important effect on the contribution of the Programme to the sustainable usage of natural and cultural heritage.
- The key factors that facilitated the contribution to the progress in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving tourism in the cross-border area were: quality of partnerships created inside the projects, financial allocation, use of grants, stakeholders' consultation and needs assessment.
- Innovation was considered to be an unintended positive effect for the Programme in general, and for the Priority Axis 2 in particular.
- The development of 34 new touristic products and the implementation of applications and websites offered access to information, as well as to new touristic activities, which facilitated the contribution of the Programme to the improvement of tourism in the cross-border area.
- The projects contributed to a great extent in improving the management and protection of NATURA 2000 sites in the cross-border area including through innovative products



and approaches (that varied from joint solutions and pilot actions to virtual applications and tools for the promotion of NATURA 2000 sites). The joint solutions offer an important improvement of joint management and protection of NATURA 2000 sites.

Impact on Risk Management

- Inter-institutional communication between Romanian and Bulgarian response forces has improved. Partnerships have been established in the field of early warning and emergency response and the capacity of the specialized units has been increased.
- The most important 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.

Impact on Employment

- The current and expected contribution of the interventions under the Programme to the progress of the cross-border area integration in terms of employment and labour mobility is mainly related to active social inclusion/mobility measures and general/youth joint local employment initiatives and trainings.
- The Programme has made considerable progress in strengthening the labour market competitiveness of the individuals at the level of these regions, a fact that is emphasized by the high level of overachievement of the output indicators that are related to encouraging the integration of the area in terms of employment and labour mobility.
- The Programme has had a significant impact in creating cooperation relations in the business environment in the cross-border area, which also implies capitalised results on employment, quality of life, flexibility - mobility for work and availability for professional training adapted to the demand of the local labour market.

Impact on Institutional Capacity

- The Projects analysed give a great importance to boosting the capacity of common cross-border cooperation schemes, creating room for exchanging experiences and best practices and supporting the most suitable arrangements that maximise synergies on the two sides of the border. Modernization and better efficiency of public services are two of the recurrent strengths that emerge throughout the analysis of interventions, in the context of complementarity and harmonization.
- The areas of intervention touched on some of the most urgent issues in the cross border area, intervening in a very practical manner (as in the case of medical supplies in hospitals and IT equipment in schools) but also in a cross-cutting way, by promoting cooperation, capacity building and exchange of experiences.

Impact on Regional Development

- A number of exchange opportunities was implemented through the Programme (shared platforms, trainings, events etc). This aspect offered the people from the cross-border area more and more occasions to get to know each other.
- The Programme has had real effects on citizens' lives, helping to stem situations of poverty and social exclusion and early school leaving, and also by promoting medical prevention.
- The Programme contributed to a large extent to the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). A total of 185 projects have contributed to the implementation of EUSDR.

Impact on Sustainability

- Many projects were the continuation of projects implemented in the previous programming period and financed under the previous CBC Programme (Romania-Bulgaria Cross-border



Cooperation Programme 2007-2013). This continuity – one of the key strong points of the Programme – highlights the fact that projects are often designed to last longer than the specific period of implementation.

Contribution of the Programme to the Europe 2020 Strategy targets

- The most substantial contribution of the Programme to the Europe 2020 Strategy targets is focused on inclusive growth, all the relevant output indicators of the Programme having their subsequent 2023 targets surpassed, based on the projects funded up until 2019.
- The Programme's contribution to smart and sustainable growth needs to be further explored based on in-depth research of the funded projects, however based on the monitoring data it seems that it is more limited in comparison to its contribution towards more inclusive growth.

General Conclusions and Recommendations

- All the priority axes have recorded significant improvements and emphasised that all the areas of intervention are connected to each other and are capable of creating positive spill over effects in other domains.
- The Programme's outputs and results are likely to be sustainable in the long run. Thus – if the overall same approach would be implemented in the next programming period – no major issues on sustainability should arise. However, the financial corrections and the allocation of funds remain an issue of concern.

Rezumat Executiv

Prezentul document reprezintă raportul de evaluare a impactului Programului Interreg V-A România-Bulgaria. Prezentul raport are ca scop evaluarea impactului programului asupra dezvoltării și durabilității regiunii transfrontaliere pe termen lung, pe baza fiecărui obiectiv specific. Analiza impactului Programului a implicat aplicarea unor metode de evaluare și instrumente de cercetare diferite precum: cercetarea de birou, interviuri cu autoritățile programului și părțile interesate, sondaj de opinie aplicat în rândul beneficiarilor, studii de caz și analiză comparativă. Pe baza analizei datelor rezultate, a fost formulată seria de constatări prezentată în continuare.

Principalele constatări ale evaluării:

Impactul asupra domeniului transporturilor

- Peste 120 km de drumuri au fost realizați prin proiectele de modernizare și peste 600.000 de persoane au beneficiat de o rețea de drumuri îmbunătățită care este conectată la rețeaua TEN-T.
- În 2017, România și Bulgaria au semnat un memorandum de cooperare având ca scop realizarea unor investiții semnificative în infrastructurile locale, în special în construirea și reabilitarea podurilor. Această convergență a priorităților și obiectivelor ar trebui, în principiu, să extindă aria de impact a Programului.
- Relevanța intervențiilor în acest domeniu reprezintă punctul forte programului evaluat. Majoritatea proiectelor sunt necesare întrucât infrastructura funcțională la nivelul zonei eligibile nu este suficientă.
- Indicatorul aferent siguranței navigației pe Dunăre („Lungimea totală a căilor navigabile interioare noi sau îmbunătățite”) a atins nivelul de realizare de 100%, acoperind întreaga lungime a Dunării din aria transfrontalieră româno-bulgară (470 km).
- Îmbunătățirea conectivității infrastructurii a contribuit la o mai mare mobilitate internă și, astfel, la crearea de noi inițiative de afaceri.

Impactul asupra patrimoniului și mediului

- Numărul de turiști a crescut în comparație cu perioada de programare anterioară. Programul a depășit valoarea țintă a indicatorului *Număr de turiști care petrec noaptea în regiunea transfrontalieră*, cu o rată de succes de 406,01%.
- Numărul total de unități de cazare din zona eligibilă a crescut între 2015 și 2019 cu 1,74%. Silistra, Dobrich, Constanța și Dolj au înregistrat cele mai semnificative creșteri.
- Intervențiile în comun și abordarea comună a proiectelor au avut un efect important asupra contribuției programului la valorificarea patrimoniului cultural și natural în scopul utilizării sustenabile a acestuia.
- Factorii principali care au sprijinit contribuția Programului la valorificarea patrimoniului cultural și natural, precum și la îmbunătățirea turismului în zona transfrontalieră au fost: calitatea parteneriatelor create în cadrul proiectelor, alocarea financiară, utilizarea finanțărilor, consultarea părților interesate și evaluarea eficientă a nevoilor.
- Caracterul inovator al proiectelor a fost considerat un efect pozitiv neașteptat la nivelul întregului Program, și în special la nivelul Axei Prioritare 2.
- Dezvoltarea celor 34 de produse turistice noi, precum și implementarea aplicațiilor și site-urilor web au oferit cetățenilor un acces rapid la informații, precum și la noi activități turistice, care au facilitat contribuția Programului la îmbunătățirea turismului în zona transfrontalieră.
- Proiectele au contribuit într-o mare măsură la îmbunătățirea managementului și protecției siturilor NATURA 2000 din zona transfrontalieră, inclusiv prin produse și abordări inovatoare (care au variat de la soluții comune și acțiuni pilot la aplicații virtuale și instrumente pentru promovarea siturilor NATURA 2000). Soluțiile comune reprezintă o îmbunătățire importantă în privința gestionării comune și protecției siturilor NATURA 2000.

Impactul asupra managementului riscurilor

- Comunicarea interinstituțională la nivelul autorităților române și bulgare s-a îmbunătățit. Au fost stabilite parteneriate în privința alertelor rapide și a intervențiilor de urgență, iar capacitatea unităților specializate a fost îmbunătățită.
- Cele mai importante aspecte care au fost îmbunătățite sunt capacitatea unităților specializate în asigurarea intervențiilor de urgență comune, cât și furnizarea și/sau îmbunătățirea echipamentelor disponibile.

Impactul asupra ocupării forței de muncă

- Contribuția actuală și viitoare a intervențiilor din cadrul Programului la progresul în ceea ce privește ocuparea forței de muncă și mobilitatea cetățenilor se datorează măsurilor de incluziune socială și inițiativelor comune în formarea și ocuparea forței de muncă în rândul tinerilor.
- Programul a înregistrat un progres considerabil în consolidarea competitivității pe piața muncii. Acest aspect este subliniat de nivelul ridicat de depășire a indicatorilor de ocupare și mobilitate a forței de muncă.
- Impactul Programului a fost resimțit și în ceea ce privește dezvoltarea relațiilor de cooperare la nivelul mediului de afaceri din zona eligibilă. Acest aspect a contribuit în mod favorabil la ocuparea forței de muncă, calitatea vieții, flexibilitate - mobilitate pentru muncă și disponibilitate pentru formare profesională, adaptate cerințelor și nevoilor reale.

Impactul asupra capacității instituționale

- Proiectele analizate au acordat importanță creșterii capacității schemelor comune de cooperare transfrontalieră, generând oportunități pentru schimbul de experiență și de bune practici și sprijinind cele mai adecvate măsuri care maximizează sinergiile dintre cele două părți ale



graniței. Factorii principali care au fost subliniați pe parcursul analizei intervențiilor, în ceea ce privește complementaritatea și armonizarea, au fost modernizarea și creșterea eficienței serviciilor publice.

- Domeniile de intervenție finanțate au acoperit unele dintre nevoile de maximă necesitate ale zonei transfrontaliere, permițând atât intervenții practice (precum achiziționarea de materiale medicale în spitale și de echipamente IT în școli), cât și intervenții transversale, prin promovarea cooperării, a consolidării capacității și a schimburilor de experiență.

Impactul asupra dezvoltării regionale

- Oportunitățile create prin intermediul Programului (ex. crearea de platforme comune, cursuri de formare, evenimente etc) au oferit oamenilor din zona transfrontalieră tot mai multe ocazii de a se cunoaște.
- Programul a avut efecte reale asupra calității vieții cetățenilor, contribuind la stoparea unor situații de sărăcie și excluziune socială și de abandon școlar, precum și prin promovarea prevenirii în domeniul medical.
- Programul a contribuit într-o mare măsură la atingerea obiectivelor Strategiei UE pentru regiunea Dunării (EUSDR). Un total de 185 de proiecte au vizat obiective ale Strategiei UE pentru regiunea Dunării.

Impactul asupra sustenabilității

- Multe proiecte au reprezentat o continuare a proiectelor implementate în perioada de programare anterioară și finanțate în cadrul programului transfrontalier anterior (Programul de cooperare transfrontalieră România-Bulgaria 2007-2013). Această continuitate - unul dintre punctele forte cheie ale programului - evidențiază faptul că proiectele sunt de multe ori create astfel încât să dureze mai mult decât perioada lor specifică de implementare.

Contribuția Programului la obiectivele Strategiei Europa 2020

- Cea mai substanțială contribuție la țintele Strategiei Europa 2020 este axată pe creșterea inclusivă, toți indicatorii de realizare relevanți din cadrul Programului având țintele pentru 2023 deja depășite, pe baza proiectelor finanțate până în anul 2019.

Contribuția Programului la creșterea inteligentă și durabilă necesită analiză suplimentară bazată pe cercetarea aprofundată a proiectelor finanțate, însă pe baza datelor din monitorizare pare a fi mai limitată comparativ cu contribuția la creșterea inclusivă.

Concluzii și recomandări generale

- Toate axele prioritare ale Programului au înregistrat îmbunătățiri semnificative și au demonstrat faptul că domeniile de intervenție sunt conectate între ele și sunt capabile să creeze efecte pozitive și asupra altor domenii.
- Este de așteptat ca realizările și rezultatele Programului să fie sustenabile pe termen lung. Astfel, dacă va fi păstrat același tip de abordare și în următoarea perioadă de programare, nu ar trebui să apară probleme majore privind sustenabilitatea. Cu toate acestea, corecțiile financiare și alocarea fondurilor pot rămâne motive de îngrijorare.

Изпълнително резюме

Този документ представлява доклад за оценка на въздействието на програмата Interreg V-A Румъния-България. Този доклад има за цел да оцени въздействието на програмата върху дългосрочното развитие и устойчивостта на трансграничния регион, въз основа на всяка конкретна цел. Анализът на въздействието на Програмата включваше прилагането на различни методи за оценка и инструменти за изследване, като: офис изследвания, интервюта с програмните органи и

заинтересовани страни, социологически проучвания сред бенефициентите, казуси и сравнителен анализ. Въз основа на анализа на получените данни, по-долу са формулирани редица констатации.

Основните констатации от оценката:

Въздействие върху транспорта

- Над 120 км пътища са построени чрез проекти за модернизация и над 600 000 души са се възползвали от подобрена пътна мрежа, която се свързва с мрежата TEN-T.
- През 2017 г. Румъния и България подписаха меморандум за сътрудничество, със цел значителни инвестиции в местната инфраструктура, особено в изграждането и рехабилитацията на мостове. Това сближаване на приоритети и цели по принцип трябва да разшири обхвата на влияние на Програмата.
- местността на интервенциите в тази област е силата на оценяваната програма. Повечето проекти са необходими, тъй като функционалната инфраструктура на нивото на допустимата площ не е достатъчна.
- Индикаторът за безопасност на корабоплаването по Дунав („Обща дължина на нови или подобрени вътрешни водни пътища“) е достигнал 100%, обхващайки цялата дължина на р. Дунав в трансграничната зона Румъния-България (470 км).
- Подобряването на инфраструктурната свързаност допринесе за по-голяма вътрешна мобилност и по този начин за създаването на нови бизнес инициативи.

Въздействие върху наследството и околната среда

- Броят на туристите се е увеличил в сравнение с предходния програмен период. Програмата надвишава целевата стойност на показателя Брой туристи, ношуващи в трансграничния регион, с процент на успех от 406,01%.
- Общият брой на единиците за настаняване в допустимата зона се е увеличил между 2015 и 2019 г. с 1,74%. Силистра, Добрич, Констанца и Долж отчитат най-значително увеличение.
- Съвместната намеса и общият подход на проектите оказаха важен ефект върху приноса на програмата за капитализиране на културното и природно наследство, за да се използва устойчиво.
- Основните фактори, които подкрепиха приноса на програмата за развитието на културното и природно наследство, както и за подобряването на трансграничния туризъм бяха: качеството на партньорствата, създадени в рамките на проектите, финансово разпределение, използване на финансиране, консултации със заинтересованите страни и ефективна оценка на нуждите.
- Иновационният характер на проектите се счита за неочакван положителен ефект на ниво Програма, и по специално на ниво Приоритетна ос 2.
- Разработването на 34-те нови туристически продукта, както и прилагането на приложения и уебсайтове осигуриха на гражданите бърз достъп до информация, както и у нас туристически дейности, което улесни приноса на програмата за подобряване на трансграничния туризъм.
- Проектите допринесоха значително за подобряване на управлението и защитата на обектите от НАТУРА 2000 в трансграничната зона, включително чрез иновативни продукти и подходи (вариращи от съвместни решения, пилотни действия, виртуални приложения и инструменти за популяризиране на обекти от НАТУРА 2000). Съвместните решения представляват значително подобрение в съвместното управление и защита на обектите по НАТУРА 2000.

Въздействие върху управлението на риска

- Междуинституционалната комуникация на ниво румънски и български власти се подобри. Установени са партньорства за бързо предупреждение и реагиране при извънредни ситуации, а капацитетът на специализираните звена е подобрен.



- Най-важните аспекти, които са подобрени, са капацитетът на специализираните звена за осигуряване на съвместни спешни интервенции, както и осигуряването и/или подобряването на наличното оборудване.

Въздействие върху заетостта

- Настоящият и бъдещият принос на интервенциите на Програмата за напредък в заетостта и мобилността на гражданите се дължи на мерки за социално включване и съвместни инициативи в обучението и заетостта сред младите хора.
- Програмата постигна значителен напредък в укрепването на конкурентоспособността на пазара на труда. Това се подчертава от високото ниво на преодоляване на показателите за заетост и мобилност.
- Въздействието на Програмата се усеща и по отношение развитието на отношенията на сътрудничество на ниво бизнес среда в допустимата област. Това допринесе благоприятно за заетостта, качеството на живот, гъвкавостта - мобилност на работното място и готовност за обучение, съобразени с реалните нужди и изисквания.

Въздействие върху институционалния капацитет

- Анализирани проекти придават значение на увеличаването на капацитета на общите схеми за трансгранично сътрудничество, генериране на възможности за обмен на опит и добри практики и подпомагане на най-подходящите мерки, които максимизират синергията между двете страни на границата. Основните фактори, които бяха подчертани по време на анализа на интервенциите, по отношение на допълване и хармонизация, бяха модернизацията и повишаването на ефективността на публичните услуги.
- Финансираните области на интервенция покриват някои от най-належащите нужди на трансграничната зона, като позволяват както практически интервенции (например чрез закупуване на медицински консумативи в болници и ИТ оборудване в училищата), така и междусекторни интервенции, чрез насърчаване на сътрудничеството, изграждане на капацитет и обмен на опит.

Въздействие върху регионалното развитие

- Възможностите, създадени чрез Програмата (например създаване на общи платформи, курсове за обучение, събития и др.) Предоставят все повече и повече възможности за хората в трансграничната зона да се опознаят.
- Програмата имаше реални ефекти върху качеството на живот на гражданите, допринесе за прекратяване на някои бедностни ситуации и социалното изключване и намаляване на процента на отпадане от училище, но също така и за насърчаване на медицинската превенция.
- Програмата допринесе значително за постигане на целите на Стратегията на ЕС за Дунавския регион (EUSDR). Общо 185 проекта са насочени към стратегията на ЕС за Дунавския регион.

Въздействие върху устойчивостта

- Много проекти бяха продължение на проектите, изпълнени през предходния програмен период и финансирани по предходната програма за трансгранично сътрудничество (Програма за трансгранично сътрудничество Румъния-България 2007-2013). Тази приемственост - една от ключовите силни страни на програмата - подчертава, че проектите често се създават, за да продължат по-дълго от конкретния им период на изпълнение.

Приносът на програмата към целите на стратегията „Европа 2020“

- Най-същественният принос към целите на стратегията „Европа 2020“ е съсредоточен върху приобщаващия растеж, като всички съответни показатели за постижения по Програмата имат цели за 2023 г. въз основа на проекти, финансирани до 2019 г.
- Приносът на програмата за интелигентен и устойчив растеж изисква допълнителен анализ, основан на задълбочени проучвания на финансирани проекти, но въз основа на данните от мониторинга изглежда по-ограничен в сравнение с приноса за приобщаващ растеж.

Общи заключения и препоръки



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GOVERNMENT OF BULGARIA

- Всички приоритетни оси на Програмата са регистрирали значителни подобрения и са показали, че областите на намеса са взаимосвързани и могат да създадат положителни ефекти и върху други области.
- Очаква се постиженията и резултатите от програмата да бъдат устойчиви в дългосрочен план. По този начин, ако се запази един и същ подход и през следващия програмен период, не трябва да възникват големи проблеми с устойчивостта. Финансовите корекции и разпределението на средства обаче могат да останат причина за безпокойство.

1. Introduction

The *Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme impact 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 8th 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 Impact Evaluation Report for Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme 2014-2020 aims to provide an independent reflection on the programme's impact and sustainability and to contribute to the drafting of the next programme.

With regard to the impact evaluation, the activities conducted by the team of experts aimed to achieve an in-depth analysis on the programme's performance as regards each specific objective and its overall impact.

Throughout the evaluation activities performed within the project, a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods and techniques was applied, which substantiated the answers to **36 evaluation questions** and enabled in-depth analyses focused on the specific objectives of the contract. The evaluation of the impact of the Programme provide details on:

- progress in achieving each specific objective,
- contribution of interventions to the achieved progress,
- factors facilitating the contribution,
- intended and unintended effects,
- effects on the cross-border regional development and cooperation,
- current and estimated effect of the programme in the eligible area,
- sustainability of outputs and results and recommendations for future programming,
- the contribution to the targets of Europe 2020 strategy.

For the impact evaluation, the activities which were conducted by the team of experts aimed to achieve an in-depth analysis of the programme's performance on each specific objective and the impact until the agreed cut-off date of 31st December 2019.

2. Methodology

The methodological approach on which this impact evaluation report was constructed relied on methods of theory-based impact evaluation (TBIE). To evaluate the Programme's impact an in-depth analysis of the Programme's performance as regards each specific objective and its overall impact was necessary. The consortium used a set of main methodological tools to answer the related evaluation questions.

The applicability of TBIE (Annex 2) was centred on desk-based research of instruments and their intervention logic – as one angle – and work on the field for collection of primary data through interviews, document analysis, surveys and case studies – as additional angles. Moreover, the use of data collection instruments was based on the principle of triangulation of the findings, so to assure a robust set of conclusions for each evaluation question. It is important to mention that at the time of the elaboration of the impact evaluation report of the Programme, the results are based on the current status of implementation of the programme, while also determining the expected impact. The final actual net impact of the Programme could be measured only at the end of 2021, when all the projects would be finalized and after the last reporting period ends. The data collection tools used for each evaluation question are illustrated in the Annex 1 of this report.

Methodological aspects – Desk research

This desk research instrument was predominantly used for the evaluation of the Programme's performance as regards each specific objective and its overall impact. Moreover, the desk research was used as a collection tool for secondary data in order to assess the impact of the Programme. Whenever relevant, desk research has been extended to documents and data related to the previous programming period, to catch relevant aspects of continuity of the interventions along the 2 periods and of their impacts.

Methodological aspects – Semi-structured Interviews

As a first and key element of the field research, interviews were conducted, which targeted a number of subjects, such as representatives of the Managing Authority, of the Joint Secretariat, of the Bulgarian National Authority, as well as local authorities and stakeholders. These interviews were applied in accordance with the activity calendar approved for conducting the field research and were organized between 28.05.2020 – 13.06.2020. The final number of undertaken interviews was 14, 7 with Romanian interviewees and 7 with Bulgarian interviewees.

Methodological aspects – Survey

This instrument was applied to the evaluation questions in order to investigate the views of beneficiaries on the impact of the Programme. To avoid the overloading of the same respondents with too many questions, the questionnaire was structured differently depending on the specific objective and the groups of respondents. Additionally, in order to speed up the process, GoogleForms web platform was used, both in terms of data collection and data analysis. The resulted data was used for the evaluation of the impact of the programme. The survey questionnaire is presented in Annex 3. The final number of respondents was 60, 29 Romanian respondents and 31 Bulgarian respondents.

Methodological aspects – Case Studies

The purpose of the case studies was to collect first-hand evidence for the impact evaluation. More concretely, the Consortium proposed conducted 7 case studies (one per each specific objective) which investigated thoroughly particular examples of successful projects that have been implemented under the current Programme. Priority in the selection of case studies was given to projects that represent a

continuation of projects funded in the previous programming period, when possible. As regards the geographical scope, the selection of case studies was made to guarantee a balanced share of projects with Romanian and Bulgarian leader partners. Case studies allowed to explore individual cases/projects and to collect specific information from beneficiaries and related stakeholders. The outputs of the case studies answered some of the evaluation questions for impacts, sustainability and EU added value. The reports of the case studies can be analysed in the Annex 5 of this report.

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 Romania-Hungary and Interreg V-A Italy-Slovenia

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.



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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 each evaluation theme covered by the report and answers to all related evaluation questions

3.1. Analysis of Specific objective 1.1 - Evaluation Domain - Impact/Transport

1. Analysis

TBIE – Theory of change for SO 1.1 (the full analysis is presented in Annex 2).

Through the interventions supported under SO 1.1., the cross-border region has improved in the planning, development and coordination of cross-border transport systems for better connections to TEN-T transport networks through:

- Developing cross-border/joint action-based solutions related to works projects for public infrastructure (waterways, roads etc.):
- Developing co-ordinated concepts, standards and tools on the cross-border level for improved mobility services in the public interest
- Exchanging experience and knowledge, including raising awareness (trainings, seminars, and workshops) in the field of traffic safety measures in the cross-border area
- Improving the cross-border secondary and tertiary nodes connections to TEN-T infrastructure
- Setting up of joint traffic management for smart mobility in the cross-border area

This change has occurred in conjunction with:

- An increased level of coordinated management of connectivity issues related to TEN-T secondary and tertiary nodes (Source: desk research, case studies and interviews).
- Improved the connectivity to the TEN-T secondary and tertiary roles boosting modal shifting (Source: interviews, case studies, desk research and survey).

Other mechanisms have also influenced this change among which we mention:

- Lack of functioning local transport infrastructures (Territorial analysis).

EQ I.TR.01	What is the progress in improving the secondary and tertiary nodes connections to TEN-T infrastructure in the cross-border area?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- According to the latest forecast of indicators, more than 219 Kms of roads will be covered by modernisation projects. So far, over 600,000 people have benefited from an improved road network leading to TEN-T, and more are expected in next years. Interestingly, the Programme is also expected to deliver impacts on multimodal transport system. There is a need for fine-tuning of the network of e-bikes, but one of the financed projects has the potential to increase the number of people benefiting of its results. In addition, this kind of projects may deliver a significant modal shifting towards more sustainable means of transportation.
- Roads deterioration and related roads accidents are a critical issue in both Romania and Bulgaria. Their fatalities rate related to road safety double the EU Average as the two countries constantly ranked at the bottom of the EU chart. This issue is particularly severe in the area covered by one of the projects financed in this field. In 2016, the Constanta county (RO) registered 1252

accidents, with 65 fatalities and over 1600 injured¹. Pleven (BG) registered over 1800 accidents with more than 500 injured in the same year². While it is possible to see a slight reduction in accidents and their severity, it is still rather difficult to attribute this impact to the Programme alone. However, it is possible to conclude that the Programme is tackling an urgent need and it is likely to deliver impacts in the future.

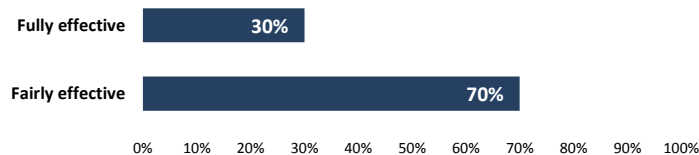
- Investments on transport networks aimed at improved connectivity in the area are key policy priorities. Romania and Bulgaria signed a co-operation memorandum in 2017 with the objective of carrying significant investments in local infrastructures, especially bridges³. This convergence of priorities and objectives should – in principle – expand the possible impact of the Programme.

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

- Most of local **stakeholders** agree that there is a substantial improvement in transport network in the area, but do not have a clear understanding of the added value related to TEN-T Network. In addition, they struggle to attribute these positive impacts to a specific Programme, as they often mention major infrastructural improvements (such as the construction of a new Danube bridge).
- Despite recognising the overall improvement in road transport, local stakeholders cannot easily attribute this progress to the Programme impacts.
- Local Authorities stressed that several municipal roads have been improved thanks to the Programme and this improved overall accessibility. However, the focus on TEN-T may hinder local roads. There is consensus that soft projects focused on road safety were particularly effective.

From the **surveys** the main findings are:

Figure 1 Do you consider that the calls were effectively designed to select projects aimed at improving the secondary and tertiary nodes connection to TEN-T infrastructure?



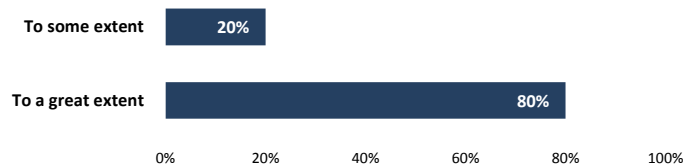
The calls aimed at improving the secondary and tertiary nodes connections to TEN-T infrastructure were considered by 70% of the respondents to be effective, while another 30% of the respondents mentioned that design of the calls was fully effective. These results are extremely positive, since no respondent considered that the calls' design was ineffective or barely effective.

¹https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/mijloace_de_transport_vehicule_inmatriculate_si_accidente_de_circulatie_rutiera_2020.pdf

²https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/publications/ptp_2018.pdf

³<https://sofiaglobe.com/2017/10/03/bulgarian-romanian-prime-ministers-open-new-border-checkpoint-sign-co-operation-memoranda/>

Figure 2 To what extent has your project contributed to the improvement of the connection of secondary and tertiary nodes?



The contribution of projects to the improvement of the connection of secondary and tertiary nodes was appreciated by all the respondents to be high and significant. 80% of them affirmed that the project contributed to a great extent to the improvement of nodes, and 20% mentioned that their projects contribute to some extent to the improvement of nodes. These results highlight that project beneficiaries are highly satisfied with the design of the calls under PA 1 and this may explain the very high application rate.

When asked to elaborate about their projects' contribution to the improvement of the connection of secondary and tertiary nodes, respondents mentioned: set up of a mechanism to support intermodal nodes in the cross-border area; raise awareness of transport opportunities and provide an alternative way to move between nodes, increase of individual mobility in and around the nodes of the TEN-T infrastructure; and improvement of secondary nodes' connection.

EQ I.TR.02	What is the current and expected contribution of the interventions under the programme to this progress?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- According to the final version of the **Operational Programme**, the financial allocation to PA1 "A well connected Region" is by far the highest of the whole Programme. This was based on a need analysis which highlighted several scopes for intervention in the region mobility. As the Programme proved to be particularly relevant, it is likely that the contribution would be significant.
- Most of the **projects included hard measures** which – as the stakeholders acknowledged – are **likely to deliver impacts**. Over 1 million local citizens are somehow benefiting from these hard measures implemented in the programme area. This is in line with the target set by the Operational Programme.
- By analysing the **statistics on road maintenance and modernisation**⁴⁵ in Programme areas, we noticed that very few interventions were carried out in the last 5 years. Some districts (Vidin, Dolj, Calarasi, Silistra) have not benefitted from any road modernisation. On the other hand, **Giurgiu and Ruse** – who are covered by a large hard project financed under the programme – **have the sharpest increase in Kms of modernized roads**. This may point out that the Programme is a **key instrument for this line of interventions in the area** – increasing its overall contribution to the development objectives and creating synergies with other relevant policies.
- By assessing the list of projects financed under SO 1.1., it is possible to conclude that road **modernisation and improvement of safety is a key feature**.

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

⁴ <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/11252/regional-statistics-and-indicators-monitoring>

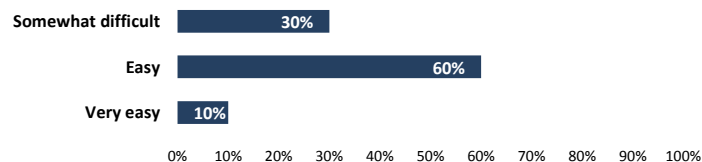
⁵ https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/lungimea_cailor_de_transport_la_sfarsitul_anului_2019.pdf



- The relevance of the interventions is indeed the strong point of this Programme. Most of the projects are needed because of the lack of functioning infrastructure in the area. In addition, the quality of the partnership is also an important factor as it ensures a smooth implementation of the projects.
- According to an interviewee from the Programme bodies, the **lack of substantial investments in the region’s road network makes Programme intervention particularly significant**.
- According to a local authority: “There has been **real progress** within some of the administrative areas covered by the Romania-Bulgaria Programme. With regard to our district - the construction and maintenance of the transport infrastructure is carried out with funds from the central budget and / or other operational programmes”.
- Most of local stakeholders acknowledged that the **Programme contributed to the overall mobility in the area**, especially given the lack of local resources. However, some of them highlighted that the Programme could have been more effective in boosting modal shifting or improving infrastructures leading to the TEN-T network.
- Finally, it is interesting to notice that the above-mentioned findings are largely confirmed by the interviews with academic experts, who noted that the restoration of connections, network and road infrastructure is needed, as well as general coordination of transport schedules. The lack of a developed state network for the provision of transport services is a prerequisite for the development of this niche in the private sector.

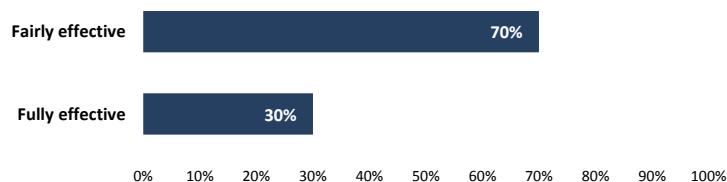
From the **surveys** the main findings are:

Figure 3 According to your first-hand experience, how easy was it to align the project's features to its contribution to the Programme’s objectives?



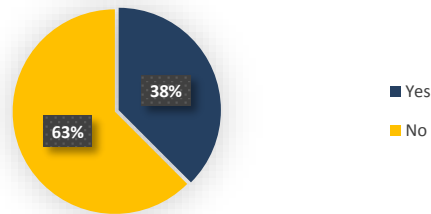
30% of the respondents to this question mentioned that it was somehow difficult to align the project’s features to its contribution to the Programme’s objective, but 70% of the respondents affirmed that it was easy and very easy to align the project’s features to the Programme’s objectives. These results point out that project beneficiaries do not encounter significant difficulties in adapting local specificities to the broader goal of the Programme. This reinforces the findings concerning the relevance.

Figure 4 According to your first-hand experience, do you consider that the calls have effectively balanced local needs with the overall Programme's objectives?



30% of the respondents to this question mentioned that the calls were fully effective in balancing the local needs with the overall Programme’s objectives and 70% considered that the calls were fairly effective in assuring the mentioned balancing between needs and objectives. Together with the previous figure, these findings confirm that calls and selection criteria are designed to suit local needs.

Figure 5 Is your project related in any way to another project funded in the previous RO-BG Programme? If so, could you please outline the connection between the 2 projects and the related advantages/added values,



38% of the respondents affirmed that the projects funded in this programming period and the projects from the previous programming period are somehow related to each other without further specifications, while 68% of the respondents outlined that their projects are not related. Perhaps, there is more scope for integrated projects (i.e. combining transport and heritage).

EQ I.TR.03 | What are the factors facilitating that contribution?

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

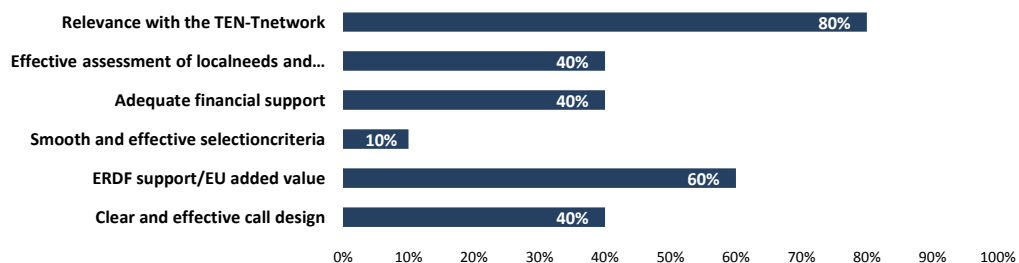
- As previously mentioned, the key factors facilitating Programme contribution are its relevance to the regional needs and the lack of local resources to cover them.
- Another relevant factor is the synergies with other EU financed policies – especially the National Operational Programme on TEN-T Connectivity.

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

- According to an interviewee from a local authority: “the Programme conditions were the key factors to enhance its contribution to the development goals”. The interviewee also added that “the programme provides quite a wide range of options for solving specific problems”.
- Another local authority stressed the focus on municipal road network is a success network.
- It is also interesting to highlight that – according to several interviewees – the cross-border dimension (i.e. the partnership between Romanian and Bulgarian project beneficiaries) was considered as a positive factor.
- Local stakeholders express some concern related to the lack of environmentally friendly measures due to an unbalanced focus on road transportation. For instance, bikes and electric mobility should be prioritised. In this regard, the project E-Bike Network can be a best practice.

From the **surveys** the main findings are:

Figure 6 According to your first-hand experience, which one of the following factors had facilitated the implementation of the project?



Relevance with the TEN-T network has been the most recurrent element chosen by 80% of the respondents, being considered the most important elements which facilitated the implementation of the



project, 60% of the outlined the ERDF support, while 40% highlighted the effective assessment of local needs, adequate financial support and clear and effective call design.

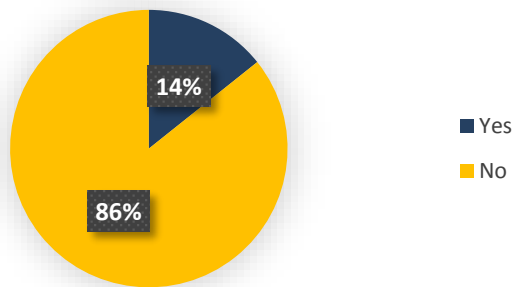
EQ I.TR.04 Are there any unintended effects of the programme in this field?

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

- According to an interviewee from the Programme bodies, a remarkable unintended but significant effect related to the improvements on roads safety is the spill over on the local economy. Improved connectivity brought about more internal mobility and thus the creation of new business and economic initiatives. Indeed, according to the interviewee, one of the key limitations of regional development is the obstacles to the movement of goods and people.
- According to an academic expert: “the intervention underpinned by the Programme delivered positive spill-over in the area, revitalising local business”.
- According to local stakeholders and local authorities, there has been a fair prevention system to avoid any possible negative spill-over of the projects financed by the Programme. However, one local stakeholder highlighted that possible environmental negative spill-overs should be taken into consideration, especially in the next programming period.

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

Figure 7 Are there any unintended effects of the Programme in this field?



When asked if there are any unintended effects under the Programme in this field, 86% of the respondents did not highlight any unintended effects, while 14% of the respondents answered affirmatively, without further specification. This led to the conclusion that no major unintended effect had happened.

2. Conclusions

The above-described evidence consistently points towards an overall success of the programme in improving TEN-T connections. This is due to several reasons, especially to the relevance of programme’s actions and the design of the calls.

Moreover, the collected evidence consistently points out to a significant contribution of the programme to the transport infrastructure in the area – which is likely to materialise in the next years.

As previously mentioned, the alignment between the needs and between the needs and the logic of projects is arguably the most significant factor ensuring success in this field.

Except for few local stakeholders who highlighted the existence of positive spill-overs, projects in the transport sector did not have major unintended effects.

Recommendations

R.1. The only minor recommendation related to improving the secondary and tertiary nodes connections to TEN-T infrastructure in the cross-border area would concern the coordination between similar policies in the area.

R.2. In what concerns the expected contribution of the interventions under the programme to this progress, the main recommendation concerns to further encourage the synergies between the types of projects and the boosting of modal shifts, complementing the secondary and tertiary nodes connections to TEN-T with waterways transport along the Danube to make the first less congested.

Furthermore, given the limited unintended effects, specific recommendations are negligible.

3.2. Analysis of Specific objective 1.2 - Evaluation Domain Impact/Transport

1. Analysis

TBIE – Theory of change for SO 1.2 (the full analysis is presented in Annex 2).

Through the interventions supported under SO 1.2., the cross-border region is better-prepared and integrated in terms of prevention and management capacity of disaster risks through:

- Raising awareness regarding the importance of developing and improving environment-friendly transport systems in the cross-border area
- unify the reference system used in Romania and Bulgaria on the Danube and introduce the River Information system, elaboration of maritime spatial plans (MSP) for the Black Sea
- Investing (infrastructure and equipment) in improved freight and passenger on river and sea transport on cross-border level

This change has occurred in conjunction with:

- An increased level of local awareness towards Danube navigability issues, especially security concerns (Source: survey, desk research and interviews).
- Improved safety in Danube navigation and improved management responses of possible accidents.

Other mechanisms have also influenced this change among which we mention:

- Lack of investment in the area (Territorial analysis).

<p>EQ I.TR.05 EQ I.TR.06</p>	<p>What is the progress in increasing Danube navigation safety for freight and passenger traffic in the cross-border area? What is the current and expected contribution of the interventions under the programme to this progress?</p>
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The relevant indicators related to the Danube navigation safety, such as “Total length of new or improved inland waterway” reached 100% completion rate, covering the whole RO-BG CBC Danube length which corresponds to 470 km.
- Similarly, the result indicator “% of the RO-BG CBC Danube length and Black Sea where safety of the navigation has been improved by joint actions”, is achievable as one project (see section on case studies) will develop a common mechanism / system for improving the safety of river Danube navigability for the whole length of the common stretch between Romania and Bulgaria.
- Then, it is possible to conclude that hard measures were more effective than soft ones. This is – in principle – a positive factor for increasing local impacts on Danube navigation.
- The tree financed projects are expected to deliver long-lasting impacts in the area:



- NAVY T-WAY and BETTER CONNECTED EUROREGION RUSE-GIURGIU concern 4% (21 Kms) of the whole inland waterway on the Danube improving safety (especially by improving existing infrastructure, delivering extra-ordinary maintenance to signalling system)
- DANUBE SAFETY NET which covers the whole length to the Romanian – Bulgarian Danube waterway.

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

- There is substantial consensus among the Programme management bodies on the fact that there is scope for improvement in the Danube navigation in the relevant areas.
- One interviewee highlighted that the need of financing on the Danube navigability is high, but the allocated budget is limited – meaning that the projects financed under this SO were few.
- On the other hand, the implementation of the Project “Danube Safety Net” will provide substantial progress to the area – by significantly improving the navigation safety.
- However, navigation safety is a national issue which should need more focus at the national level and should be funded accordingly.
- One interviewee from a Programme Management Body pointed out that the EU policy for the Danube is not necessarily in line with the local needs. Indeed, the EU focuses more on the navigation through the Danube rather than from one side to the other.
- Local stakeholders have mixed views on the impact on the Danube navigation. While the majority of them acknowledge that some progress has been made, many complain about the poor connectivity.
- On the other hand, many stakeholders pointed out that they are not in a position to assess impacts attributable to the Programme as they are not sufficiently informed about it.

From the **surveys** (only one respondent out of the three financed projects), the main findings are:

- When asked in which kind of measures he/she was involved as beneficiary, the respondent mentioned hard measures.
- The beneficiary mentioned that the project contributed to some extent to the improvement of navigation safety on the Danube.
- When asked to elaborate about the project’s contribution to the improvement of the Danube, the beneficiary answered that:
 - The Calarasi county and the city Silistra are connected by a relation of passengers transportation which implies only road transportation (made by own cars) or navy transportation (made by ferryboat). Their intention was to eliminate the barriers to free movement of the citizens between the two communities, Calarasi (Romania) and Silistra (Bulgaria) by introducing a new and alternative means of transportation. These barriers were represented by the obligation of using personal transport means or by using a transportation mean such as ferryboat. The project had to take in consideration many people who do not have a driving license for a car and cannot use these means of transportation for traveling from one side of the border to another.
- When asked about the level of difficulty in aligning the project features to its contribution to the Programme’s objective, the respondent did not offer any answer.
- According to his/her first-hand experience about the level of difficulty in aligning the project features to its contribution to the Programme’s objective, the respondent did not offer any answer.

- The beneficiary's perspective is that the calls were fairly effective in balancing the local needs with the overall Programme's objectives.

From the **case study: Danube Safety Net**, the main findings are:

- Once the project will be completed, two fully operational control systems will be available for both sides of the Danube. This will significantly improve the safety of navigation.
- Another contribution would be developing the capability to respond together to any kind of disaster (chemicals, fuels, nuclear power-plant), to preserve environment and human lives.
- According to the project beneficiary, the factors facilitating this contribution were
 - First facilitating factor was the professional attitude of the two agencies
 - Identification of the needs to implement the project
 - Support by the two governments to the involved agencies.
- The project is also likely to have positive spill-overs on the sustainable management of the Danube.
- The project has a clear cross-border dimension as it involves National Authorities from both sides of the border and strengthen their cooperation capacity.

EQ I.TR.07	What are the factors facilitating that contribution?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- A key factor facilitating the contribution on this objective is the lack of alternative sources of financing with a cross-border approach. Indeed, both Romania and Bulgaria have several national policies related to Danube Navigation. However, these policies are hardly intertwined and coordinated. Thus, the Interreg Programme remains the only policy instrument suitable to address common issues.
- On top of that, the status of the Danube navigation – especially as far as concerns safety – needs significant investment and improvement. This gives a wide scope for intervention.

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

- Local stakeholders could not identify any key factors and struggle to see significant improvement on Danube navigation. On the other hand, they recognise that any kind of investment in this area would be highly beneficial for the whole area.

From the **surveys** (only one respondent out of the three financed projects), the main findings are:

- When asked which factors have facilitated the implementation of the project, the beneficiary considered that ERDF support/EU added value were one of the most important factors that have facilitated the implementation of the project.
- The beneficiary mentioned that the project considered some of the indicators for monitoring the environmental impact proposed through the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). The mentioned indicators involved:
 - No of projects having a negative impact on landscape
 - Number of projects creating a modal shift from road transport to waterways
 - Number of projects focusing on river transport infrastructure.

EQ I.TR.08	Are there any unintended effects of the programme in this field?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- No relevant sources concerning unintended impacts have been found. Many of these are likely to materialise in the next years.

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

- As mentioned above, local stakeholders struggle to identify any effect on Danube navigation – either intended or unintended. On the other hand, many of them acknowledge that the most



likely unintended effects will be on tourism – as the Danube river has great potentiality in that field.

- One interviewee from a Programme Management Body highlighted the importance of boosting Danube navigation and positive spill-over on local business. The higher the frequency of boats crossing the Danube – the higher the number of local businesses (i.e. restaurants and bars) which may open in the area to host passengers while they are waiting.

2. Conclusions

As acknowledged by the Programme Bodies and confirmed by the desk research, there is scope for improvement as far as navigation safety is concerned. Programme's contribution is yet to be fully materialised. It is worth to be noted that, although the Programme set up a dedicated SO and calls have been launched, there has been limited number of applications on the beneficiaries' side. However, some progress has been made even though it is difficult to attribute it to the programme itself. Indeed, the most important project financed under this SO is still under implementation.

It is hard to determine the real contribution and impact of the programme to the Danube Navigation. Thus, it is even harder to identify the key factors facilitating this contribution.

The timing of the analysis does not allow to draw significant conclusions about the unintended effects: if any, they will materialise in the next years.

3. Recommendations

As the impacts are yet to materialise, it is not possible to give detailed recommendations. However, the project Danube Safety Net is likely to be a best practice in this field.

There is not sufficient evidence to provide recommendations for EQ I.TR.07 and EQ I.TR.08.

3.3. Analysis of Specific objective 2.1 - Evaluation Domain Impact/Heritage

1. Analysis

TBIE – Theory of change for SO 2.1 (the full analysis is presented in Annex 2).

Through the interventions supported under SO 2.1., the cross-border region is better-prepared and integrated in terms of sustainable use of natural heritage and resources and cultural heritage through:

- the development of joint management and coordination approaches
- the development of common tools and technologies for the management of natural and cultural heritage areas and sites

This change has occurred in conjunction with:

- An increased level of local awareness towards cultural and natural heritage preservation and importance thanks also to the cross-border projects funded during the previous and current programming period (Source: interviews and survey).
- Increased development of common tourism products and services thanks also to the cross-border projects funded during the previous and current programming period (Source: survey).

Other mechanisms have also influenced this change among which we mention:

- This particular SO was also influenced by the funds received from other mechanisms such as Regional Operational Programme, Operational Programme for Large Infrastructure, (Romanian Operational Programmes) and Operational programme "Regions in Growth" (Bulgarian Operational Programme). Both countries received funds from Private investments/own contribution.



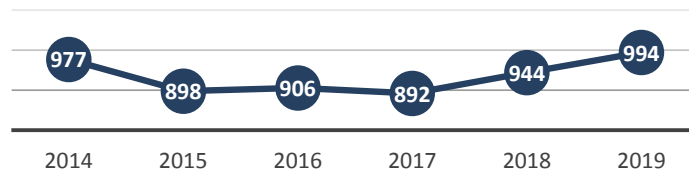
EQ I.HE.01

What is the progress in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving the tourism in the cross-border area?

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

- According on the data collected from the Bulgarian and Romanian National Institutes of Statistics, within the period of reference (2015-2019), the total number of accommodation establishments in the eligible area increased by 1,74%, with Silistra, Dobrich, Constanta and Dolj seeing the most significant increases on this indicator in 2019 compared to 2015. 40% in the case of Silistra, 21% in the case of Dobrich and 25,2% in the case of Constanța.

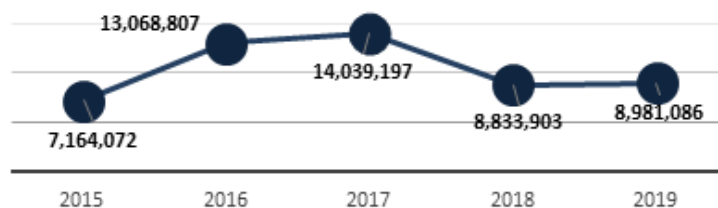
Figure 8 Cross border number of accommodation establishments (2014 – 2019)



Source: Bulgarian and Romanian National Institute of Statistics

- In the cases of Dolj, Teleorman, Vratsa and Montana, the number of available accommodation establishments has decreased after 2018. When considering the number of overnights spent within these counties, in the cases of Dolj, Teleorman, Vratsa and Pleven, the registered values on this indicator for 2015 and 2019 decreased slightly. In the case of Dolj it decreased between 2015-2016 and 2018-2019, while in the case of Teleorman the indicator decreased constantly, with a slightly increase between 2018-2019. As compared to 2015 (baseline year), increases in the number of overnights have been registered in 2019 in Dolj, while for Teleorman the registered value for 2019 is lower than the value of 2015. For Montana and Pleven, as compared to 2015, in 2017 increases in the number of overnights have been as high as 365% in the case of Pleven, while in the case of Vratsa this increase reached 300%. Apart from these cases, in all of the other districts/counties in the cross-border region there have been significant increases in the number of overnights (in 2019 as compared to 2015).

Figure 9 Cross-border progress in no. of overnights (2015 – 2019)



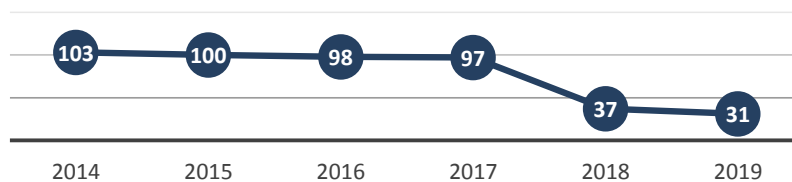
Source: Bulgarian and Romanian National Institute of Statistics

- At cross-border level, the data analysed shows an average annual increase in the number of tourist overnights of 25.3% in the entire reference period. The most important yearly increases at the level of the region have been registered in 2016 (of 82.4% higher as compared to 2015) and in 2017 (of 7.4% as compared to 2016).
- Constanta County and Dobrich have contributed the most to the progress registered in the eligible area on this particular indicator (also considering their position to the seaside), while Teleorman and Silistra continue to have the lowest contribution on average overnights in the

region in the reference period. Overall, at the level of the entire eligible area this indicator has increased in 2019 by 24.2% in the Romanian border region and by 27% in the Bulgarian border region as compared to 2015.

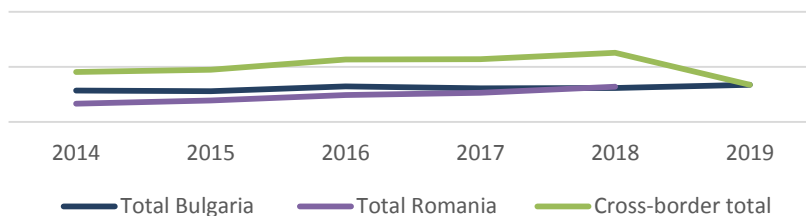
- When looking at the total amount of revenues from nights spent in the Bulgarian border region, we observe an increase in 2019 as compared to 2015 by 47.6% (a difference of over 55 million Leva), the amount coming from nights spent by foreigners in 2019 in the region representing 66% of the total (as compared to 62.5% in 2015).
- While the progress registered by the eligible area is highly significant, it is important to mention the fact that Constanta and Dobrich continue to secure the highest contribution to this value. Furthermore, in the last 5 years the progress was more significant in 2015/2016, the growth rate starting to slowly decrease in 2016/2017, but still continuing to grow comparing to 2015 (baseline value).
- A similar comparison between the values registered for 2019 as compared to 2015 indicates that at the level of the eligible area there has been an increase in the number of visits to museums, despite the decrease in the number of museums in the eligible area (from 103 to 31).

Figure 10 Number of museums in the cross – border area (2014 – 2019)



Source: Bulgarian and Romanian National Institute of Statistics

Figure 11 Number of visits to museums in the cross-border area (2014-2019)



Source: Bulgarian and Romanian National Institute of Statistics

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

- The number of tourists increased in comparison with the previous programming period. It is difficult to measure the cause of the increased number of tourists because other measures than the programme implementation were taken in this field (e.g. vouchers).
- The analysis of the indicator (number of tourist overnights) should take into consideration that the number of tourists will decrease because of the Covid-19 situation, not necessarily because the projects were not effective, but because of the social distancing restrictions imposed by this health emergency situation.

EQ I.HE.02	What is the current and expected contribution of the intervention under the Programme to this progress?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- According to the data collected from the project application forms and project progress reports, it can be observed that all the projects contracted under this SO had proposed innovative ideas in this domain⁶⁷. This aspect can be considered an unintended positive effect that can be added to the intervention logic for the next programming period.
- The data for both the programme and project level, as well as the data at the country level (National Institutes of Statistics) were available only for the period 2015-2019. In this context, a final analysis to measure the net impact of the programme to the development of the IP 2.1 will only be possible to elaborate at the end of 2021 or 2022 when all the projects will be finalized and the countries will update their national data about the result indicator of the Programme.
- For both Romania and Bulgaria, the main indicator through which the progress of using in a sustainable way the natural and cultural heritage and of improving the tourism in the cross-border area can be measured is the indicator ‘number of tourist overnights in the CBC region’.

Table 1 Programme-specific result indicators (SO2.1 - To improve the sustainable use of natural heritage and resources and cultural heritage)

ID	Indicator	Measurement unit	Baseline value	Target value (2023)	Achievement	%
R 2.1	Number of tourists overnight in the CBC region	Number of overnights	6,668,515.00	7,200,000.00	8,826,399 (cut-off -date 31st of December 2018; measurement carried out in 2019 based on the information provided by the national statistical institutes)	406.01%

Source: Interreg Romania-Bulgaria Website

Table 2 Progress registered by Romania and Bulgaria for the result indicator analysed

Country	Number of tourists overnight in the CBC region	2015	2016	2017	2018
Bulgaria	Units	2455660	7973641	8654191	3199561
Romania	Units	4708412	5095166	5385006	5634342
Total cross-border	Units	7,164,072	13,068,807	14,039,197	8,833,903

Source: Bulgarian and Romanian National Institute of Statistics

- According with the data provided in the Annual Implementation Report for 2019 as well as on the data analysis emphasised in the Annexes of the Implementation Evaluation Report and on the Bulgarian and Romanian National Institute of Statistics, the total value of number of tourist overnights across the entire eligible area was 8,826,399 (value for 2018). Moreover, considering that the target value for 2023 is 7,200,000 number of overnights, it can be outlined that the Programme achieved with success the target value of the indicator with a 406.01% success rate.
- The analysis of this success rate is based on the information provided by the statistical data from the national institutes from Romania and Bulgaria. The calculation is done by adding the yearly overnights spent by visitors in all the accommodation establishments in each county or district part

⁶ CBC for MaST Education (ROBG-165), Coordination of joint policies and equipment investments in the field of education in the cross-border area, Progress Reports

⁷ PARC (ROBG-17), Development and promotion of a common natural heritage tourism product: Route “Protected natural heritage within the cross-border region Romania-Bulgaria, Progress Reports

of the CBC according with the data provided by the national statistic institutions. Considering the data, and compared with the baseline value, an increased with 2,157,884 overnights was registered at the level of the entire eligible area, predominantly in Constanta – Dobrich area.

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

- As the Figure below shows, the respondents confirm the current impact of the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme. These findings confirm what was described above, namely that the Programme is having a great contribution to the progress registered in the domain of cultural heritage. Interestingly enough, no respondent considers that projects implemented within the programme are having no impact at the local level.

Figure 12 In your opinion, did your project bring any improvement at local level?

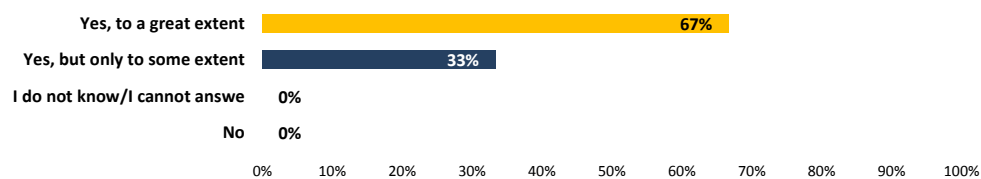
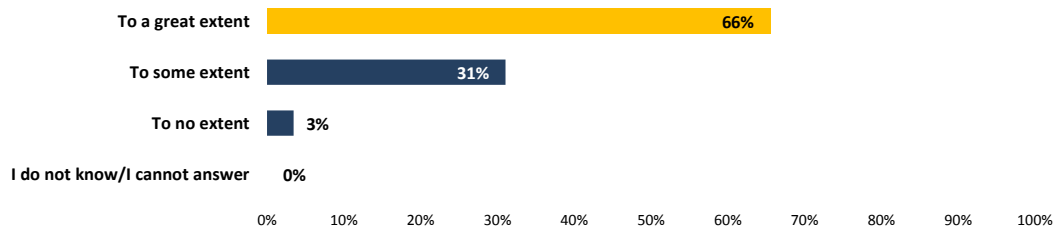


Figure 13 To what extent and how do you feel that your project has contributed to the sustainable use of the natural and cultural heritage and to improving the tourism in the cross-border area?



Source: Data collected by the research team

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

- There is a **substantial consensus on the current impact** of the programme amongst interviewees. Some pointed out that the scope for cross-border cooperation and programme intervention is great.
- The number of tourists is perceived as increased in comparison with the previous programming period. It is however difficult to measure the cause of the increased number of tourists because other measures than the programme implementation were taken in this fields (e.g. vouchers, other national or European interventions, etc.).
- It was mentioned that the key factors that 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 are: quality of partnerships created inside the projects, financial allocation, use of grants, stakeholders' consultation and needs assessment.

From the **case study analysis, Heritage for RO-BG Economy - EMS 8**, the main findings are:

- Through the implementation of the medium-term Strategy for a heritage-friendly business environment in the Romanian-Bulgarian border area the project supported the enterprises to adopt measures for sustainably using the natural and cultural heritage as direct or indirect assets of their business, with the view of improving cross-border tourism.



- Furthermore, through the implementation of this strategy businesses and local communities changed their mentalities and way of action by becoming more heritage-friendly and by working together to improve cross-border tourism.
- Moreover, the creation of one network of institutions involved in the domain contributed to the Programme progress because through this network six memorandums of understanding on the Strategy dissemination were signed at the end of the project, between the leading partner and the Romanian implementation entities (CCI Calarasi, CCI Craiova, CCI Olt, CCI Mehedinti, CCI Teleorman and PJIMM Giurgiu). In addition, the achievement of the programme result indicator with 200.000 more tourists' overnights in the CBC region contributed to the Programme progress.
- Considering the general aim of the project, the successful finalization of this project will significantly improve the growth and creation of jobs in the border area, by improving the tourism sector (see Annex 4 for more details).

EQ I.HE.03	What are the factors facilitating that contribution?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- 70 projects were contracted out of which 2 projects in 2019, and 23 projects (33%) were completed by the end of 2019, out of which 7 in 2019. One project was terminated. Based on the progress of the indicators analysed in the EQ 1 and EQ 2 above, it can be outlined that the projects within the Programme contributed to a high extent in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving the tourism in the cross-border area.
- Based on Annual Implementation Report 2019, the touristic products, studies and strategies implemented within the projects can be considered important factors that facilitated the contribution of the Programme to the sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage and to the improvement of the tourism in the cross-border area (e.g. 34 integrated touristic products; studies and strategies for applications and websites). The development of new touristic products and the implementation of applications and websites offered access to information, as well as new touristic activities, which facilitated the contribution of the Programme to the improvement of tourism in the cross-border area.
- The type of results of one of the financed projects, *The Path of Clay*, are facilitating this contribution of the Programme in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving the tourism in the cross-border area. The type of activities that the projects developed (e.g. new tourist routes, trainings, workshops and festivals, strategies and plan) can be considered a factor that facilitated the contribution of the Programme in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving the tourism in the cross-border area.

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

- The majority of the beneficiaries agreed that the common approach, common promotion of the touristic products, as well as the exchange of good practices between the two countries adopted within the projects were important factors through which the Programme contributed to the sustainable use of the natural and cultural heritage and to improving the tourism in the cross-border area.
- The integrated tourist products developed by the project innovative tourist services: Mobile application (name: Easy guide), Web portal (www.easyguide-portal.com).
- Availability of information materials developed within CBC projects; accessibility; promotion; tourist offers in Romania and Bulgaria.



- Virtual applications have been developed, interactive tourist environment on both sides of the Danube River has been built to achieve sustainable results.
- The projects ensured wider accessibility of common historical and cultural heritage based on technology and innovative tools and services.

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

- The joint intervention and joint approach of the projects had an important effect on the contribution of the Programme to the sustainable usage of natural and cultural heritage.
- The key factors that in the opinion of the interviewed persons have facilitated the contribution of the Programme to the progress in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving the tourism in the cross-border area were the quality of the partnerships created inside the projects, the use of grants, stakeholders' consultation and needs assessment.
- Joint actions aimed at tourism infrastructure, respectively the general design of key tourism products and services based on natural and cultural heritage, contributed greatly to the economic, social and cultural sustainable development of the area.
- A factor that also facilitated the contribution of the Programme to the progress in this field was represented by the actions to raise the awareness of the communities about the cultural and natural resources of the area in order to be valued and preserved in the future.
- Another important factor consisted in 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.

From the **case study analysis**, the main findings are:

- The factors at the project level that facilitated the contribution of the project, and thereby of the Programme to the progress, were the implementation of a well-established institutional framework visible and discussed with the economic environment from the eligible area, as well as efficient implementation tools and methods (multi-annual action plan and detailed action plan for the first year, guidelines for cultural heritage and natural heritage, modular training curricula and training manual for enterprises, website, leaflets, one measurement system for enterprises heritage friendliness).

EQ I.HE.04	Are there any unintended effects of the Programme in this field?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The projects contracted under the Specific Objective 2.1 impressed by their innovative ideas to approach the objectives of this domain. The progress reports, annual implementation reports and the official declarations of the Programme bodies emphasized that this innovative approach is considered an unintended positive effect⁸⁹.

⁸ CBC for MaST Education (ROBG-165), Coordination of joint policies and equipment investments in the field of education in the cross-border area, Progress Reports

⁹ PARC (ROBG-17), Development and promotion of a common natural heritage tourism product: Route "Protected natural heritage within the cross-border region Romania-Bulgaria, Progress Reports



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

- Most of the respondents considered that the projects implemented in this domain created positive changes in people's attitude towards the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage.
- The joint strategies and the common approach of the projects linked developed tourist sites to the ones that were less developed or underdeveloped by promoting them together to different audiences and on different markets.
- Both stakeholders and tourists gained know-how about the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. The tourists have now more information about regions and touristic attractions, they can find almost all the information online, centralized - everyone has access. This offers the opportunity to develop new potential for tourism sites and also to offer new common tourism products.

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

- It was considered by the Programme management bodies that the projects were extremely innovative. Hereby, innovation was considered to be an unintended positive effect for the Programme in general, and for the Priority Axis 2 in particular.
- Another unintended effect would be that a place hidden from the eyes of the people would be discovered by many tourists and that place will somehow be destroyed.
- The unintended positive and negative effects can only be observed after a longer period (5 to 10 years).
- An unintended negative effect that was mentioned by the Joint Secretariat was the garbage/waste left behind by tourists. The need for civic education on waste generated by tourism activities was identified. In the next programming period this aspect can be either included in the horizontal principles of the Programme or included as part of each project.
- The majority of the Programme management bodies mentioned that the projects generated unexpected positive side effects on local communities (i.e. social mobility, creation of new businesses, real-estate requalification).

From the **case study analysis**, the main findings are:

- The involvement of stakeholders from different domains in the development of the heritage domain offered new perspectives on the challenges that the domain rises.
- Support for changing mentalities and adopting new business models, educating and training businesses, offering permanent support, services and signposting to more specialized business service providers and, eventually, introducing the heritage-friendly concepts in larger strategies, policies and legislation can be considered potentially unintended effects.

2. Conclusions

In general, based on the indicators analysed so far, the eligible area of the Programme has witnessed a significant improvement within the touristic sector, registering an average yearly increase of the number of tourist overnights. However, certain factors still need to be kept in view, such as: Dobrich District and Constanta County have contributed the most to the progress registered in the region concerning the number of tourist overnights; the values for the eligible area overall number of overnights peaked between 2016 and 2017, falling between 2017 and 2018, and stabilising in 2019.

The Programme had a positive impact on the progress registered at the level of this domain. The programme contributions to the progress in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving the tourism in the cross-border area is high. However, considering that there are still projects

in implementation, as well as due to the COVID-19 situation, the number of tourists will decrease, not necessary because the projects were not effective, but because of the social distancing restrictions imposed by the health emergency situation. However, it is expected that although the potential effects of the pandemic will affect the rhythm in which the target will be achieved, it is believed that its overall value will not be affected.

Several factors facilitated the contribution of the Programme to the sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage. The key factor that has facilitated the contribution of the Programme to this progress was the quality of the partnerships created inside the projects. The partnerships created were based on communication, aspect that strengthened the partnerships and contributed to the overall success of the projects. The quality of the partnership had been also ensured in those partnerships continuing from the previous programming period that succeeded to implement continuous and solid projects. In addition, another aspect that ensured the quality of the partnerships was the expertise of the partners, a necessary aspect in developing and implementing the projects. Other factors that contributed to the progress registered by the Programme in the eligible area were the use of grants, stakeholders' consultation and needs assessment.

Furthermore, the Programme generated also unintended positive effects at the level of this domain. One of the most important unintended positive effects is the innovative aspect that was approached by all the projects under this specific objective. Another unintended positive effect important to be mentioned is the know-how gained by tourists and stakeholders about the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. If these effects will be analysed and taken into consideration in the next programming period, the contribution of the Programme in 2021-2027 to the development of tourism and to the sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage can be even higher.

3. Recommendations

R.3. The need for civic education on waste generated by tourism activities is recommended to be included in the horizontal principles or to be part of each project for the future programming period. Moreover, in the next programming period the significant pollution aspects that a higher number of tourists could bring in a remote, isolated area and the way public institutions react should be taken into consideration so that the future projects are sustainable and good for the environment.

3.4. Analysis of Specific objective 2.2 - Evaluation Domain Impact/Environment

1. Analysis

TBIE – Theory of change for SO 2.2 (the full analysis is presented in Annex 2).

Through the interventions supported under SO 2.2., the cross-border region is better-prepared and integrated in terms of sustainable management of the ecosystems from the cross-border area through:

- effective management enhanced through cross border cooperation and networking
- the promotion of NATURA 2000 sites and protected areas through the development of public awareness

This change has occurred in conjunction with:

- joint development, testing (pilot actions) and implementation of innovative tools and mechanisms for the protection of NATURA 2000 sites
- Increased capacity for joint strategies and management plans thanks also to the cross-border projects funded during the previous and current programming period

Other mechanisms have also influenced this change among which we mention:



- This particular SO was also influenced by the funds received from other mechanisms such as Regional Operational Programme, Operational Programme for Large Infrastructure, Romanian Operational Programmes) and Operational programme “Regions in Growth” (Bulgarian Operational Programme). Both countries received funds from Private investments/own contribution.

EQ I.EN.01

What is the progress in improving the management and protection of NATURA 2000 sites in the cross-border area, especially as regards joint solutions?

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

- The environmental situation in the RO-BG region is improving yearly. This is mainly a result of the reduced industrial activity in many of the main urban centres along the border. Over the past few years, a number of disastrous events have reiterated the need for better planning, coordination and infrastructure investment in order to prevent the local population and the economy from floods, forest fires and other climate-related hazards.
- The RO-BG border region is favoured by a number of natural and cultural heritage opportunities. The NATURA 2000 network is well presented on both sides, including the Persina Nature Park (covering part of Plevna and Veliko Tarnovo districts in Bulgaria). The Black Sea resorts located in the county of Constanța (RO) and in Dobrich district (BG) provide a combination of summer tourism opportunities and varied cultural attractions, thus generating around 80% of all overnight stays in the eligible area of the Programme.
- Additional investments are required for the rehabilitation, socialization and promotion of many cultural sites, especially the ones that are outside the main cities and routes. The tourist potential of the Danube River is still largely underused.

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

- About the improvements in the management and protection of NATURA 2000 sites in the cross-border area, the local stakeholders affirmed that it has improved because of the funds available for the facilities. The main aspects that have undergone a change are site rehabilitation and storage.
- 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. The above problem occurred as a result of managerial passivity and lack of interest in the protection of the NATURA sites in Bulgaria.
- 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.

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

- The beneficiary mentioned that the joint solutions envisaged by the project had contributed to a great extent to the improvement of joint management and protection of NATURA 2000 sites in the cross-border area.

From the **case study analysis**, the main findings are:

- Because until 2016 no major or effective cooperative measures (e.g. joint planning, strategies, mapping, management plans or coordinated management tools) related to biodiversity conservation and landscape protection and promotion in cross border Natura 2000 sites have been elaborated and enforced, the main INCOLAB project objectives were to promote and strengthen the partnership between the border environment communities to sustainably managing the ecosystems in zones of European Natura 2000 network:



- Establishment of a joint model for better planning, protection and use of ecosystems in the cross-border region of the Danube River.
- Implementation of a common approach for green initiatives to protect the biodiversity.
- Support of cross-border investments in Natura 2000 sites.

EQ I.EN.02	What is the current and expected contribution of the interventions under the Programme to this progress?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- Using some innovative approaches, both in collecting primary data and in using an analysis platform, the quality of management was significantly improved. Despite of some legislation differences, using a common platform for collecting and analysing information (ROBG-10 INCOLAB project) conducted to a more objective, fact-based and coherent decision-making process, which offers a better control of processes and limits the impact of some subjective approaches.
- By developing 2 studies on the status of wetlands and protected Natura 2000 areas in the municipalities along the Danube, both in Romania and Bulgaria, holding two traveling Scout camp in the protected areas in Bulgaria and Romania and carrying 8 cleansing campaigns, the ROBG-11 Plums for Junk project contributed directly to better protection for Natura 2000 sites, in a joint manner.
- For the future, the expectations are linked to the replication of management plans and strategies for Natura 2000 sites. The first steps are already done: one of the selected Natura 2000 administrators, Echilibru Association, which administrates Confluența Olt-Dunare site, is an example for this management improvement and how it could be replicated. After a successful involvement in ROBG-10 INCOLAB project, based on new approach of Natura 2000 sites management, it started a project to strength the management of other two Natura 2000 sites in the Danube area.
- For both Romania and Bulgaria, the main indicator through which the progress of enhancing the sustainable management of the ecosystems from the cross-border area that can be measured is the indicator ‘NATURA 2000 sites from the cross-border area with coordinated management tools’.

Table 3 Programme-specific result indicators (SO2.2 - To enhance the sustainable management of the ecosystems from the cross-border area)

ID	Indicator	Measurement unit	Baseline value (2014)	Target value (2023)	Achievement	%
R 2.2	NATURA 2000 sites from the cross-border area with coordinated management tools	Number	2	10	13.	137.50%

Source: Interreg Romania-Bulgaria Website

- The baseline value of this indicator in the Programme, referring to jointly developed/aligned management tools (2014) is 2. The gross impact is calculated as the total number of jointly developed/aligned management tools of NATURA 2000 sites (13, reported by the 2 project beneficiaries in 2018) is divided to the baseline value. No additional contribution is reported in 2019. The net impact is estimated to be 137.50% based on the assumption shared by the workshop participants that no other common NATURA 2000 management tools have been developed through other funding sources during the same period.



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

- Based on collected data, the beneficiaries mentioned that the projects contributed to a great extent in improving the management and protection of Natura 2000 sites in the cross-border area.
- The stakeholders mentioned that the joint solutions envisaged by the project had contributed to a great extent to the improvement of joint management and protection of sites.
- The projects contributed to a great extent in improving the management and protection of NATURA 2000 sites in the cross-border area by their innovative approach. The joint solutions offer an important improvement of joint management and protection of NATURA 2000 sites.
- Despite of some incongruences (ex. different regulatory frameworks), using a joint solution is the better way to dispose of more resources and generate a common solution for the same reality, a cross border added value.
- Joint Secretariat representatives mentioned that the partnership criteria that could assure a better success of the project is that within the partnership one of the partners should have the necessary attributes to carry out that project.
- Also, the MA representatives considered that the projects on PA 2.2 facilitated the interaction between stakeholders and contributed to their effort in generating new development ideas.
- The added value of cross-border projects in terms of environment is that the Programme created the field of play for the stakeholders to interact with each other.

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

- The beneficiary who participated in the survey mentioned that the project contributed to a great extent to improving the management and protection of NATURA 2000 sites in the cross-border area.

From the **case study analysis**, the main findings are:

- Through the project selected as case study for SO 2.2, 27,059 ha were supported to get a better conservation status by developing common management plans for 4 NATURA 2000 sites (Suhaia and Confluenta Olt-Dunare in Romania and Ostrov Vardim and Ribarnitzi Hadji Dimitrovo in Bulgaria) and by cataloguing and studying 7 other NATURA 2000 sites and protected areas from Vidin to Oriahovo.
- The project, through some specific activities, followed to create the context for a common management plan implementation through the common reports and sharing of information from both sides of the Danube.
- In terms of project's contribution to relevant European, national, regional or local strategies and policies, in particular, those concerning the project or program area, the project followed one of the directory lines, mentioned as Innovation Union: "to develop a strategic research agenda focused on challenges such as energy security, transport, climate change and resource efficiency, health and ageing, environmentally-friendly production methods and land management, and to enhance joint programming with Member States and region".
- The innovative aspects from the projects are a contribution of the results to the EU2020 strategy. Also, the project addressed the challenge item no.3 – Environment, from the European Union Strategy for Danube Region, the Communication from the Commission, 2010, being in line with the challenges concerning "regional approach to nature conservation" and with "tourist development".



EQ I.EN.03	What are the factors facilitating that contribution?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- There are several factors that facilitate the contribution of the interventions under the Programme to this progress, such as public implication and the synergies with NATURA 2000.
- *The public implication.* Both in ROBG-10 INCOLAB and ROBG-11 Plums for Junk projects, the involvement of various segments of population contributed to the success of projects' implementation. Whether they reported facts, collected data, or cleaned the area, the involved persons contributed to the final outputs of the project.
- Other facilitator factor for project implementation was the possible *synergies with the Natura 2000 network at the EU level.* The complementarity with this Programme added a real cross border value to the projects' contribution to implement new management tools and strategies for Natura 2000 sites, in the conditions of a not very generous budget.

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

- The representatives of the Managing Authority pointed out that for this priority axis (PA 2) there were softer than hard projects financed. The projects under this axis needed lower amount of money than the projects financed under priority axis 1. Hence, the projects under PA 2 were able to do more activities with less money.
- Some measures must be taken together within Romania and Bulgaria. There are places where if not intervened on both sides of the border, the effect would not be as great and with as great impact, since the Programme addresses common problems for Romania and Bulgaria.

From the **case study analysis**, the main findings are:

- The internal factors, which affected or could affect the effects of the projects, are related to the feedback offered by the responsible authorities (NEG, RIEW) about the cases reported by the public. The lack of feedback, to complete the communicational chain, could affect people's trust in the effectiveness of their involvement.
- In terms of identifying the external factors, which influenced the projects' effects, by including Natura 2000 sites in the list of new destinations for cross border tourism, the number of visitors and the potential users of the application raised, increasing the stock of data collected from the field.

EQ I.EN.04	Are there any unintended effects of the Programme in this field?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The projects contracted under the Specific Objective 2.2 impressed by their innovative ideas to approach the objectives of this domain. The progress reports, Annual Implementation Reports and the official declarations of the Programme bodies emphasized that this innovative approach is considered an unintended positive effect¹⁰¹¹.

¹⁰ CBC for MaST Education (ROBG-165), Coordination of joint policies and equipment investments in the field of education in the cross-border area, Progress Reports

¹¹ PARC (ROBG-17), Development and promotion of a common natural heritage tourism product: Route "Protected natural heritage within the cross-border region Romania-Bulgaria, Progress Reports



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

- The unintended effects of the Programme in the field are not very numerous. JS identified one possible negative effect in increasing the visibility for some Natura 2000 sites, which make them possibly vulnerable for abusive exploitation and other risks: a possible undesirable effect would be that a place hidden from the eyes of the people was discovered by many tourists and that place was somehow destroyed.
- This possible effect could be anticipated and controlled through projects mechanisms and tools (people have the possibility of reporting any fact about Natura 200 sites using a mobile application).
- There are currently no undesirable effects; these might be able to be observed after a longer period. The public has become aware of the existence of NATURA 2000 sites and protected areas, and this is extremely beneficial.
- Also, MA representatives mentioned that the lack of biases from a previous experience could be the reason of thinking the projects from zero, without any previous conceptual schemas or shortcuts, which could change the beneficiaries' implication.
- The innovation of the projects was an unintended very positive effect. The reason why the projects were innovative is that this PA was a new axis for the beneficiaries, and they had the possibility to not be biased with their previous experiences and think projects from scratch. Their results were really impressive.
- Some local authorities mentioned, as an unintended effect the garbage/waste left behind tourists and suggested the need for civic education on waste generated by tourism activities as an idea / criteria to be included in the horizontal principles or to be part of each project for the future programming period.

From the **case study analysis**, the main findings are:

- Without identifying many unintended effects, positive or negative, it could be important to mention the situation of some not very visible sites, hidden from the eye of the large public, which became more visible, attracting a higher number of tourists and being exposed to the risks of abusive exploitation, with a significant impact on nature.

EQ I.EN.05	Does the implementation of the programme have significant environmental effects, based on measuring the indicators for monitoring the environmental impacts proposed under SEA?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The Programme strategy identified and assumed 5 objectives related to the environmental impact, being most suitable to be tackled by cross border cooperation:
 - Promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management.
 - Preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency
 - Promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures
 - Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility
 - Enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration through actions to strengthen the institutional capacity and the efficiency of public administrations and public services related to the implementation of the ERDF, and in support of actions under the ESF to strengthen the institutional capacity and the efficiency of public administration



- Based on Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Romania-Bulgaria Cross Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020¹², the main linkage between RO-BG CBC Programme priorities to strategic priorities at national level is
 - Rational correlation of the development objectives, investment programmes, including at the intersectoral and regional level, with the potential and supporting capacity of the natural capital, associated with SO 1.2 and SO 2.1
 - Enhanced modernisation of the educational and professional training, health, and social service systems, considering the demographic developments and their impact on the labour market, linked with SO 4.1
 - Generalised use of the existing best technologies from an economic and ecological perspective, in investment decisions involving public funds; firm introduction of eco-efficiency criteria in all the production or service activities, connected with SO 5.1
 - Anticipating the effects of climate change and preparing timely contingency plans for crisis situations generated by natural or anthropogenic events, linked with SO 3.1
 - Ensuring food safety and security by capitalising on Romania's competitive advantages, without giving up on the requirements to maintain soil fertility, preserve the biodiversity and protect the environment, associate with SO 2.2
 - Identifying additional funding resources for the implementation of large-scale projects and programmes, especially in infrastructure, energy, environmental protection, food safety, education, health, and social services, linked with SO 5.1
 - Protection and enhancement of the national cultural and natural heritage; harmonisation with the European norms and standards for the quality of life, connected with SO 2.1
- 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. One of these challenges was related to the climate change and environmental risk, which 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.
- According to the 2018 Implementation Report, the Programme contributes to a large extent to the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). A total of 185 projects have contributed to the EUSDR. The 40 finalised projects have regarded: improvement of transport connection to the TEN-T; management of environmental risks, cross border labour mobility and institutional capacity.
- Data collected in Programme documents revealed that
 - The effects of projects implementation in NATURA 2000 sites consisted in the higher efficiency of the measures for the protection and conservation of the natural habitats in targeted NATURA 2000 sites. The number of species and the birds' population, the prevention of vegetation fires or the reduction of habitats exploitation (reeds, forest

¹²https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/9584/-Strategic_Environmental_Assessment_of_the_Romania-Bulgaria_Cross_Border_Cooperation_Progr.pdf?sequence=2&%3BisAllowed=



cutting) are indicators that have improved in the areas targeted by the implementation of the projects¹³.

- The environmental situation in the RO-BG region is improving yearly. This is mainly a result of the reduced industrial activity in many of the main urban centres along the border. Over the past few years, several disastrous events have reiterated the need for better planning, coordination, and infrastructure investment in order to prevent the local population and the economy from floods, forest fires and other climate-related hazards.

From the **interview's analysis**, the main findings are:

- The MA representative underlines, in the interviews, that, in what concerns the SEA indicators, no problems were identified, and the SEA indicators were reported to the Ministry of Environment in accordance with the legal provisions. The projects' results took a little bit longer to be observed, but the selected indicators reflect the need for the cross-border area to mitigate the effects of floods and fires. The SEA reports are monitored by the Programme structures, based on the information provided by the projects in the final reports.
- JS representative mentioned that some measures must be taken together with Romania and Bulgaria. There are places where if not intervened on both sides the effect would not be as great and with as great impact.
- The beneficiaries also indicated that the projects considered any of the indicators for monitoring the environmental impacts proposed under SEA and they were achieved.
- The overall opinion of local stakeholders is that they are satisfied with more measures related to reducing carbon emissions, green methods and methodologies, education on these topics and environmental educational actions. Educating farmers and land owners regarding the opportunities available in agriculture in the current climate change environment or educating youth through 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) contribute to the emergence of a mass environmentally friendly culture.
- Local stakeholders express some concern related to the lack of environmentally friendly measures due to an unbalanced focus on road transportation. For instance, bikes and electric mobility should be prioritised. In this regard, the project E-Bike Network can be a best practice. (PA 1)
- Also, as a risk, despite of a fair prevention system to avoid any possible negative spill-over of the projects financed by the Programme, some stakeholders highlighted that possible environmental negative spill-overs should be taken into consideration, especially in the next programming period. (PA 1)

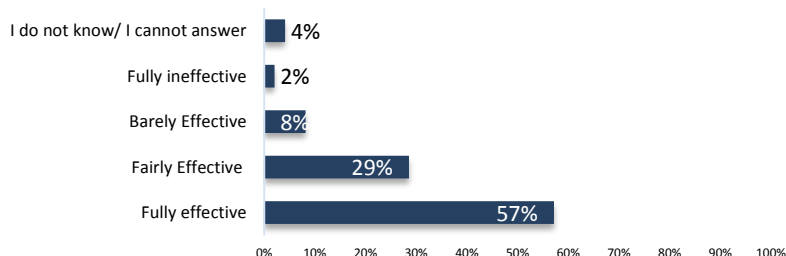
From the **surveys**, the main findings are:

- The beneficiary mentioned that the project considered some of the indicators for monitoring the environmental impact proposed through the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). The mentioned indicators involved:
 - No of projects having a negative impact on landscape.
 - Number of projects creating a modal shift from road transport to waterways.
 - Number of projects focusing on river transport infrastructure.

¹³ <http://prunepentrugunoi.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Studiu-asupra-zonelor-protejate-Mehedinti.pdf>

- The beneficiaries' perception (from the Impact Evaluation Report 2018) of the impact of Programme specific actions is positive. More than 75% of the cross-border area inhabitants consider these actions being fairly or fully effective.

Figure 14 How do you consider the specific actions aimed at ensuring sustainable development (i.e. environmental regulation, eco-friendly incentives, etc.)?



- Implication in environmental actions was higher. Based on beneficiaries' survey, 75% of project beneficiaries considered the environmental sustainability was easy to reach, in comparison with financial (46%) or social (53%) sustainability (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).
- Also, from the Impact Evaluation Report 2018, 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.

From the **case study analysis**, the main findings are:

- In the case of **Danube Safety Net**, a mentioned contribution would be developing the capability to respond together to any kind of disaster (chemicals, fuels, nuclear power-plant), to preserve environment and human lives. (PA 1)
- The **INCOLAB** case study reveals that the managerial tools developed by the project beneficiary contributed to the increase of NATURA 2000 sites efficiency. Without assuming that is only the effect of the program projects implementation, we could observe some effects which are influenced by the new managerial approach of NATURA 2000 sites. In Olt county, where is located one NATURA 2000 site targeted by INCOLAB project, the number of environmental authorizations for economic activities in protected areas was reduced from 23-24 authorizations, in 2016-2017, to 7-8, in 2018 and 2019.¹⁴

2. Conclusions

Without having a very detailed and comprehensive analysis of the environmental effects of the projects based on measuring the indicators for monitoring the environmental impacts proposed under SEA, the data collected show that the beneficiaries accorded a high importance to the environmental indicators and followed their achievement. On the other hand, indirectly, we can observe an improvement of certain

¹⁴ National Agency for Environmental Protection, Olt county



environmental indicators in the NATURA 2000 sites, improvement which, even if cannot be exclusively associated with the implementation of the projects, is certainly partially their effect.

The NATURA 2000 network is well presented on both sides of the border. Additional investments are required for the rehabilitation, socialization and promotion of many cultural sites, especially the ones that are outside the main cities and routes. The tourist potential of the Danube river is still largely underused.

In a very innovative manner, using the modern technologies in synergy with the social actors and knowledge resources, the projects succeeded to implement real and significant changes in environment management. Due to the regional importance of the projects, which targeted the cross border natural area, the cross-border added value was higher and generated the premises of a regional development in areas where national policies are not focused on.

Using joint solutions and common approach, the partners developed and implemented modern tools for collecting raw, primary data directly from the source, contributing to the new-shared knowledge databases, very useful in decision processes and in a very synchronized action. By involving more actors, they resuscitated the local economic and social environments, creating new links between stakeholders from both sides of the Danube.

The Programme generated also unintended positive effects at the level of this domain. One of the most important unintended positive effect is the innovative aspect that was approached by all the projects under this specific objective. Another unintended positive effect important to be mentioned is the know-how gained by tourists and stakeholders about the preservation of natural and cultural heritage.

Protecting and preserving the environment and offering a more efficient resource allocation and coordination is a cornerstone of the cohesion policy intercepted by the Programme. The unexplored potential in the cross-border area, consisting in cultural or natural assets, could be unveiled by encouraging tourism and all related services.

3. Recommendations

There are no specific recommendations for this evaluation domain.

3.5. Analysis of Specific objective 3.1 – Evaluation domain – Impact/Risks management

1. Analysis

TBIE – Theory of change for SO 3.1 (the full analysis is presented in Annex 2).

Through the interventions supported under SO 3.1., there is evidence that the cross-border region will better-prepared and integrated in terms of prevention and management capacity of disaster risks through the support provided for:

- the identification and implementation of common measures to tackle common hazards and risks (these measures were based on joint partnerships, common strategies, integrated and common standards and exchanges of experiences) and through
- Investments made and measures taken to consolidate joint hazard management and risk prevention (these measures being based on the procurement of necessary equipment).

This change has occurred in conjunction with the following contextual factors:



- An increased level of local awareness towards DRM actions and importance thanks also to the cross-border projects funded during the previous and current programming period (Source: survey).
- Increased operation capacities developed through additional resources, channelled through national budgets or under other operational programmes in the direction of risk mitigation (including SEE programmes – ex.: in the case of Romania: the Operational Programme Large Infrastructure, the Regional Development Operational Programme and I Bulgaria: the Environment Operational Programme, and the Regions in Growth Operational Programme).
- Increased capacity for joint interventions and emergency response thanks also to the cross-border projects funded during the previous and current programming period (Source: survey).

The change attributed to the influence of funding channelled through SO 3.1 is challenged by the following aspects:

- Programme level output and result indicators specific to the SO 3.1., especially common output indicators, are more focused on outcomes instead of impact, which can lead to an unclear image with regards to causation.
- Additional and important funding through other sources (be it national funding or operational programmes) has also contributed to the development of DRM capacity.

EQ I.RI.01	What is the progress in preventing and managing the capacity of mitigation and disaster resilience in the cross-border area, especially as regards joint solutions?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

Between 2014 and 2018¹⁵, the damages produced in Bulgaria nationally by landslides and floods alone amounted to 299.650.900,01 EUR, while damages produced by floods in the North border region of Bulgaria (comprising the 8 eligible districts) amounted in the same reference period to 52.791.137,59 EUR (while landslides damages amounted to 1.781.843.75 EUR). The zones most prone to earthquakes in the Northern border region include Shabla, Veliko Turnovo and Gorna Oryahovitsa. In Romania, the counties most affected by floods in the Southern border region include Teleorman, Giurgiu and Călărași¹⁶, while Călărași and Giurgiu are at the highest risk in the region to be affected by earthquakes. However, besides natural hazards which are evaluated in different ESPON studies as ranging from low to moderate, the cross-border region also includes areas which are subject to industrial risks that in turn lead to air pollution as well as ground and underground pollution of waters and soils (Seveso sites being located in Constanta, Craiova, Turnu Măgurele, Călărași, Ruse, Svishtov, Veliko Tarnovo, Silistra, Nicopole and Gorna Oryahovitsa).

With regards to the governing structure in the field of prevention and reduction of natural disasters and risk management, in Bulgaria¹⁷ the Fire Safety and Civil Protection Directorate-General is the key responsible national entity for DRM (disaster and risk management), while district governors and mayors

¹⁵ Based on calculations made with data provided by the Bulgarian National Institute for Statistics.

¹⁶ World Bank, Country Risk Profile, <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/395111485464185423/romania-country-risk-profile-lo-res.pdf>.

¹⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/civil-protection/disaster-management/bulgaria_en.

have the primary responsibility for disaster protection at district and municipal levels respectively. Overall, the responsibilities of the governor and mayor include activities in all DRM phases, not only in emergency planning and emergency response¹⁸. In Romania, the Department for Emergency Situations (DES) and the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations (GIES) under the Ministry of Interior have key responsibilities for response, preparedness, and prevention at central level, while at the county level emergency response (as well as guidance and control of prevention measures and management of emergencies) is ensured by professionals from the Inspectorates for Emergency Situations Bucharest and 40 county inspectorates under the command of the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations¹⁹. When considering the institutional capacity of these systems, in the case of Romania a World Bank country diagnostic on climate and disaster management²⁰ observed that coordination between the central ministry and the local bodies, and the involvement of other departments in disaster preparedness and risk reduction, requires further strengthening. The analysis also notes that „despite considerable progress, Romania also faces challenges in sustaining the commitments of authorities, especially at the local levels” and „despite having annual funds dedicated for disaster risk management, local authorities tend to redirect these funds for other purposes”. Moreover, although significant progress has been reached especially in early warning, preparedness, and risk information, actual investments in risk reduction are reported as still limited, especially when the scale of climate and disaster risk in Romania is considered. In the case of Bulgaria, a peer-review funded under the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism²¹ observed that the Bulgarian civil protection system includes a number of good practices, including a well-established body of law on civil protection that clearly sets out the roles and responsibilities of the various components of the ‘Unified Rescue System’, a high value placed on training in this field, and the close integration of the Bulgarian Red Cross into the country’s preparedness and response management system. However, the document noted that there is need for an integrated and comprehensive approach for disaster risk management at the central level, while at the local level the recommendation was to assess and take into consideration the local needs and characteristics in risk management planning activities and to provide local government with the necessary resources to communicate them to the public.

During the current programming period, based on documental analysis, several joint interventions have been identified that could have significant positive effects upon the disaster and risk management capacities of local authorities across the region. Based on the available data, cross-border exercises and collaborations have also focused on developing solutions particularly aimed at Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Defence solutions.

- Collaboration between the Inspectorate for Emergency Situations Olt, and the Regional Directorates and Civil Protection Firefighters of Pleven and Vratsa in order to develop a plan,

¹⁸ [https://www.moew.government.bg/static/media/ups/articles/attachments/DRM%20-%20Full%20Report%20-%20First%20Draft%20\(2018-04-27\)%20-%20EN%20-%20for%20printing%20v2675c5b0db190d4aa5dae48daf147c909.pdf](https://www.moew.government.bg/static/media/ups/articles/attachments/DRM%20-%20Full%20Report%20-%20First%20Draft%20(2018-04-27)%20-%20EN%20-%20for%20printing%20v2675c5b0db190d4aa5dae48daf147c909.pdf), p. 22.

¹⁹ European Commission (2020): European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations – Romania - Overview of the National Disaster Management System, available here: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/civil-protection/disaster-management/romania_en.

²⁰ <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/785381530899707521/pdf/128046-SCD-PUBLIC-P160439-RomaniaSCDBackgroundNoteClimateandDisasterRiskManagement.pdf>, p. 13.

²¹ https://ec.europa.eu/echo/sites/echo-site/files/bulgaria_peer_review_report_-_en.pdf.

together with rules and procedures on how to approach joint interventions regarding CBRN-related emergency situations in the cross-border area.

- Based on project Emersys (ROBG-123), Romanian-Bulgarian emergency authorities are setting up in the cross-border area a joint intervention rapid force, D-EMERSYS, to efficiently manage the chemical-biological-nuclear emergencies.
- Common investments in risk capacity have been realized in both the Olt and Dolna Mitropolia area under project ROBG-244. In the context of this project, a total number of 4 joint partnerships related to common interventions have been signed.
- In 2018, the Inspectorate of Emergency Situations Mehedinți has participated in multiple joint-training sessions in the Montana district in both CBRN and pyrotechnics related exercises.
- In order to cover the transnational risks in the cross-border area, the Dolj Inspectorate for Emergency Situations, in collaboration with the Regional Directorates for Firefighters and Civil Protection Vidin, Vrasta and Montana, have established in 2017 common rules and procedures so as to ensure joint interventions in case of situations of emergency, with the aim of ensuring higher cooperation efficiency, such as better information exchanges and shorter intervention times.
- In 2019, the Inspectorate for Emergency Situations Giurgiu organized, in collaboration with the Bulgarian firefighters, a CBRN exercise funded under another ESIF-related programme Danube 2014-2020.

Furthermore, progress has been made by the relevant regional emergency inspectorates in terms of equipment and capacity for interventions. However, due to the lack of data available at regional level regarding the net influx of equipment and resources of emergency inspectorates, an analysis of the progress made through national investments is unfeasible. However, a number of projects contracted under the present Programme have significantly improved the capacity of emergency institutions through the purchase of highly specialized equipment, some of which are already finalized and discussed in detail in the following sections. Nevertheless, such investments serve to improve the capacity of institutions that seldom receive high amounts of financing from national budgets.

Based on **survey** data analysis, the respondents' views with regards to the progress achieved in enhancing DRM capacities in the past 5 years, revealed that:

- The capacity to prevent, manage and mitigate disasters has been perceived as having greatly increased.
- The level of local awareness towards DRM actions and importance has been perceived as having increased.
- The capacity for joint interventions and emergency response has been perceived as increased.
- The operational capacity (new specialised equipment, logistics, new partnerships) for risk management has been perceived as increased.

EQ I.RI.02	What is the current and expected contribution of the interventions under the Programme to this progress?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

During the previous programming period, 20 projects have been funded in the cross-border region through Romania-Bulgaria CBC Programme 2007-2013 under the Area of Intervention 2.2 – Development of joint infrastructure and services to prevent the impact of natural and man-made crises, including joint emergency response services (of a total value of EUR 90 million), contributing to increasing disaster and risk management capacity through various outputs reached that have included: the development of joint strategies and procedures, the purchase and use of specialised equipment to deal with environmental

risks and emergency situations and the undertaking of trainings and awareness campaigns on specific environmental issues and situations²². Moreover, in the same period, 2 strategic projects have also been supported:

- Danube WATER Integrated Management (WATER project, which was financed under SO 2.1 but nevertheless contributed directly to improving the capacity in terms of disaster risk management) which had as objective the creation of a common system of management and control of water quality in the Danube in extreme conditions caused by natural and technological disasters.
- Joint Risk Monitoring during Emergencies in the Danube Area Border (RISK projects) which aimed at improving the emergency preparedness and intervention by developing a joint integrated system for efficient monitoring and disaster consequences mitigation, according to EU standards and procedures.

The main indicators related to the present Specific Objective in the present Programming period are 5b.1 “Population benefiting from actions of risk management” and 5b.2 “Number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response”. Based on the 2018 Annual Implementation Report (AIR), in 2018, a total of 6 joint projects in the field of joint early warning and emergency responses were finalized. However, at the level of the entire Programme, a total of 55 joint partnerships are expected to be reached, which would represent a rate of achievement of 88% by the end of the Programme.

Table 4 Programme-specific result indicators (SO3.1 - The quality of the joint risk management in the CBC area)

Indicator	Target value	Expected	Achieved (2019)
R 3.1. The quality of the joint risk management in the CBC area	3	3	3.5 (based on the survey carried out in 2019, cut-off date 31 st December 2018)
5b.1. Population benefitting from actions of risk management	2,500,000.00	4,150,000	304,370
5b.2. Number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response	50.00	55.00	7.00
CO20. Population benefiting from flood protection measures	1,250,000	4,150,000	0.00
CO21. Population benefiting from forest fire protection measures	1,250,000	4,200,000	0.00

Source: Annual Implementation Report 2018

At the end of 2019, a total of 7 joint projects were finalized (of an overall eligible value of EUR 15,270,056) and 15 were in implementation (of a total eligible value of EUR 27,207,245). Based on monitoring data, the finalized projects by the cut-off date:

- Collectively exceeded their expected target for indicator 5.b.1. Population benefitting from actions of risk management
- Individually surpassed their expected targets for indicator 5.b.1. Population benefitting from actions of risk management (these were the cases of projects ROBG-20 by 14%, ROBG-23 by 24,6%, and ROBG-126 by 4%)

²² European Commission (2016): European Territorial Cooperation Work Package 11. Ex post evaluation of Cohesion Policy programmes 2007-2013, focusing on the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF), available here: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/evaluations/2016/european-territorial-cooperation-work-package-11-ex-post-evaluation-of-cohesion-policy-programmes-2007-2013-focusing-on-the-european-regional-development-fund-erdf-and-the-cohesion-fund-cf.



- Reached their expected target for indicator 5b.2. Number of joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response, and in one case even surpassed it (ROBG-23).

The projects in implementation are expected to:

- Collectively reach an expected target of 4,150,000 people benefitting from actions of risk management
- Collectively reach an expected target of 48 joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response.

Based on the most recent progress reports, the projects under implementation have so far:

- Have generated 9 joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response (project ROBG-244 already reaching its expected target)
- And have secured for 162.882 people to benefit from actions of risk management (project ROBG-122 not including an expected contribution to this indicator but managing to secure 111,445 beneficiaries).

Based on the analysis of the progress reports, the following results have been so far secured:

Soft projects

Table 5 Soft projects main results

Project no.	Main results
ROBG-20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research on elaboration of a methodology for school preparation regarding risk prevention • Trainings of school management, teachers and psychologists • An establishment of 40 volunteer clubs.
ROBG-21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A joint evaluation of needs and opportunities for better preparation of volunteer resources • A joint methodology for education of volunteers and relevant experts • Trainings of individuals on risk management, of which: 800 volunteers, 120 administration officers, 160 local experts.
ROBG-22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A joint institutionalized partnership on insect population management • A common strategy on control over insect population • A Geographical Information System tool on control over insect population
ROBG-23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 studies elaborated: "Large Scale Infrastructures, relevant in the cross-border area Romania-Bulgaria" and "Study on Assessment Methodology and Defining Impact Indicators for Large Scale Infrastructures" related to the assessment of LSI generated vulnerabilities, hazards and calculated risks • Trainings of main actors in risk management.

Hard projects

Table 6 Hard projects main results

Project no.	Main results
ROBG-121	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procurement of CBRNe mobile units for the Romanian and Bulgarian special intervention team • Training of relevant staff in the operation of the purchased equipment. • A laboratory, composed of Particle Size Analyzer and Supply of XRF Spectrometer was purchased by the National Research-Development Institute for Material Physics – NIMP (Romania)
ROBG-123	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five training courses were organized by the project partners • Creation of operational procedures and joint intervention plan in the cross-border area. • The two national emergency inspectorates agreed to further jointly intervene in case of CBRN emergency situations on the Danube and signed the protocol for collaboration* • Purchase of specialized equipment, such as one high resolution SE-EBS-EDX microscope, 3 rapid CBRN boats, 4 mobile platforms, etc.
ROBG-126	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad awareness campaign on risk management organized in Bulgaria • Guidelines for common management of natural hazards and other emergency situations in the areas of Byala, Grădinari, and Malu elaborated. • Equipment purchased, including 2 backhoes, 2 motor pumps, 3 electric power generators, and water and foam truck.

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

- Inter-institutional communication between Romanian and Bulgarian response forces has improved.



- Partnerships have been established in the field of early warning and emergency response and the capacity of the specialized units has been increased.
- The most important 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.

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

- The general overview of respondents was that the Programme has contributed significantly towards improving joint risk management in the cross-border area. Thus, 72% of the surveyed beneficiaries that implemented projects under SO 3.1 considered that their intervention contributed to a great extent towards improving joint risk management.

EQ I.RI.03

What are the factors facilitating that contribution?

Based on the analysis of the **interviews**, the following factors have been emphasised as having an impact upon the contribution of the Programme in the region:

- the good or excellent cooperation within the partnerships and the degree of involvement from the direct beneficiaries
- the strength of the design of the Programme’s intervention logic and strategy, which led to the relevance of the interventions funded by the Programme in relation to the needs of the beneficiaries.

Based on the analysis of the **survey** data, the respondents considered the following factors as facilitating the contribution of the funded interventions to the change generated:

- Enhanced and improved communication and access to information
- The solid cross-border partnerships that have been established
- The good communication and openness of stakeholders
- Improved levels of specialised know-how built through work visits and good practices exchanges
- The openness of the general public and of target groups towards new information on DRM and ways of getting involved.

From the **case studies** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- Local authorities from both countries have understood the urgent need to better prepare their populations to react in cases of emergency. Moreover, there was also a shared understanding that effective risk management requires capacity building at community level. And in order to build disaster resistant communities one needs to involve the whole population in the process of risk reduction, and not only the responsible institutions and experts/specialists. This shared understanding at the community level has translated into the openness of different actors/stakeholders towards the achievements and results of the project – in the case of the project analysed school inspectorates in the cross-border area, county/district inspectorates for emergency situations and the Ministry of Education, as well as local authorities who have expressed their support for a greater culture of prevention to increase people' resilience and reduce risks related to different hazards.

EQ I.RI.04

Are there any unintended effects of the programme in this field?

Based on the **survey data**, the majority of respondents, beneficiaries of the Programme mentioned no notable unintended effects being generated from the implementation of the projects. However, in the cases of soft projects, respondents focused more on the multiplication potential of their results, mentioning that by raising the level of awareness of their communities with regard to the importance of nurturing a culture of prevention generated more openness towards volunteering in the field of risk management.

Based on the analysis of the **case study**, both positive and negative unintended effects have been generated by the project funded under the SO 3.1. More specifically:

- New collaboration opportunities have been generated while implementing the project, one such opportunity materialising itself into a new cross-border project that involved part of the actors in this Interreg project.
- There is a risk of opportunistic collaborations, difficulties being encountered when attempting to motivate stakeholders to continue implementing activities specific to the project in the absence of further funding.

2. Conclusions

According to the analysed data, there have been relevant developments in the current programming period in terms of preventing and managing the capacity of mitigation and disaster resilience in the cross-border area. However, the bulk of the progress is related to various joint risk management projects. Particularly, the assessment team identified a number of projects related to the specific scenarios such as CBRN-related emergencies, emphasized by a number of cross-border projects aimed at enhancing cooperation in this area. Further progress has been registered by the relevant emergency intervention institutions in terms of their capacity to react to various natural and anthropogenic hazards, particularly through investments in specialized equipment and tools that can facilitate emergency interventions.

However, this progress, highly important in increasing joint as well as local DRM capacities, depends very much upon dedicated funding such as the CBC Programmes, particularly because of the distinct lack of national funding in terms of capacity building of emergency response institutions in certain areas of intervention. For instance, according to the annual reports of regional emergency institutions for which data was available, the vast majority of the cross-border training exercises have been performed within the scope of CBC programmes including but not exclusively limited to the RO-BG CBC programme

The current and expected contribution of the Programme towards the progress made by the NUTS 3 regions covered by the Programme in terms of risk management and disaster resilience and mitigation capacity is quite evident and is enabled by a variety of highly relevant projects that can facilitate the strengthening of the institutional capacity of relevant emergency intervention institutions at the level of both Member States. This fact is particularly emphasised by the disproportionate amount of hard measures that were implemented at the level of the present specific objective.

However, a net impact of the contribution of the Programme's interventions is unfeasible to measure, particularly due to the lack of relevant statistical indicators at regional level and due to the unavailability of data on the utilization of equipment at the level of the regional and local institutions.

According to the analysis presented above, the main factors that facilitated this contribution is the effective design of the intervention logic and its relevant correlation with the needs of the regions in terms of risk management and disaster resilience. Furthermore, another aspect of high importance is the high quality of the collaboration between the project partners, which facilitated not only the smooth implementation of the projects but has also strengthened the inter-institutional cross-border relationship between Romania and Bulgaria.

The unintended effects are mainly enabled by the smooth collaborations between project partners that implemented interventions through the programme. However, the Programme faces an increased risk regarding the sustainability of the interventions, particularly due to the unavailability of stakeholders to continue implementing activities in the absence of further funding opportunities.

3. Recommendations

There are no specific recommendations for this evaluation domain.

3.6. Analysis of Specific objective 4.1 – Evaluation domain Impact/Employment

1. Analysis

TBIE – Theory of change for SO 4.1 (the full analysis is presented in Annex 2).

Through the interventions supported under SO 4.1., the cross-border region is better-prepared and integrated in terms of employment and labour mobility from the cross-border area through:

- the provision of skills adapted to the cross-border economic resources and potential
- the enhancement of the linkages between entrepreneurs on both sides of the border

This change has occurred in conjunction with:

- Increased capacity for common strategies and joint trainings to foster opportunities on the labour market thanks also to the cross-border projects funded during the previous and current programming period (Source: Territorial analysis).

EQ I.EM.1	What is the progress in integrating the cross-border area in terms of employment and labour mobility?
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The impact evaluation of the SO 4.1 from Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria in the analysed period had to face some specific methodological limitations listed below:

- While the previous Programme did not foresee a priority axis exclusively related to employment, it did, however, finance a Specific Objective (3.2) that was aimed at improving cooperation in the field of human resources development, namely development in common skills and knowledge, which aimed to support cross-border exchanges of information on employment opportunities engagement, the development of cross-border training services for employment in close correlation with the integrated needs of the labour market, etc. Considering that, during the analysed period, other types of programs were implemented in the eligible area of the Programme, with a direct impact on employment, it is not possible to identify the separate and net impact of this Programme on the labour market, labour mobility and employment. A limitation of the impact analysis is represented by the lack of a consolidated database specific to the analysed intervention area that would allow consistent assessments in the field of employment. It should be noted that the implementation of projects on the specific objective 4.1 creates the premises for building a database relevant to the field of investigation (microdata and synthesis indicators), but at the time of writing this report not all the data from all projects were available, as some of them are still in implementation.
- The main outcomes of the projects financed through SO 4.1 aimed at creating tools for the development of employment opportunities such as job fairs, one stop shops, rather than actions with direct results on employment (where people can find out information about the hiring process in the border area, job openings, selection criteria etc. or at least pre-contracts or expressions of interest).
- The fact that the projects could not include State aid relevant measures affected the overall results of the projects. For this reason, it is not possible to make a concrete and correct assessment of the attractiveness of the specific objective for applicants, having in the market comparatively more advantageous alternative offers, respectively these having the possibility of requesting state aid, through other financing Programmes.

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

Regional indicators on employment, Main characteristics, levels and trends after 2014.



The analysis of the availability of data at regional level and of the existence of microdata at the level of projects in the field of employment and mobility for work highlighted the following:

- There is a lack of information at local level, respectively at NUTS 3 level, although the data exist at national level (NUTS 1) and at NUTS 2 regions, which makes it difficult to delineate the contribution of the interventions financed by the RO-BG Programme in the area through the specific indicators established at the Programme level.
- There has been also faced a lack of availability of administrative data and in the cases in which they are available and can be accessed, it is difficult to compare those data on the attributes of detail necessary to determine the impact of the Programme.

Taking into consideration all these reasons, as well as the limitations of the analysis presented above, a brief analysis of the indicators related to the economic and social development of the cross-border area are presented below.

- The eligible area covered by the Programme presents a low level of development, with economic and social performances below the national average; the trend of the last years is to reduce the contribution of the areas to the national GDP, respectively for Bulgaria from 13.3% the contribution of the districts from the eligible geographical area in 2014 to 12.52% in 2017 (last year with data available at regional level, at the moment of elaborating this report) and for Romania, from 12.09% the contribution of the counties of the geographical area to 11.18%, in the same period.
- Even at a low level of development, there are significant differences in the economic performance between the eligible districts/counties, increasing from 1 to 3.8 times in the case of Bulgaria, and from 1 to 7.8 times in the case of Romania in 2014, with decreasing trends in the following years, more pronounced in the case of Romania for 2017. This means that the economic power of the counties/districts is reduced by the stronger impoverishment of those with the best performance in 2014, while keeping the differences between all counties/districts. The ranking of the counties/districts based on the level of development is maintained for the entire analysed period.

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

- In terms of employment, progress has been made, notably in measures to increase information and promote labour mobility, as an opportunity to tackle unemployment.
- The area is affected by a long-lasting and structural unemployment which is a major obstacle to the impact of the programme. In addition, there is a substantial lack of infrastructure to support labour mobility.
- The structural unemployment is a long-lasting challenge for the region and would require massive policy interventions. EU Policy and EU Cohesion Funds can be helpful, but the challenge of underdevelopment and persisting unemployment should be addressed mostly with national policy.
- The local stakeholders mentioned that some improvements were achieved in the employment field, such as the development of infrastructure directly linked to increased labour mobility, action 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.

From the **case studies** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- The project selected for the case study, ***Cross Border virtual incubator for promoting employment on bio agriculture, bio products processing and connected services (BIOVIRTINC)***,



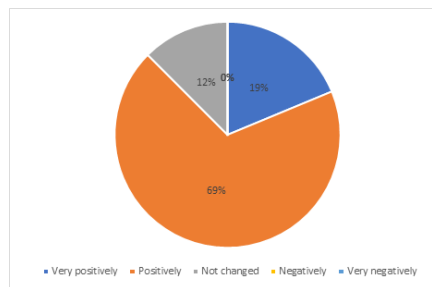
was finalized in 2018, after 20 months of implementation and it was implemented in Dolj County from Romania and Pleven district from Bulgaria.

- The main details of the case study are presented in Annex 5. The logic of the project starts from the similarities of the labour market - unemployment of about 9%, above the national average of both countries and a low standard of living of the population, especially in rural areas. As facilitating factors of the implementation of the project, the high proportion of the rural environment (36.5% in Pleven, 44% in Dolj) and the weight of agricultural activities can be considered.
- The need for cross-border skills growth was not observed in the cross-border area but it was necessary to be demonstrated in the project. The development of the labour force in the cross-border area is very necessary. The trend of the development of the labour force in the field will be maintained, especially after the completion of the training courses.

From the **survey** applied among the beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- In what concerns the opinion of the beneficiaries on how the situation about the integration of the cross-border area in terms of employment and labour changed in the past 5 years, the majority of the respondents perceive that the situation has changed “positively” (69% of the respondents).

Figure 15 In your opinion, how has the situation about the integration of the cross-border area in terms of employment and labour changed in your area in the last 5 years?



Source: Data collected by the research team

The respondents to the survey mentioned that the following aspects related to the employment field changed the most in the last years: access to the labour market and an increase in labour market access for youth, an increase in the cross-border mobility of individuals within Romania and Bulgaria, as well as investments in local businesses and the development of new industries. Moreover, some beneficiaries mentioned that these investments have effectively created new jobs, in turn increasing the rate of employment in certain cross-border areas.

EQ I.EM.2

What is the current and expected contribution of the interventions under the programme to this progress?

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

Considering that the previous programme presented a similar specific objective related to employment (SO 3.2), a comparative analysis has been made, underlining the efficacy of the intervention in increasing cross border labour market integration (keeping in mind the inherent differences between the context and results of the present specific objective in comparison with the related specific objective of the previous programming period). The separate promotion of labour market issues as well as the facilitation of regional integration through the specific objective 4.1 has been auspicious for increasing social inclusion as well as employability opportunities, and cross-border mobility, result which further motivates



the continuation in future stages of financing this intervention issue. However, based on the results obtained through projects' implementation until end of year 2019, a few conclusions can be drawn:

- Compared to the achievements of the previous programme, the current implementation period is much more efficient and effective in targeting problems (specific subtopics), observation which is supported by the analysis of output indicators which shows a significant exceeding of the target value for CO44, CO46 and 8e.1 (both for the period until 2019 as well as the cumulative estimate). The overrun was significant, respectively for CO44 of more than 1.8 times (2019) and it is estimated, based on the preliminary results from the implementation of the ongoing projects, to be surpassed by 5.4 times, for CO46 by 4.5 times and, respectively, by 4.9 times and, for 8e.1 approximately by 1.6 times and, respectively, a cumulative estimate of 5.86 times²³.
- In the current programming period, all of the output and result indicators related to SO 4.1 are expected to significantly exceed their respective target values, which is a relevant improvement when compared to the previous programming period. Thus, the effectiveness of the Programme interventions related to SO 4.1 are expected to present a significant improvement, a strong point of the Programme.

Furthermore, we will present very briefly some implementation components that can define the expected impact of the implementation of the financed projects.

- If the type of financed activities/interventions is to be considered, out of the 34 projects implemented in the SO 4.1, 62% proposed activities to create access to employment for people in various forms of vulnerability in relation to the labour market, while 18% of the projects aimed the improvement/adaptation/modernization of the employment model to facilitate the changes required by the business environment, the adaptation of small businesses and entrepreneurs. Only 1/5 of the project proposals were addressed to the facilitators of the interventions specific to the labour market with an impact on employment, be they public or private institutions. This distribution is, in our opinion, specific to this initial stage of implementation of projects with addressability in sustainable employment and cross-border mobility, because it mainly develops tools for identifying and promoting opportunities and to some lesser extent activities with a defined purpose at company or local level. It might be advisable to limit these outcomes in the next period and to aim in particular to obtain (sustainable) employment results, such as number of people employed in a predefined period of employment of at least 3 years after the

²³ In the previous programming period, the output result indicators related to employment initiatives, namely a) Number of projects developing cross-border training services for employment in connection with the integrated market needs and b) Number of projects supporting cross-border sharing of information on employment opportunities did not achieve their expected target values at the end of the programme, while the result indicators, namely a) Number of people informed on employment opportunities and b) Number of people graduating cross-border training courses each exceeded their target values at the end of the Programme. While these results are an indication that the finalized projects related to employment financed by the Programme in the previous programming period presented a high degree of effectiveness related to the achievement of the results, an improvement was necessary going forward. Therefore, in the first period, the premises for employment growth were created, with potential later impact on indicators of actual employment results - number of jobs created, number of people who promoted in their careers, long-term unemployed people re-employed, etc.



implementation of the projects, training courses targeting re-employment in the business environment, etc.

- In what concerns the age categories of the attracted target group, even if there were no limitations, most participants included in the target group of the projects were young people, generally more resonant to change and more receptive to the opportunities involving mobility.
- The diversity of the main applicants and of their partners is noteworthy, which proves not only the interest for this type of interventions, but also the attractiveness of possible implementers and their ability to create transnational partnerships that aim to solve a need identified in the eligible area, related to the complex and sustainable cross-border cooperation. It is expected that these initiatives will continue through complementary projects, maintaining and probably extending the already initiated partnership structures that will be strengthened through the implementation of the current projects.

The current and expected contribution of the interventions under the Programme to the progress of the cross-border area integration in terms of employment and labour mobility is mainly related to active social inclusion/mobility measures and general/youth joint local employment initiatives and trainings. However, measuring the net current and expected contribution of the interventions under the Programme to the progress made by the relevant NUTS 3 regions is unfeasible due to the lack of relevant regional statistical indicators that can be used as a basis for comparison.

According to the analysis of the latest project progress reports that were either in implementation and/or finalized before the end of 2019, comparing the results of the output indicators with the target values that were expected by the Programme by 2023, a number of mentions can be brought up:

- The Programme has already exceeded the target values set for year 2023 by a very significant margin for every single output indicator that is related to SO 4.1. This in turns means that the Programme has had a very high level of cost-efficiency in terms of the results of the projects financed under the present specific objective. This contributed to a large number of individuals with improved qualifications and vocational education at the level of the NUTS 3 regions in the cross-border area that have a particularly low level of economic development. The effects of such trainings can increase the labour market competitiveness of individuals at the level of these regions as well as improve their attractiveness to potential local and/or regional employers looking to expand their economic activity.
- The notable results obtained in reaching objective 4.1 are well defined by the specific results mentioned above in the programme statistics. However, at the level of the eligibility area, it is difficult to clearly demarcate the contribution of the different programmes with impact over the labour market (in terms of generating opportunities that lead to employment) as especially at the level of NUTS 3, contributions are not followed by breakdown. As such, one caveat that must be emphasised here is the fact that while the Interreg RO-BG Programme has created opportunities that lead to employability, at the level of NUTS 3, there are multiple factors that can also contribute or on the contrary hinder this result.
- Nevertheless, it is quite clear that the Programme has made considerable progress in strengthening the labour market competitiveness of the individuals at the level of these regions, a fact that is emphasized by the high level of overachievement of the output indicators that are related to SO 4.1.

One important aspect that has been underlined within interviews²⁴ has concerned the design of project indicators. In this sense, one respondent has suggested, focusing on the next programming period, for indicators to be more ambitious in the sense of better capturing the efficiency of project results as well (giving the example of number of participants to joint trainings and arguing that their efficiency should also be taken somehow into account).

In general, the main points emphasised within the interviews conducted revealed the following aspects:

- the inclusion of this SO at the Programme level was justified by the specificities of the eligible area, being, in both countries represented by counties and districts with a lower level of development, with associative vulnerabilities that limit the access to the labour market, especially the population in rural areas, such as: poverty, unemployment, lack of education for the labour market, lack or inadequacy of available labour force skills, high share of NEETs, low availability of internal mobility for employment, history of external mobility for occasional jobs with medium or low level of qualification. In order to increase the attractiveness of funding through SO 4.1, the MA should also consider state aid in the following programming period.
- An important part of the submitted and implemented projects targeted the disadvantaged people as a target group, thus the actions implemented through the projects led to increasing their potential for inclusion on the labour market or to increasing the employability for those looking for a job.
- While it cannot be clearly concluded that the projects financed under SO 4.1 of the Programme had a major impact directly upon the labour market within the eligible areas (factors such as business environment dynamics, technological transfer rate and job restructuring at companies level, vacancy rates, local labour market demand of professions and competencies, level of , labour force migration, structural labour force deficit, over-employment and over-qualification etc. largely setting the evolution trend of the labour market), the initiatives were appreciated and visible. The effects exist – especially in terms of initiatives towards the integration of the labour markets in the region - even if these effects do not exert a significant impact upon the employment field.
- The added value of this SO is precisely the fact that it addresses the problems of employment and labour mobility in the cross-border area, given that this aspect of cross-border labour mobility is not considered in other programs.
- The projects implemented have been targeting mainly the category of young people. The explanation would be that young people are more open to what the idea of involvement in the project means, they are open to face changes and they desire to be involved in these kinds of initiatives.
- As a result of the projects, business ideas have been developed and implemented in the industries related to the local economic potential for development i.e. agriculture, services and tourism.
- The multiple forms of partnership developed through the Programme, associated with the categories of beneficiaries, ensured both the adequacy of project proposals to cover the specific needs of the eligible area and exploited the opportunity for cross-border collaboration creating diversified employment supply, with or without cross-border mobility, or mutual coverage of the business environment diversification deficit.

²⁴ Interview with the representative of a non-governmental organisation of employers.



According to the interviews, the following can be said regarding the contribution of the Programme towards the progress made by the regions in terms of employment and labour market integration:

- The level of certification of individuals has increased due to the fact that the trainings organized by the project partners released a certification at the end of the training courses.
- The job seeker – employer relation has improved in a number of dimensions particularly in the level of availability of employment, as well as in the quality of the employment process, due to the protocols that have been signed by project partners with labour market agencies.
- Multiple centres for information and counselling and training courses have been set up at the level of the eligible NUTS 3 regions, where individuals can not only find information about employment opportunities at the level of their region, but also at the level of other regions across the border of their respective Member State.
- The level of mobility of workers between Member States has increased but, according to the beneficiaries, this mobility is asymmetrical, in the sense that there is a higher mobility of individuals from Romania to Bulgaria rather than from Bulgaria to Romania. However, a further increase is inhibited by the language barrier between the two Member States.

From the **case studies** with beneficiaries, the main findings are:

- The project selected for the case study aimed to increase employment opportunities by developing organic farming. From the perspective of human resources, this involved an innovative approach to stimulating employment through new jobs created (after professional training) and stimulating the development of small entrepreneurship. It focused on facilitating employment in niche fields - bio agriculture - by creating cross-border virtual incubator BIOVIRTINC, fostering bio business development, offering information, trainings, consultancy for certification, business and mobility tools tailored to the specific needs of job seekers and entrepreneurs in Dolj-Pleven area.
- The project has a multidimensional approach - stimulating the business environment, training the workforce soundly with the development demand model and including the certification of agro-food products in the ecological field. It is worth mentioning that the project continues an already existing initiative at the level of the Lead Partner, completing it with the creation of mobility tools tailored to the specific needs of job seekers and entrepreneurs. Through the project, the institutional capacity of the partners has practically increased, along with a diversified supply for training, by fields and professions necessary for the two geographical areas. Because the project activities were identical both in Romania and Bulgaria, a mutual exchange of experience in the project activities was achieved.

The project followed in the study case proved to be highly useful for the two communities, innovative in its approach and an important starting point in the development of future projects and collaborations between stakeholders in the area that could contribute in a significant manner to the better integration of the labour market in the cross-border area. In this sense, based on the data of the final report, the project followed in the case study surpassed its project result indicator – set in the application form for 151,099 people to have access to joint employment initiatives – by 135%, reaching 355,311 people to which access was facilitated to joint employment initiatives. Out of the number of reached persons, 325 persons were trained for new jobs/ entrepreneurship, 5,977 persons visited the project platform, 275 of persons reached were job seekers/specialists, 89 were employers/entrepreneurs, and 45 were land owners, 100 persons benefitted of consultancy, 340.500 persons were reached through radio/tv, and 8.000 persons received informative flyers. The project also surpassed its set target group of persons from



higher education and research field (set in the application form to 1,181), reaching 1213 persons (148 reported in project report 5.5; 1065 reported in LB partner report 6.3, representing: 1019 viewers on platform; 40 registered job seekers; 6 employers/entrepreneurs). While achievements can be easily observed after the end of the implementation period, the problem of measuring the sustainability of such projects – respectively the capitalisation of results mostly via mainstream programmes - remains open. The need for quantitative specific indicators being an aspect that should be considered in the next programming period in case there are still interventions in this field.

Moreover, among the major needs that should be addressed by the Programme in the following period in terms of labour mobility are those related to the development of the digital competencies. Higher initial education is not closely oriented to the needs of the labour market, so in many cases the people looking for a job do not have the necessary skills (computer skills). In the future an increased emphasis on digitalization is needed, as a key competence for the development/ innovation of the employment model in new entrepreneurial initiatives, but also for the flexibility of working conditions, for increasing business resilience in extreme events, such as the crisis generated by the SARS-COV-2 pandemic.

According to the case study, the main areas where project *BIOVIRTINC* contributed to in terms of employment and labour market integration was the development of a highly specialized labour force in terms of bio-agriculture and bio-products. The relevance of the project was high, as it was oriented towards agriculture and, based on the analysis of EQ1, there is a high proportion of rural area in the eligible NUTS 3 regions, in which agricultural employment opportunities are likely to be available.

EQ I.EM.03	What are the factors facilitating this contribution?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- Institutional cross-border collaboration relations from other funding lines and already created.
- Partnerships can expand to projects that cover this thematic area, especially by attracting public institutions and some NGOs.
- The diversity of training institutions in the eligible area of the Programme – from institutions providing initial education system or continuous training, they are actors with experience in implementing similar projects, even if they are funded through other structural funds with specific thematic programmes.
- There is a need to complete competencies in accordance with the labour market demand for initial education graduates knowing that in general, in the two countries, there is an asymmetry between labour market demand and the education system supply for professional skills specific to business development areas.
- In addition, the digitalization of economies, as a global trend, will increase the demand for soft skills both for the mature labour force on the labour market, but also for a permanent updating of skills for young people, which must be added to the requirements of the business environment.

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

- The fact that the projects could not benefit from state aid affected the overall results of the projects. The reason why the projects did not receive state aid is that the interest in the eligible area of the Programme for such schemes is low. In the following programming period, there is some possibility for this option to be considered, albeit with a lower budget.
- The opportunity offered by the Programme, the correct identification of the problems that exist in the eligible area and the target groups, as well as the structure of a partnership are positive factors for ensuring the sustainability.



- The language barrier is still an important factor that has a negative impact on employment rate, even if the citizens can access some language courses. The Bulgarian citizens are more interested in learning the official language in Romania.
- The Programme facilitated the cross-border communication between the employers and employees due to the mobility of the employers.
- Setting up centres for information and counselling and training courses (including requalification authorized training courses) on both sides of the border; inside the centres, beneficiaries are able to find information about job openings on each side of the border, work legislation etc.
- The key factors that facilitated the contribution of the interventions to the progress of the employment in the cross-border area were represented by the involvement of active non-governmental organizations in the projects implementation, the effective inter-institutional communication and good partnerships that were created between Romanian and Bulgarian institutions, agencies, organizations.
- Other factors mentioned in the interviews that have influenced in a positive way the employment component were represented by the studies elaborated to improve the employment; the initiatives that activated the labour mobility in the cross-border area; the self-assessment tools created to support job seekers; the stakeholders affiliate networks and information resources; various information campaigns, trainings and roundtables organized in the financed interventions, etc.

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

- In what concerns the opinion of the beneficiaries regarding the main factors that have driven the change related to projects financed under SO 4.1, the respondents have repeatedly mentioned a number of main factors, such as flexibility of employment, work migration, cross-border labour mobility schemes and direct investments in small and medium enterprises. One beneficiary mentioned that an increase in tourism was a driving factor for the observable changes in labour market and employment in the cross-border region.
- Regarding the factors that have contributed to the smooth implementation of the projects, the most recurrent answer was the adequate financial support received through the Programme. The beneficiaries also mentioned the possible synergies with EURES cross-border framework, effective assessment of local needs and alignment with the Programme's Priority axis, as well as the clear and effective design of the calls (see figure below).

Figure 16 Amongst the possible factors, which one do you consider the most important for facilitating the smooth implementation of your project?



Source: Data collected by the research team

From the **case study analysis, Biovirtinc ROBG-141**, the main findings are:



- The activities of the projects aimed to create a cross-border virtual incubator BIOVIRTINC that fosters bio business development, as well as offers information, trainings, consultancy for certification, business and mobility tools tailored to the specific needs of job seekers and entrepreneurs in Dolj-Pleven area rising in the process of labour market inclusion.
- The factors that facilitated the achievement of the project's objectives were the openness of the cross-border population to receive information about bio agriculture and bio products. Another factor was the fact that the project provided to local business free soil analyses sets.

EQ I.EM.04

Are there any unintended effects of the programme in this field?

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

- Up to now it is difficult to define such effects, but some possible tendencies that are likely to occur can be advanced:
 - a) Favourable:** (1) increasing the competition for projects specific to the priority axis, between the traditional applicants for this Programme and those who have experience in implementing similar thematic projects, but through other programs, had a beneficial effect on the quality of project proposals; (2) increasing the competition in the region between projects financed through this Programme with other thematic interventions finance through other operational programs (i.e. POCU): the projects will be better oriented on the specific needs of cross-border cooperation; (3) partnerships can be developed / strengthened on this SO and the cooperation of similar institutions from the 2 countries will increase: training institutions, public authorities, agencies for promoting social inclusion measures through employment - employment agencies, information centres for the needs of the labour market; specialized agencies on issues of development and efficient management of human capital, etc.
 - b) Unfavourable:** (1) labour market volatility and increased external mobility for work of the young and young adult population segment - up to 40 years, so there may be a shortage of eligible people for the target group; (2) poor diversification of the business environment, so new entrepreneurial offers will be difficult to be implemented; (3) high risk / funding deficit for the post-implementation period of projects in order to ensure the sustainability indicators in the field of employment.

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

- Many projects targeted disadvantaged people. Hence, the inclusive aspects were added to the unintended effects that the projects under Priority Axis 4 created.
- Other unintended effects of the Programme in the field of employment are represented by the creation of new businesses as a result of the participation to the training courses organized in the projects, as well as the creation of new jobs for the unemployed persons who participated in the courses.

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

- The most prevalent answers offered by the beneficiaries participating to the survey were represented by the development of cross-border cooperation, creation of SME's with cross-border participation, the development of business networks and joint cross-border activities.

From the **case study analysis, Biovirtinc ROBG-141**, the main findings are:

- Beside the expected effects of the project (project was expected to promote joint mobility with a min. of 5000 viewers on social media/platform, 200 registered job seekers/specialists, 30 employers/entrepreneurs, 10 land owners), the unexpected effects will consist in the multiplication of the results with an increased rate of 5% yearly within the next five years.

- Other results for which the impact will be observed in the next couple of years are the offering of the following services/facilities:
 - Consultancy for certification on bio-agriculture products including Help Desk functionality
 - Soil sampling analysis for Romanian and Bulgarian farmers
 - Online bio product show case for marketing of bio products
 - Consumer awareness and education on bio products by posting on the web page short articles regarding benefits of bio products
 - Trainings on request.
- In addition, the common strategies and action plans for job creation and cross-border mobility by developing business on bio agriculture, bio products processing and connected services elaborated and approved within the project, will determine BIOVIRTINC future activities and other measures will be further developed.

2. Conclusions

The eligible area covered by the Programme presents a low level of development, with economic and social performances below the national average. Even at a low level of development, there are significant differences in the economic performance between the eligible districts/counties. Some improvements were noticed in the employment field, such as the development of infrastructure directly linked to increase labour mobility, action 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.

The employment component appears as a direct and indirect purpose, as a horizontal or transversal result of the financed interventions through the Programme.

Overall, the implementation of the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme had positive effects on employment in the eligible region, although difficult to measure quantitatively as a result, and especially in terms of impact.

The Programme addresses the issue of employment as a complementary objective, rather residual than one of direct effect, although one of the important indirect effects of funding, regardless the SO under which the projects are finance, is the quality of life in the region, which implicitly also means increasing employment, income, reducing economic, social, environmental inequalities, etc., but also new opportunities to expand the business environment - entrepreneurship, self-employment, etc.

The usefulness and efficiency (although rather indirect and partial) of the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme in the field of employment and active inclusion was highlighted by the results of the implemented projects. It is difficult to measure the effect as long as through the programme and project indicators there is no direct addressability on the employment indicators - both in the sphere of direct employment -i.e. number of jobs created, people employed for a period of at least 1-3 years, etc. as well as indirect - i.e. continuation of the activities initiated by the project.

Considering the projects' results reached up to 2019, a number of conclusions can be drawn: Firstly, the Programme has had a high level of success in terms of the obvious overachievement of the output indicators regarding this priority axis.

- There is a high level of labour market opportunities and educational asymmetries between less developed regions and highly developed regions, as well as between rural and urban areas.

Considering that the regions eligible under the present Programme are not as developed as other highly competitive regions in both Member States and considering the net decrease in the regional GDP of certain NUTS 3 regions eligible under the Programme, the interventions are highly relevant to the needs of the population.

- Furthermore, these interventions can potentially reduce the educational and vocational training asymmetries between regions at the level of both Member States, which can in turn lead to a higher level of competitiveness of individuals on the market. On medium to long term, this higher level of competitiveness can reduce the discrepancies in labour market occupation between less developed and more developed regions at the level of both countries.

A key factor that has facilitated the contribution of the interventions to the progress of the employment domain in the cross-border area was mainly represented by the will and interest of the key actors in the region to create and develop soft measures to improve the labour market and labour mobility, such as: the studies elaborated to improve employment; the self-assessment tools implemented to support job seekers; the dissemination of various information campaigns, trainings and roundtables.

The Programme is capable of generating unintended effects at the level of this domain, but up to now it is difficult to define such effects for the medium and long term. However, some possible effects that are likely to occur consist in the implementation of new businesses due to the participation to the training courses, as well as the creation of new jobs for the unemployed persons who participated in the courses.

Overall, we consider that the Programme has had a significant impact in creating cooperation relations in the business environment in the cross-border area, which also implies capitalised results on employment, quality of life, flexibility - mobility for work and availability for professional training adapted to the demand of the local labour market, etc. The effects of the projects implemented through the Programme have focused on 3 main directions, namely:

- Direct effects, generated from project implementation upon the project team (experts co-opted with a fixed-term contract defined by the project implementation period) and upon the target groups of some of the activities with direct effects in employment (ex.: training, good practices development etc.);
- The contagion effect - the results of some of the projects could attract in time other business initiatives
- Creating and maintaining/ developing inter-institutional collaboration relations and consolidating partnerships that continue the initiatives of promotion and implementation of projects funded through initiative 4.1, thus creating, on the one hand, the ground for the successful implementation of new projects (follow-up or complementary) or, on the other hand, the possibility of expanding partnerships, attracting new members/ local public or private institutions.

3. Recommendations

R.4. Promoting the organization of training courses through projects is an important step to facilitate further employment. However, in order to secure a more targeted effect upon the labour market, for the next programming period, one potential aspect to consider could be the prioritisation of certain profiles and areas of training, so that activities of skills development be better correlated with labour market demand. As such, for the next programming period, in case this field is tackled by the future programme, authorities could consider supporting interventions better adapted to the current context that could have finality in the level and quality of employment in the region, including through cross-border mobility for

work. As we are estimating a slow recovery after COVID-19 crisis, with a high challenge for employment for the last graduates from 2020 and probably from 2021, we propose, as examples, as possible future eligible actions in projects: training for digital skills and digital management of the companies, restructuring employment model at company level from the perspective of the employees involvement in projects implementation - as expert or target groups; a more developed and complex platform for project visibility, on-line implementation activities and results dissemination (integrated project site to allow on-line activities with the target group, associated with the allocation of eligible expenses with support logistics-equipment, payment of IT experts, access to online communication forms, etc.); providing coaching competencies for better integration in firms jobs structure and for higher productivity; redesign of the business model and of the employment framework in affected/ risk activities like tourism etc.

R.5. Finally, the monitoring system could also be developed such that sustainability indicators could be developed and monitored (for example number of persons still employed at specific periods of time after the finalisation of projects as a result of the implementation of the financed actions). This recommendation is particularly useful for the evaluation of soft measures and their impact and sustainability over time.

3.7. Analysis of Specific objective 5.1 – Evaluation Domain Impact/Institutional Capacity

1. Analysis

TBIE – Theory of change for SO 5.1 (the full analysis is presented in Annex 2).

Through the interventions supported under SO 5.1., the cross-border region has increased cooperation capacity and the efficiency of public institutions through:

- Improved harmonisation of the cross-border regulatory framework
- Strengthened local and cross-border networks and creating new ones
- Enhanced capacity building of cross-border public administrations
- Created and strengthened new cross-border models to encourage social innovation and platforms of discussions and exchanging ideas.

This change has occurred in conjunction with:

- An increased level of local awareness on the cross-border opportunities (employment, health, education, social services) and European cohesion funds’ effectiveness
- Enhancement of level of cooperation through the development of concrete joint actions with the aim to improve the overall well-being of the citizens in the cross-border area
- Development of new models of governance which encourages the participation of private stakeholders in the cross-border decision-making process.

EQ I.IC.01	Have the interventions under this priority axis (5.1) led to the achievement of any effects, intended or unintended?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

The analysis conducted at project level suggests that the approved interventions under priority axis 5.1 can be categorised in four main domains: health, social services and poverty alleviation, education and public administration strengthening coordination.

- The projects addressing **cross-border health issues** have been the most financed under Priority Axis 5.1. The common thread of intervention can be seen from a double perspective: a hard one, with the modernisation of local hospitals and provision of modern healthcare supplies; and a soft



one, which focuses on fostering collaboration among cross-border healthcare players, implementation of common health policies and facilitation of exchange of experiences and good practices on disease redress and prevention.

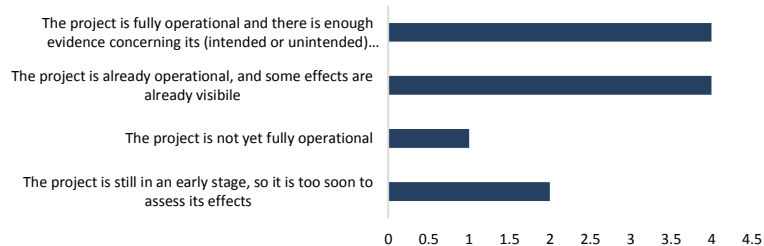
- The projects concerning **social services and poverty alleviation** addressed the insufficient level of cross-border and public-private cooperation in social field on all levels but also the lack of synchronization in the efforts of the institutions to provide efficient services to the population, from assistance to elderly citizens to help to poor people. More concretely, this translates to the creation of cross-border networks for NGOs and social services providers, to strengthen their coordination, and facilitate the exchanges of best practices and their dissemination.
- The projects which focused on **educational aspects** aim at increasing the cooperation and effectiveness of educational institutions by: developing common education policies and strategies; fostering the development of common innovative learning environments for teachers and students; preventing school dropouts; developing careers services and addressing poor education infrastructures (equipment, IT tools etc.);
- The projects dealing with **public administration strengthening coordination** aimed at helping cross-border counties and fostering them to face common challenges and take advantage of cooperation opportunities. One of the main problems emerging from the projects' analysis is the **lack of public-private coordination in the eligible area**. This can be addressed by joint strategies and the establishment of common platforms to stimulate the public-private exchange of ideas and best practices. Other common solutions to cross-border problems concern the development of eco-tourism and green economy joint strategies, strengthening methodologies for the Danube River supervision and increase public actors' **capacity building** and efficiency to ease the access to EU funds.

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

- To keep up the progress in the field of institutional capacity, it is necessary to support capacity building for civil servants, to support the development of specific skills (language courses, training courses etc), to improve the efficiency and capacity building of public administrations and cross-border mechanisms.
- One respondent highlighted the need to foster platforms and forums to exchange experiences and best practices, especially in the field of social services.
- Specialized forums for the exchange of experience and expertise in the field of social services have been organised thanks to the Programme, with very positive effects.
- According to one respondent, the private sector would be interested to be more involved in the next programming period.

From the **surveys** the main findings are:

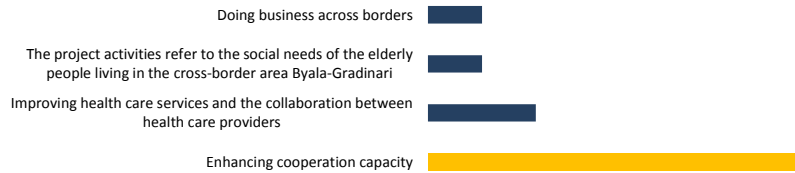
Figure 17 To what extent is it possible to assess your project's effects on cooperation capacity?





Regarding the possibility of assessment of effects on cooperation capacity, beneficiaries (4) mentioned that the project is fully operational and that there is enough evidence concerning its effects; others (4) mentioned that the project is already operational and some effects are visible; while one beneficiary mentioned that the project is not yet fully operational; two beneficiaries mentioned that the project is at an early stage.

Figure 18 To which of the fields related to institutional capacity is your project most relevant?



Most beneficiaries mentioned that the main field of institutional capacity is the enhancement of cooperation capacity (7). The rest of the beneficiaries mentioned relevance in the following fields: improving health care services and the collaboration between health care providers, the project activities refer to the social needs of the elderly people living in the cross-border area Byala-Gradinari and doing business across borders.

The beneficiaries were asked to elaborate on the effect of their project upon the cross-border cooperation capacity. To this extent, most of the answers were related to the increase in capacity of public authorities, particularly through the establishment of integrated management systems, the creation of joint online platforms, common strategies and increase in institutional cooperation as well as easing the access to public services. Other beneficiaries mentioned an increase in effectiveness of services as well as health capacity increase through sport.

From the **case studies**, the main findings are:

Following the discussion with Zimnicea Town, lead partner of the project ROBG-174 Your health matters, the main conclusions are:

The results obtained by implementing the project are the modernization of hospitals in Zimnicea and Svishtov by equipping them with medical equipment according to identified needs and laid the foundations for cooperation between the two medical units and local public administration to continue efforts to develop and increase the quality of medical services population;

- The project activities generated a positive impact in the target area by increasing the population's confidence in the medical service provided by the two hospitals.

EQ 1.IQ.02	How much of the effects identified are directly attributable to interventions under the Programme?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The Projects analysed give a great importance to boosting capacity of common cross-border cooperation schemes, creating room for exchange experiences and best practices and support the most suitable arrangements that maximise synergies on the two sides of the borders.
- Modernization and better efficiency of public services are two of the recurrent strongholds that emerge throughout the analysis of interventions, in the context of complementarity and harmonization. In practical terms this leads to the elaboration of common studies, common exchanges platforms, shared trainings, joint actions and development information tools,



involving a wide range of categories and target groups (from policymakers to medical specialists) that otherwise would not have had the opportunity to interact with each other;

- Another critical effect, directly attributable to the Programme, is making the participation of private stakeholders in the public decision-making process more attractive, fostering the dialogue with the public cross-border institutions and facing together common challenges.
- The trust and synergies that have been created between the stakeholders and target groups involved lay the foundations both for sustainability of the projects beyond the funding period, but also for future collaborations and projects.

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

- The programme has a visible effect on cooperation among public civil servants. For instance, all the mayors know each other, and this is considered a key impact.
- Partnership agreements create spill-over effects, allowing partners to share their experiences. Also, the Programme allowed for consultations with an increasing number of experts in a wide range of areas, strengthening the overall regional institutional capacity.
- The project activities improved the capacity and effectiveness of educational institutions through the development, transfer and implementation of innovative social and educational services.
- According to one respondent the main aspect that has undergone positive change is the creation of partnerships based on mutual trust.
- Also, the implementation of optimal solutions helped to eliminate the consequences of emergencies, reducing public losses, direct and indirect financial, environmental and other damages.
- One respondent considered that the current Programming period has a higher impact in terms of institutional capacity than the previous programming period.

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

- To the question “In which way(s) does your project contribute to enhancing the level of coordination of public institutions or the general level of cooperation capacity in the cross-border area?” the responses of the beneficiaries are varied. One beneficiary mentioned that their project reinforces the efficiency of institutions through the implementation of new common procedures as well as the optimization of existing ones.
- Another beneficiary mentioned the creation of a joint online platform to exchange good practices between institutions, NGO’s and citizens, while another project described the creation of a network of social service providers (both public and private). A large number of beneficiaries mentioned increases in institutional cooperation in the cross-border area through the establishment and partnerships and common projects.
- Indeed, one beneficiary reported the elaboration of a joint strategy to improve the public services environment in the RO-BG cross-border region, as well as the development of a platform named E-GoverNet, while another beneficiary reported establishing a platform to exchange information about public institutions in the cross-border regions, which was aimed at the general public.

EQ I.IQ.03	What are the factors facilitating this direct effect?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- The analysis at project level indicates that the carried-out interventions, in line with the need’s assessment identified by the Programme, concerned:
 - Creation of new cross-border networks and reinforcement of the existing ones, throughout the development of common structures, mechanisms and exchange tools, as



well as promotion of horizontal cooperation between administrative public actors in key local and cross-border aspects

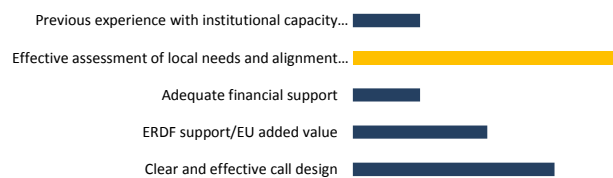
- Fostering civil society participation in public decision-making and development of public-private partnerships
- Increasing the efficiency of the public sector through capacity building for public authorities and the adoption of e-government processes and promotion of innovations in social services, as well as services of general interests for citizens
- Transformation of public services through infrastructure development and equipment modernisation
- Improvement of the policy-making process at cross-border level and coordination of policies and investments related to health, education, social services and public administration
- Improvement of investment plans and structures related to territorial development.

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

- Institutional cooperation has impact on the daily life of citizens, for instance exchanging of best practices may lead to an overall better administration of the concerned areas
- The success of the Programme's direct effects depends on many factors which must be in unison to be truly effective
- The effective use of grants and stakeholder consultations have been highlighted among those factors which facilitated the Programme's direct effect
- The synergies with other EU-level programmes have played an important role in making the Programme more effective
- The fact that the Programme promoted dialogue and collaboration among people in the cross-border area was a very successful factor. The freedom to choose the field of action within this PA was an additional element that increased the participants' interest in the Programme
- The language differences represent a real obstacle in the cross-border area, but the adoption of English as a mid-language has helped step by step to overcome the barriers (even though it has been very difficult at the beginning, especially for beneficiaries).

From the **surveys** the main findings are:

Figure 19 According to your first-hand experience, which one of the following factors facilitated the implementation of the project?



Most beneficiaries (4) believed that the effective assessment of local needs and alignment with the Programme's priority axis were the main drivers of successful implementation, followed closely clear and effective call design (3). Only one beneficiary mentioned adequate financial support as the main driver, while 2 beneficiaries mentioned that ERDF support and the EU added value were the main driving factors.

2. Conclusions

From the analysed projects it emerges that the areas of intervention touched on some of the most urgent issues in the cross border area, intervening in a very practical (as in the case of medical supplies in

hospitals and IT equipment in schools) but also in a cross-cutting way, by promoting cooperation, capacity building and exchange of experiences. It is however true that the projects financed under this priority axis were implemented in a limited number of town/cities, therefore it is not possible to detect a geographical homogeneous improvement in the cross-border area.

The initiatives of the Programme showed to be effective in creating synergies, facilitating the dialogue and creating common development opportunities for stakeholders and actors from a wide range of sectors, which would have hardly had space for discussion, improvement and exchange of ideas without the Programme. The synergies created have also stimulated the partners involved to deepen collaboration opportunities, laying the foundations for long-term collaborations.

The projects were able to intercept the main cross-border needs identified by the Programme. One of the factors behind the success of this PA was the freedom of the participants to be able to choose their own area of interest. This allowed the creation of not only true partnerships effective exchange of good practices, but also positive effects on the lives of the cross-border inhabitants themselves.

3. Recommendations

R.6. The main recommendation, as also suggested by one respondent, is to further involve the private sector in the needs and priorities identification process, for what concerns the next programming period.

R.7. Although the Programme has been instrumental in stimulating cross-border dialogue and exchange of experiences, it is recommended to further stimulate the integration of services and the exchange of good practices between the public and private sectors in the cross-border area.

3.8. General questions – Impact/Regional Development

1. Analysis

EQ I.RD.01	To what extent does the programme add benefits to the cross-border regional development and complement and enhance the effect of other related policies or strategies? How does this mechanism work and what can be improved?
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From the **benchmarking analysis, (comparison analysis with Interreg V-A Programmes Romania-Hungary and Italy-Slovenia)**, the main findings are:

- The RO-HU CBC Programme has contributed to increase employment opportunities and enable joint economic growth in the cross-border area. In particular, the cross-border area is mainly rural, with a number of small cities and villages and a few large cities, where the majority of the population, economic activities and services are concentrated. The RO-HU CBC Programme has thus contributed to improve the cross-border labour mobility and joint training opportunities. Similarly, the RO-BG CBC Programme brought a high added value in the cross-border region for what concerns the labour and training mobility, considering the existing linguistic and physical barriers, showing to be, at least, as successful as the RO-HU counterpart.
- Differently from the RO-BG CBC Programme, the RO-HU CBC Programme supported flagship projects, which aim at improving the health-care services for the population living in the cross-border area, creating a people-friendly employment market and developing the cultural environment and road infrastructures in the eligible area. Such flagship projects benefit of a higher ERDF budget (up to 11.815.000 €)²⁵ than the normal projects and their impact has been quite significant and are expected to spread positive effects in the years to come. Even though

²⁵ RO-HU Annual Implementation report 2019

the RO-BG Programme did not introduce the concept of flagship projects in the field of health, it generated, through the *SO 5.1 – To increase cooperation capacity and the efficiency of public institutions in a CBC context*, a positive impact in the target area by increasing the population's confidence in the medical services, thus demonstrating to be as successful as the RO-HU CBC Programme.

- The IT-SI CBC Programme focuses on the promotion of research innovation for a more competitive area, in order to reinforce the existing potentials of innovative sectors that could be attractive to foreign investors. This major goal is being pursued through a better cooperation among public and private actors involved in R&I. Even though the RO-BG CBC Programme did not foresee a Priority Axis that clearly addresses the research and innovation goals, it has tackled the lack of public-private coordination in the eligible area, by promoting joint strategies and by establishing common platforms to stimulate the public-private exchange of ideas and best practices. Thus, the impacts are not comparable as they target different domains, but the progress in the public-private cooperation in the RO-BG cross-border area, pursued within the context of the programme, is remarkable.
- Similarly, to the RO-BG CBC Programme, both benchmarked CBC Programmes have widely supported the improvement of common risk prevention and disaster management tools, bringing a high added value to the respective cross-border areas. Since the RO-BG CBC Programme has spread one of the greatest effects in the area of risk management and disaster resilience tools improvement, contributing to secure the life of more than 4 million of inhabitants in the cross-border area, it has proven to be at least as successful as the two benchmarked Programmes.
- As a last point, similarly to the RO-BG CBC Programme, both RO-HU and IT-IS Programmes have been effective in implementing cross-border cooperation solutions, with positive effects on the overall cross-border capacity building and the level of cross-border cooperation intensity. Thus, when it comes to cross-border governance solutions and capacity building, the RO-BG CBC Programme has been at least as successful as the other benchmarked Programmes, bearing in mind that the synergies that have been created between the stakeholders and the target groups involved guaranteed, in many cases, the sustainability of the projects beyond the financing period.

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

- Before the Programme, there was weak record of historical cooperation between Romania and Bulgaria. The presence of a physical obstacle such as the Danube has been a real factor of discontinuity and one of the main reasons why cooperation in the cross-border area has not taken off. To the present date, the problem remains very relevant: there are only two bridges on a 450 km border, one of which has only been operational since 2014²⁶.
- Physical barriers also hinder the cross-border labour mobility, making commuting very difficult if not impossible. Cross-border labour mobility has indeed been one of the areas where the Programme has encountered most difficulties.

²⁶ EURACTIVE, 2018. Deputy mayor: A second bridge at Ruse-Giurgiu is a priority

- The obstacles that prevent reaching the other side of the Danube are reflected in labour-mobility policies design. For instance, there is no EURES Cross-Border Partnership in force, which might be very beneficial especially to the labour mobility of younger people²⁷.
- Even if the physical obstacles are overcome it is even very complicated to simply talk to another person from the other side of the border due to the great language barriers, preventing cross-border communities to develop mutual links.
- The Programme contributed to create opportunities, so that people from the cross-border area have more and more occasions to know each other, thanks to the growing number of exchange opportunities (shared platforms, trainings, events etc).
- In addition to providing incentives for cross-border dialogue, the Programme has had real effects on citizens' lives, helping to stem situations of poverty and social exclusion and early school leaving, but also by promoting medical prevention.
- Other sectors where the Programme has spread the greatest effects are risk management and disaster and climate change response in the area of the Danube River. Among the positive consequences, the new risk management, navigability, and water quality implemented policies allow population to feel safer and encourage more and more investments in tourism related services, which are crucial for the growth of the cross-border area. Indeed, one of the main challenges to capitalize such resources is to transform cultural resources into economic resources.
- According to the 2018 Implementation Report, the Programme contributes to a large extent to the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). A total of 185 projects have contributed to the EUSDR. The 40 finalised projects have regarded: improvement of transport connection to the TEN-T; management of environmental risks, cross border labour mobility and institutional capacity.
- The creation of new infrastructures in the cross-border area, such as new roads and bridges could act as a sounding board amplifying the effects and potential of the Programme.

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

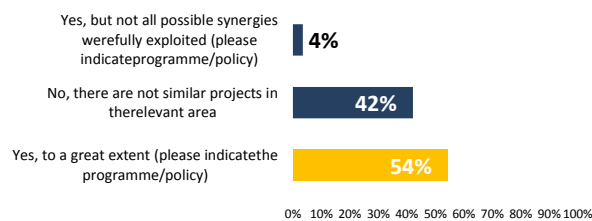
- Positive developments have been recorded in the field of climate change adaptation and environmental protection, while less positive developments have been remarked under employment and job creation and regional mobility.
- To some extent the Programme has had an impact on increasing mobility and outreach in the labour market by promoting initiatives aimed at both workers and entrepreneurs.
- Improved institutional and expert capacity have been noted among the cross-border development aspects that have undergone the most important changes in the last years, together with the joint trainings for the newly introduced technical solutions and management systems.
- The implementation of the Programme has contributed to the development of the teams' qualifications, which is a prerequisite for formulating new risk management policies. This is important because in recent years the bulk of the funding has been channelled to outsourced procurement, reducing the interest of participating and creating work-teams.

²⁷ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. Border orientation paper, Romania-Bulgaria.

- Most of the respondents observed significant benefits added by the Programme to the cross-border regional development in the last 5 years.

From the **surveys** the main findings are:

Figure 20 Have you experienced synergies and/or complementary coordination between your projects and other projects financed under other programmes/policies?



54% of the respondents answered that they experienced synergies and/or complementarities with other projects financed under other programmes and/or policies while 42% stated that there are not similar projects in the relevant area.

When asked to specify the programmes and/or policies within which synergies and or complementarities exist, most of the beneficiaries mentioned the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, the Danube Transnational Programme and the IPA CBC Romania-Serbia and Bulgaria-Serbia Programmes. To a smaller extent, the beneficiaries cited the Black Sea Basin Programme and Interreg Europe. Also, the beneficiaries mentioned synergies within the context of the current Romania-Bulgaria cross-border Programme, but also with the national operational programmes in Romania and Bulgaria.

EQ I.RD.02 | What is the current and estimated aggregated effect of the programme in the eligible area?

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

- Whereas the main priority of the RO-BG CBC Programme is to enhance the regional mobility and improve the connection of secondary and tertiary nodes to the TEN-T, one of the RO-HU Programme’s main priorities aims at the protection and sustainable use of common values and resources, indeed 22.77% of the overall financial resources have been allocated to PA 1 (Cooperating on natural and cultural resources). As reported by the RO-HU CBC Annual Implementation report 2019, the forecast of indicators for 2023 regarding the total number of tourist visits (129.723) in the cross-border area has more than doubled the baseline target values (61.000). Similar trends have been also witnessed in the case of IT-SI CBC Programme, where more than 43.000 tourist visits are expected to come in the cross-border area by 2023. Thus, the impact on local tourism for the RO-BG CBC Programme, with about 290.000 tourists visits foreseen by 2023, is expected to be more successful than the benchmarked Programmes.
- However, the cooperation on accessibility and improvement of cross-border mobility - thus removing the most important bottlenecks - remains an important element of the RO-HU CBC Programme. According to the Annual Implementation Report 2019 and most recent data on



Cohesion Programmes²⁸, the total length of newly built roads is 12,14 km, slightly overtaking the target values. Also, about 18 km of reconstructed and upgraded roads have been planned, but it is too early to assess the progress since the implementation of the related project ROHU444 has begun only in September 2019. Considering the different budgets, RO-BG results seem to have a slightly higher impact on the relevant territory.

- When it comes to the IT-SI CBC Programme, its main priority is the promotion of innovation capacities for a more competitive area, which resulted in the improvement of a) the number of enterprises cooperating with research institutions, b) the number of research institutions participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects and c) the innovative services, products and tools transferred to enterprises. Considering that the RO-BG CBC Programme did not foresee a priority axis that clearly address the research and innovation goals (even though several references to research and innovation can be found in several priority axis of the Programme), the impacts are not comparable as they target different domains. We need, however, to consider the achievements in the field of private public partnership brought thanks to the RO-BG CBC Programme's contribution in the eligible area.
- Similarly to the RO-BG CBC Programme, both RO-HU and IT-SI CBC Programmes have focused on capacity building development to ensure disaster resilience and developing common disaster management systems. According to the IT-SI Annual Implementation report, more than 33.000 people will benefit from joint protection against flood by 2023, whereas for what concerns the RO-HU CBC Programme's forecast of indicators, more than 2,5 million people will benefit from improved emergency responses by the same target-year. Taking in consideration the data from the other benchmarking CBC programmes, the RO-BG programme proved to be as successful as the others in the context of the benchmarking exercise.
- Whereas in the RO-BG case, the health-related interventions are foreseen within the scope of the SO 5.1 – To increase cooperation capacity and the efficiency of public institutions in a CBC context, the RO-HU CBC Programme foresees a whole Priority Axis for the improvement of the CBC healthcare services. Indeed, according to the forecast of indicators, about 4 million people will have access to improved health services in the Romania-Hungary cross-border area. Considering these differences in the overall strategic planning, the impacts are not comparable as they target different domains, but there is however positive impact in the cross-border area, by increasing the population's confidence in the medical services.
- For what concerns cross-border mobility and joint training efforts, both RO-BG and RO-HU CBC programmes have witnessed positive trends according to the forecast of indicators. More than 54.000 people will have access to local employment initiatives and joint training in the RO-BG cross-border area by 2023, whereas about 30.000 will have access to the same opportunities and initiatives on the RO-HU side²⁹. Thus, RO-BG appears to be at least as successful as the two benchmarked Programme.
- As a last point, the two cross-border programmes taken in consideration for this benchmarking exercise have witnessed, similarly to the RO-BG CBC case, positive trends for what concerns the

²⁸ European Union, Cohesion data. Available at :
<https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/programmes/2014TC16RFCB049>

²⁹ *Ibid.*



improvement in terms of capacity building and cross-border governance solutions. This is especially the case of the RO-HU CBC Programme, where the forecasts for number of people participating in cross-border initiatives, as well as the number of institutions directly involved in cross-border initiatives, have steadily improved compared to the baseline target values.

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

- PA 1 - A well connected region. According to the Programme implementation report 2018, more than 2000 people have benefited from the improvement of road infrastructure in the cross-border area. However, the greatest impacts will occur between 2019 and 2020, thanks to the improvement of over 123 km, concerning a large part of the population in the eligible area. According to the forecast of indicators, the total length of reconstructed or upgraded roads will be around 219 km, which leads to an increase of 182% with respect to the target value for 2023 (120 km). As regards the improvement of navigability and safety on the Danube, the contribution will be ensured by two large projects that will cover the entire length of the Danube in the cross-border area.
- PA 2 - A green region. There has been an increase of over, according to the Programme implementation report 2018, 2.1 million tourist overnight stays, conforming to Bulgarian and Romanian national statistics, from the beginning of the Programme until the end of 2018, thanks to the tourism services' improvements in the eligible area. Following the forecast of indicators, the total number of tourist overnight stays will be over 8.9 million, which means an increase of 125% from the target value for 2023 (7.2 million overnight stays). Furthermore, more than 27,000 ha have benefited from better conservation status, covering more than 100% of the target, which corresponds to an increase of 135%, as the target value for 2023 was 20,000 ha. In addition, 17 Natura 2000 sites will develop coordinated management tools, representing an increase of 187% compared to the target value for 2023 (10 Natura 2000 sites).
- PA 3 - A safe region. In the fields of joint risk management, flood and forest fire protection measures, there have been significant improvements in the eligible area. According to the Programme implementation report 2018, the highest number of populations benefitting from these enhancements is estimated to occur between 2020 and 2021, when most of the running projects will have completed the implementation period. However according to the forecast of indicators all the cross-border population (4.2 million) will benefit from joint risk management measures.
- PA 4 - A skilled and inclusive region. Participants show a growing interest in cross-border labour mobility. Indeed, according to the forecast of indicators, more than 1,4 million people will have access to joint employment initiatives, corresponding to an increase of 187% compared the target values set for 2023 (500,000 people).
- PA 5 - An efficient region. Since the beginning of the Programme, a general improvement, in the coordination of public administrations in the cross-border area, has been recorded. Following the of indicators, the Intensity of cooperation between cross-border stakeholders will reach 100% of the target. In addition, the Programme will support 127 cross-border mechanisms, which corresponds to an increase of 27% compared to the target values for 2023 (100 cross-border mechanisms).

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

- According to the stakeholders, the Programme has intercepted the main needs of the cross-border area through the identification of the 5 priority axes.
- However, in some sectors such as transport, where the construction costs are very high, even for small works, close integration with other European and national funds and policies is necessary to be more effective, given the limited budget of the Programme.



EQ I.RD.03

How did the support from ERDF contribute to the objectives of each priority, in line with the result-focus of cohesion policy?

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

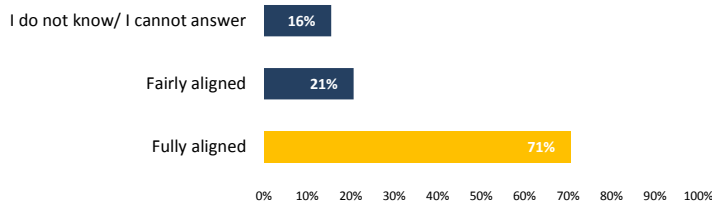
- The main objective of the Programme, as stated by the work-programme, is to expand the region's horizon to enable the area to be a region to live, study, work, visit and invest in. To achieve this, cohesion objectives must be carefully assessed and calibrated on the basis of territorial needs. Improving the accessibility of the cross-border region is essential to make the area easily accessible, so that it attracts new investments and creates new business opportunities and consolidates its strategic importance, able to connect Central and Western Europe to Asia. It is not surprising that PA1 - A well connected region, with 95 million euro, is the priority axis for which more funds have been allocated, due to its great importance for the future of the cross-border area.
- Preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency is another cornerstone of the cohesion policy intercepted by the Programme. There is great unexplored potential in the cross-border area, which is endowed with important cultural assets (the area is indeed a crossroads of three cultures, the Byzantine, the Hellenic and the Roman one), natural ones (there are numerous Natura 2000 sites and one of the richest biodiversity in Europe). It is therefore essential to continue to encourage tourism and related services, as has been done so far under the Programme, and to fully explore the tourism potential offered by the Danube River.
- Climate change and risk prevention management is another fundamental objective of cohesion policy, linked to territorial needs of the cross-border region. There are indeed great chances that Romania and Bulgaria will be seriously affected by climate change in the years to come, and the cross-border region in particular ranks among the last regions in Europe when it comes to climate change response and mitigation. The region faces serious flood risks in the Danube area, which have had devastating effects in the past, in addition to the risks associated with coastal erosion on Danube's banks and along the Black Sea. The actions carried out under this Thematic Objective have been recognized to be among the most effective.
- The promotion of sustainable and quality employment and support of labour mobility is another thematic objective that responds to the needs of the region. When we deal with education, the cross-border area steadily underperforms the EU benchmark (both basic and higher education). The region also has among the highest rates of early school leaving and NEET (Younger People neither in education nor in education and training) in the EU. Unemployment levels are high, especially on the Bulgarian side, and in particular for young graduates between 20 and 34 years old. Intra-regional labour mobility is also very low, due both to infrastructural obstacles (which for example make commuting very difficult) and linguistic barriers, considering that bilingualism is almost non-existent.
- Thematic objective 11 "Enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration" serves the narrative of regional needs because there are currently no institutional cross-border cooperation structures, and public administrations in the area are poorly harmonized. The aim under this TO is therefore to stimulate a common approach to real common problems, coordinating cross-border policy making and making collaboration between public administrations more efficient, as well as increasing the participation of civil society in the decision-making process.

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

- The interviews revealed that progress had been made in many areas, such as tourism, climate change disaster management, sustainable transport and public administration coordination
- However, much progress still needs to be achieved for a structural qualitative leap in the eligible area, but the Programme has certainly shown the way forward

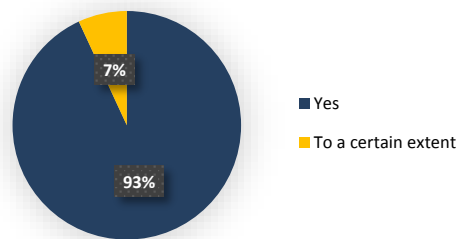
From the **surveys** the main findings are:

Figure 21 How would you evaluate the alignment between the ERDF contribution, in terms of financial availability, and your project goals?



A very large proportion of the respondents (71%) mentioned that the project goals were fully aligned with the ERDF financial availability, while 21% of the respondents mentioned that the project objectives were only fairly aligned. Even though 16% of the beneficiaries stated they do not know/they cannot answer, the overwhelming majority of the beneficiaries had their project objectives at the very least fairly aligned with the ERDF financial availability.

Figure 22 Do you think that the ERDF support has been a decisive factor for the successful implementation of your project?



The overwhelming majority of the respondents (93%) mentioned that the ERDF support was the deciding factor for the successful implementation of their project, while 7% mentioned that the ERDF support was the deciding factor only to a certain extent. No beneficiary disagreed with this statement.

EQ I.RD.04	What is the additional value resulting from the EU intervention (in this case, support from ERDF), compared to what could reasonably have been expected from the two Member States acting at regional level?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- It is a common opinion among scholars and policymakers that the cross-border Programme has made a difference in the region, generating high European added value and bringing success stories, therefore it is important to ensure continuity beyond 2020.
- Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007 and this is only the second programming period, compared to other long-term cross-border programmes. Moreover, according to an article of October 2018, with a selection rate at that state of over 90% according to the European Commission, the Programme was placed among the best performing programmes³⁰.

³⁰ EURACTIVE, 2018. Less money, a new legal framework, what future for the Interreg post-2020?

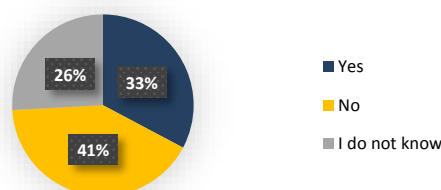
- The cooperation opportunities promoted by the Programme have had considerable spill over-effects that, in an increasing number of cases, have radically changed the lives of cross-border area citizens, from the improvement of educational systems to the modernization of healthcare facilities, which allowed many cross-border residents to receive specialized medical care in their home-town and benefit from disease prevention measures and health promotion activities.
- The main objective of the Programme is not only to finance projects, but to create synergies and reduce the obstacles to further cooperation and regional development prospects. Although the limited budget, it has laid the foundations for further structural actions and for ideas for cooperation that can go beyond European funding schemes and be sustainable in the long term.
- One of the best examples of structural approach to cooperation concern the cities of Ruse and Giurgiu, which have developed a series of territorial and economic common visions, certainly facilitated by the great advantage of the bridge that connects the two cities, but also thanks to the Programme, which has facilitated several actions concerning sustainable development, cross-border governance and cultural initiatives.
- Similar integration opportunities might also exist between Vidin and Calafat and Silistra and Calarasi.

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

- Without the Programme, there would have been little towards no cooperation between the two countries, steadily improving the expertise capacity in the eligible area.
- Projects' sustainability would have been very complicated, if not impossible without funds granted by the Programme.
- Also, it emerged that the Programme has contributed to the concrete improvement of citizens' lives. An eloquent example mentioned by the interviewed stakeholder concerns the construction of a cardiology department carried out with the Programme's funds, and it is the only one in the eligible area. Before, the cross-border inhabitants were forced to travel to the big cities in order to be treated for heart problems.

From the **surveys** the main findings are:

Figure 23 Would you have participated in the call if the project had not been funded through the ERDF but only from national funds?

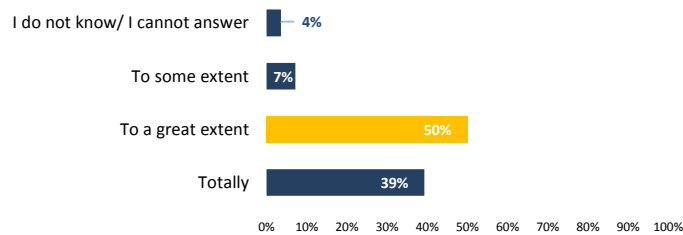


Considering the decision to participate in the calls if such funds were available at the national level, only 33% of the respondents mentioned that they would have participated in the call, while a large proportion of the respondents (41%) mentioned that they wouldn't have participated in the calls.

Regarding the main added value of RO-BG Programme for the cross-border area, apart from the availability of funds, the main answers of the beneficiaries are related to an increase in cross-border cooperation between Romanian and Bulgarian actors, the collaboration of various actors that would not have been otherwise possible without RO-BG Programme, the simplification of documentation and management procedures. Most of the beneficiaries mentioned that, in general, the only available funds

for projects regarding cross-border cooperation are not at the national level, further enforcing the need for Interreg programmes in general.

Figure 24 To what extent can the main achievements of the project be credited to the EU intervention?



Considering the attribution of achievements to the EU intervention, most of the beneficiaries (89%) mentioned that such achievements can be attributed to the EU intervention totally or to a great extent. 7% of the respondents mentioned that such achievement can only be partly attributed to EU intervention, while 4% did not know or could not answer.

EQ I.RD.05 What would be the most likely consequences of stopping or withdrawing the EU intervention?

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

- As we have widely seen above, the main contribution of the Programme has been to create opportunities for exchange, due to the fact that there has been little interest between the counties and districts in the two countries to cooperate, throughout the last decades
- A possible stop or withdrawal of the Programme's funds would mean stopping abruptly those synergies that are being created in the cross-border area, which need more time and funding also in the future, in order to translate into a consolidated reality
- The Programme has also real effects on citizens' lives, it is sufficient to think of those actions that have allowed citizens to benefit from specialist medical care in their hometown, or those measures that allowed tackling early-school leaving. A possible interruption of the financing would therefore impede the extension of these good practices also in other parts of the cross-border area
- The Programme also stimulated joint activities in the context of climate change mitigation, which would be very difficult to replicate while stopping or withdrawing the funds, especially if these actions depended on the two countries acting alone, given the urgency and the need for mitigation concrete responses to climate changes for the years to come;
- Without the Programme's funds, the valorisation of tourism and cultural resources would also be compromised, given the results achieved so far in unlocking their potential
- Road safety actions would also be affected, given the improvements achieved so far, for which the Programme had a great contribution, in terms of intra-regional mobility and spill-overs on the regional economy.

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

- All the stakeholders consulted consider the Programme is generally very useful and relevant
- According to the stakeholders consulted, the withdrawal of the EU intervention would be very negative for the regional development of the whole area, isolating Romania and Bulgaria from the other European Danube countries
- The withdrawal of the EU intervention would have a negative impact on the local policies development and their coordination in the cross-border area



- According to one stakeholder, the harshest consequences would be felt by the outermost regions. Maritime cooperation and interregional innovation investments actions would be also seriously affected by the withdrawal of the EU intervention
- Some beneficiaries highlighted the loss in terms experience gained and cohesion with the partners on the other side of the Danube
- The withdrawal of EU intervention would bring negative consequences because of the limited financial resources of local authorities in the cross-border area.

From the **surveys** the main findings are: Considering the main consequences on the RO-BG cross-border area of an interruption of the EU CBC funding in the field covered by their project, the main answers of the respondents aimed towards a severe reduction in the possibility of implementation of cross-border projects, a big drop in the Romanian-Bulgarian relationship as well as a significant drop in the investments regarding cross-border cooperation. The beneficiaries consider that cross-border partnerships would have been severely limited, while some beneficiaries mentioned that, in absence of EU intervention, there would be no projects on the cross-border cooperation of RO-BG actors.

When it comes to the availability of national funds, most beneficiaries agree on the fact that, in absence of EU funds, there would be no projects in the cross-border cooperation between RO-BG. Furthermore, in cases where national budgets are made available, the actors mentioned that such funds would not be sufficient to implement the projects, or the scope of the projects would have been severely diminished. Some beneficiaries mentioned that, if such funds were made available at the national level, the level of the budgeting would not have been sufficient and therefore they would not have applied.

2. Conclusions

The regional development progress in the cross-border area is still in its early stages, and much remains to be done. However, the opportunities for cooperation and regional progress brought forward by the Programme have had a significant spill-over and indicate that this is the way to go. It is considered enough to think about the extent to which the implementation of risk management policies has had positive consequences on boosting tourism in the region. A decisive turning point would certainly be the creation of new infrastructures, such as the creation of a new bridges, which would bring a real qualitative leap in terms of regional cooperation intensity.

All the priority axes have recorded significant improvements and demonstrated that all the areas of intervention are connected to each other and are capable of creating positive spill over effects in other domains. An eloquent example is how road safety and the implementation of climate change and risk prevention management policies have had positive spill over effects on the improvement of tourism and related services, which in practical terms leads to an increase of 2.1 million overnight stays in the cross-border area.

The Programme considerably contributed to the main objectives of cohesion policy, since the thematic objectives well intercept the needs but also the potential of the cross-border area, but also highlighting the need for large-scale interventions. Moreover, as suggested by the Programme's National Authority in Bulgaria it might be also advisable to consider territorial-based strategic interventions, together with an integrated-solutions approach in order to overcome strictly sectoral orientations.

The added value of the European intervention, has made the difference in the region, creating synergies between the cross-border communities and laying the foundations for other cooperation opportunities, which may go beyond European funding schemes and be sustainable in the long term.

The Programme has stimulated on the one hand the cross-border dialogue and has concretely helped the citizens on the other, for this reason a possible withdrawal or stopping of EU funds is perceived as detrimental by local stakeholders and confirmed by the documental analysis' results.

3. Recommendations

R.8. It is recommended to further stimulate and encourage synergies and complementary coordination between the projects funded by the Programme and other projects financed in connection to other programmes/policies, such as EUSDR.R.9 It is also recommended to follow the ERDF thematic concentration for the next programming period 2021-2027, as it has been done during the 2014-2020 programming period, in order to further strengthen the cross-border area's attractiveness and strategic relevance, following to the 5 main investment priorities identified by the EU for the 2021-27 Regional Development and Cohesion Policy framework: Innovation and digitisation of SMEs (a **Smarter Europe**), Energy transition, renewables and the fight against climate change (a **Greener Europe**), Strategic transport and digital networks (a **Connected Europe**); Supporting quality employment, education, skills, social inclusion and equal access to healthcare (a **Social Europe**), Supporting locally-led development strategies and sustainable urban development across the EU (a **Europe closer to citizens**).

R.10. It is then important to give continuity to the results obtained so far in the next Cooperation Programme, beyond 2020, strengthening the investment priorities in order to amplify the achievements of the current Programme.

R.11. The Programme also needs continuity of investments to bring a structural value in the cross-border region, together with a more integrated territorial approach to avoid uncoordinated events, taking in consideration the competitive advantages of the cross-border region, together with an integrated-solution approach to avoid strictly sectoral orientation. However, it has so far produced very promising results in terms of regional development and laid the foundation for new progress and spill over effects.

3.9. General questions – Evaluation Domain Sustainability

1. Analysis

EQ I.SU.01	Are the Programme's outputs and results sustainable on long term?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- By examining the application form, it is possible to highlight the existence of specific sections dedicated to the sustainability assessment. Applicants are required to provide detailed description about the measures taken to ensure long-term sustainability. Applicants were expected to deliver a "clear, concrete and reliable exit plan".
- In addition, extra points were given to projects which proved to have a sound long-term sustainability plan. By doing so, applicants have an extra incentive to consider sustainability criteria in their project design.
- It is also interesting to notice that many projects were the continuation of projects implemented in the previous programming period and financed under the same Programme (Romania-Bulgaria CBC Programme 2007-2013). This continuity – one of the key strong points of the Programme – highlights the fact that projects are often designed to last longer than the specific period.

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

- According to a Programme Management Body, projects results are – in principle – sustainable in the long term. On other hand, there is some concern about the financial sustainability and

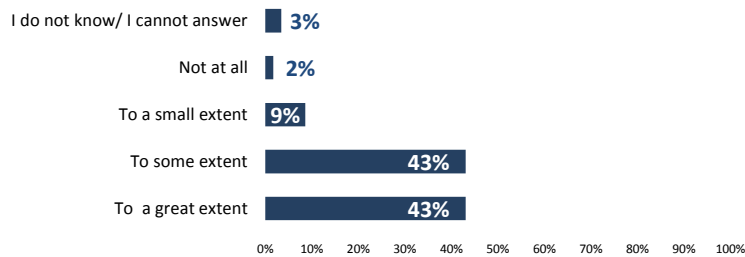


solvency of project beneficiaries, as they may lack resources and experience to manage long lasting projects.

- Another Programme Management Body highlighted that flagships projects are more likely to be sustainable in the long run as they receive more attention and scrutiny. On the other hand, small local projects may be relatively less considered once the programming period is over – hindering the long-term sustainability.
- Local stakeholders pointed out that political divergences may lead to unsustainable projects. For instance, changes in the municipal councils’ majority may reverse priorities and thus some projects may be prioritised over others.
- According to another local stakeholders, the key principle of sustainability is relevance. If the project is needed, then its sustainability will be ensured by this very fact.

From the **surveys** the main findings are:

Figure 25 In your perception, did the calls and/or the selection criteria take into consideration long-term sustainability related issues?



43% of the respondents considered that the calls and/or the selection criteria took into consideration to a great extent the long-term sustainability, and other 43% agreed that the calls and/or selection criteria took into consideration to some extent the long-term sustainability. Only 9% of the respondents considered that the calls and/or selection criteria took into consideration to a small extent the long-term sustainability. This is substantially in line with what emerged from interviews and desk research.

EQ I.SU.02	How can future programming (2021-2027) be streamlined in order to achieve higher impact and ensure sustainability of the financial assistance provided?
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From the **documental analysis**, the main findings are:

- During the analysis, it emerged that financial corrections are arguably the most significant threat to financial sustainability as far as the Programme is concerned. While local specific issues need to be considered, a relevant document to be considered is the recent Commission Decision (14.5.2019) “laying down the guidelines for determining financial corrections to be made to expenditure financed by the Union for non-compliance with the applicable rules on public procurement”.
- In particular, the Decision’s Annex (23 pages operational guideline) is relevant for project applicants but to enhance its usefulness it should be duly translated and adapted to local needs.

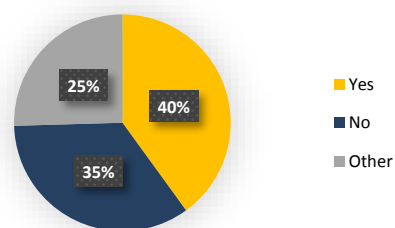
From the **interviews** the main findings are:

- According to an interviewee from the Programme Management Body, a more substantial involvement of local SMEs as project beneficiaries would enhance projects’ sustainability. From their point of view, SMEs (and private entity) have an implicit interest in ensuring project continuity as their goal is to preserve cash flows and profits.

- Another Programme Management Body highlighted that “the ideal strategy would be to capitalize the results of the projects, but this is more common in the transnational or interregional programmes, while in a cross-border programmes the beneficiaries propose more real concrete actions”.
- It should be highlighted that Programme Management Bodies are aware of the risks related to the application of financial corrections. They are mostly caused by mistakes and inaccuracies during the application and public procurement phase. To contain this risk, the MA frequently held several training events and provided support to the project applicants (see section on surveys findings). However, it also recognises that the only way to entirely avoid the risk of financial corrections is to have public procurement specialists in project beneficiaries’ teams.
- Local stakeholders – which are often also project beneficiaries – are more critical about financial corrections and perceive that the administrative tasks are sometimes burdensome and unclear. Some of them believe that an overall simplification should be needed in the next programming period.
- They also mentioned that the funds should be allocated timelier. In particular, a large chunk of the project budget should be provided at early stage.

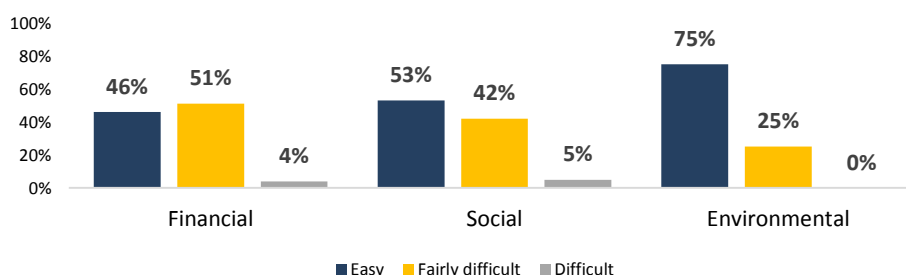
From the **surveys** the main findings are:

Figure 26 Do you consider that financial corrections pose a serious risk to project sustainability?



As the figure above shows, 40% of project beneficiaries consider financial corrections as a serious risk to project sustainability. This is in line with what emerged from interviews and reinforce the case for an intervention on this issue in the next programming period.

Figure 27 In your case, how difficult was it to reach the following elements of sustainability (financial, social, and environmental)?



In line with the previous, also the figure above shows that financial sustainability is the more challenging one. Indeed, while 75% of project beneficiaries considered the environmental sustainability was easy to reach, more than 50% believed that financial sustainability was challenging. Respondents were asked to motivate their answers and there were many references to the timing of budget allocation. This is in line with what emerged from interviews.



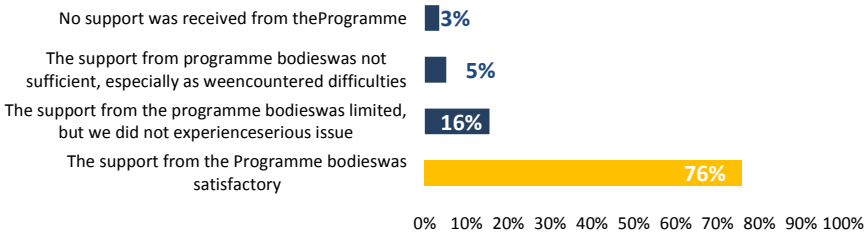
EQ I.SU.03 **What are the major factors which influenced the achievement or non-achievement of the sustainability of the Programme?**

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

- There is a substantial consensus amongst the interviewees that one key factor influencing the sustainability is the relevance. Projects that tackle relevant and perceived needs are likely to preserve their outputs in the long run. This is also due to the fact that they tend to receive public interest and scrutiny – forcing project beneficiaries to ensure maintenance.
- According to one Programme Management Body, the design of the calls as well as the strictness of the sustainability criteria played a key role in guaranteeing the sustainability.
- On the other hand, the same Programme Management Body highlighted that one of the critical factors affecting sustainability is the financial solvency of project beneficiaries – which can be rather weak, considering the development of the area. There is little that the Programme can do to improve internal financial solvency.

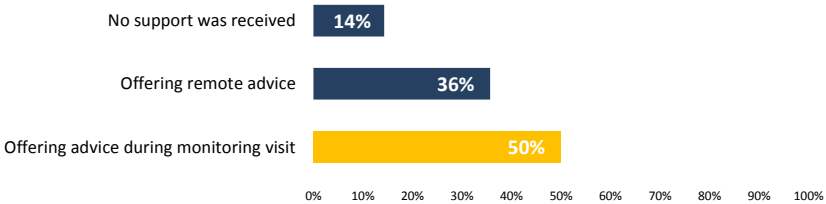
From the **surveys** the main findings are:

Figure 28 How do you assess the support from the Programme Bodies aimed to ensure sustainability (i.e. guidelines, instructions, Q&A, and other activities)?



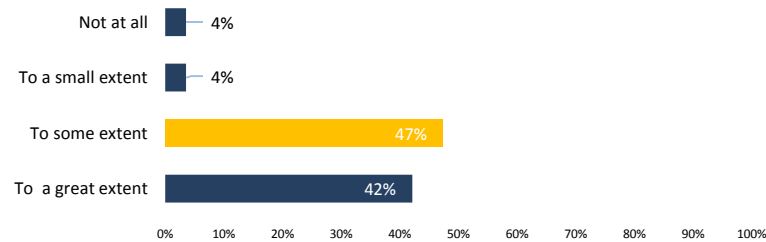
As the figure above shows, the vast majority of project beneficiaries are satisfied with the support provided by the Programme bodies on sustainability issues. Only a tiny minority complains about a lack of support. These results lead to the conclusion that the support received from the Programme Bodies was effective and it managed to tackle key sustainability issues.

Figure 29 How did the Programme bodies support you during project sustainability?



The most common type of support is advice during monitoring visits – which means active and specific support likely to be tailored on the project beneficiary needs. This may explain its success.

Figure 30 Do you consider that the criteria underlying the selection of eligible expenditures support project sustainability?



In line with the previous results, also the figure above shows how the Programme design is particularly consistent with the objective of ensuring sustainability. 92% of respondents believed that the selection of eligible expenditures was tailored to support project’s sustainability. As one respondent noted, both the selection of eligible expenditures and an effective adoption of simplified cost-options were important factors in ensuring sustainability.

2. Conclusions

The collected evidence led to the conclusion that project’s outputs are likely to be sustainable in the long term. This is due to both an effective ex-ante planning – which pushed applicants to consider sustainability implications while designing the projects – and projects’ relevance to local needs. The long-lasting continuity amongst programmes is also a key factor ensuring sustainability.

As mentioned before, the Programme’s outputs and results are likely to be sustainable in the long run. Thus – if the overall same approach would be implemented also in the next programming period – no major issues on sustainability should arise. However, concerns remain over financial corrections and the allocation of funds.

In light of the above-described evidence, we can conclude that the internal factors (i.e. factors related to the Programme) were designed to support sustainability and they largely achieve their objective. However, external factors – such as the weak financial solvency of project beneficiaries – fall outside the scope of Programme intervention and pose the most significant threat to project sustainability.

3. Recommendations

R.12. Recommendations mostly concern the issues of financial corrections and their effective prevention. On one hand, it is strongly advised to continue the activity of events and training provided by the MA, supported by the NA and the Joint Secretariat, highly appreciated by project beneficiaries. As far as procedures simplification is concerned, the MA’s initiative to extend the use of simplified cost options in the next programming is indeed in line with policy recommendations. To improve the financial sustainability of projects, a pre-financing mechanism may be suitable.

R.13. The recommendations to further enhance internal factors are already listed and described in the previous EQ. Realistically, there is little the Programme can do to address external factors – especially the weak solvency. A possible solution may be a stricter pre-screening of applicant’s financial solvency during the selection phase.

3.10. Contribution of the Programme to the Europe 2020 Strategy targets

Based on its 10-year strategic planning document, targeting smart, sustainable, inclusive growth, the European Union set itself five headline targets to be reached by 2020, namely:

- To raise the employment rate of the population aged 20-64 from 69% to at least 75%;



- To invest 3% of GDP in R&D in particular by improving the conditions for R&D investment by the private sector, and develop a new indicator to track innovation;
- To reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20% compared to 1990 levels or by 30% if the conditions are right, increase the share of renewable energy in final energy consumption to 20%, and achieve a 20% increase in energy efficiency;
- To reduce the share of early school leavers to 10% from 15% and increase the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary from 31% to at least 40%;
- To reduce the number of Europeans living below national poverty lines by 25%, lifting 20 million people out of poverty.

Starting from these headline targets, Member States have set their national targets in order to secure their contribution to the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy. As such:

- Bulgaria assumed to increase its employment rate for the population aged 20-64 to 76%, while Romania set it to 70%;
- With regards to the increase in the combined public and private investment in R&D, Bulgaria set itself a target of 1.5% of GDP and Romania a target of 2% of the Gross domestic expenditure;
- Bulgaria pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20% compared to 1990 levels, and Romania by 19%;
- With regards to the increase of the share of renewable energy in final energy consumption, Bulgaria pledged a 16% increase by 2020 and stay within the target of 16.9% in primary energy consumption, while Romania set a target increase for renewable energy by 24% and a 43% target for primary energy consumption;
- Bulgaria targets a reduction of the school drop-out rate to 11% and an increase of the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education to 36%. Romania targets a reduction of the rate of early leavers from education and training to 11.3% and an increase of the tertiary educational attainment to 26.7%;
- Finally, Bulgaria seeks to reduce by 260.000 the number of persons living in monetary poverty, and Romania by 580.000 persons³¹.

According to the most recent data available³²:

- ➔ Romania was by 2019 at 0.9 percentage points over its employment goal, while in the case of Bulgaria the employment rate fell sharply between 2008 and 2011, but the subsequent increase up to 2019 (to 75%) could help the country reach its 76% target.

³¹ Eurostat (2017): https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4411192/4411431/Europe_2020_Targets.pdf

³² <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/10155585/KS-04-19-559-EN-N.pdf/b8528d01-4f4f-9c1e-4cd4-86c2328559de>.



- ➔ Romania's R&D intensity fell by 0.05 percentage points between 2008 and 2018 the country remaining well below its target. Despite a rise in R&D expenditure between 2008 and 2018³³, Bulgaria would need to double its expenditure in the coming years to reach its goal of 1.5% of GDP.
- ➔ Bulgaria reduced its ESD GHG emissions between 2008 and 2018, staying within its national target. Similarly, Romania had reduced by 2017 its GHG emissions in ESD sectors by 1.7% compared with the ESD base year levels, remaining well within its 2020 target.
- ➔ In 2017, Romania exceeded its commitment to reaching a 24% share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption, but in the following year this rate fell below the target to 23.8%³⁴. With regards to the national target on primary energy consumption, Romania managed to remain well under below its national target on primary energy consumption, while Bulgaria surpassed its target between 2008 and 2018 (at an average yearly of 18.2%).
- ➔ With regards to education targets, Romania raised its tertiary education attainment rate by 8.6% between 2008 and 2018 but remained 2.1% below its respective target. In contrast, its share of early leavers from education and training increased to 16.4% in the same period, widening the distance to the national target to 5.1%. Although Bulgaria has moved towards its national targets on early school leavers and tertiary education since 2008, in 2019 it was still 2.9 and 3.5 percentage points away from its respective Europe 2020 goals.
- ➔ Between 2008 and 2018, Bulgaria reduced the number of people at risk of poverty after social transfers — used as a national target in the area of poverty reduction — but still needed to take 179 000 people out of being at risk of monetary poverty to reach its national 2020 target. Romania significantly reduced the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 3 million between 2008 and 2019 and had already met its national target in 2013.

The Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme has been designed based on an integrated approach to territorial development, considering the Partnership Agreements of the participating Member States and combining thematic and territorial dimensions.

In the case of Bulgaria's Partnership Agreement four strategic mutually reinforcing priorities for funding have been set:

- ✧ Education, employment, social inclusion, and healthcare for inclusive growth,
- ✧ Scientific research, innovation, and investment for smart growth,
- ✧ Connectivity and green economy for sustainable growth,

³³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/european-semester-your-country/bulgaria/europe-2020-targets-statistics-and-indicators-bulgaria_en.

³⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/european-semester-your-country/romania_en.



- ✧ Good governance and access to quality administrative services³⁵.

In the case of Romania's Partnership Agreement, the national Europe 2020 targets have been correlated with 5 development challenges, which addressed intoned through coherent and integrated action can help the country reach its nationally set targets. As such:

- ✧ in order to reach the employment target, Romania seeks to address its (I) competitiveness and local development challenge, (II) its people and society challenge and (IV) its administration and government challenge,
- ✧ in order to reach its R&D expenditure target, Romania seeks to address its (I) competitiveness and local development challenge, (II) its people and society challenge, (III) its infrastructure challenge, and its (V) administration and government challenge,
- ✧ in order to reach the its greenhouse gas emissions target as well as the targets for the share of renewable energy and primary energy consumption, Romania focuses on addressing its (I) competitiveness and local development challenge, (III) infrastructure challenge, (IV) resources challenge, and (V) administration and government challenge.
- ✧ in order to reach its targets on early leavers from education and training, on tertiary educational attainment and on poverty and social exclusion, action needs to be focused on addressing (II) the people and society challenge, (III) the infrastructure challenge and, (V) administration and government challenge.

The RO-BG CBC Programme was designed to contribute in a complementary way to the Europe 2020 Strategy targets and to support through an integrated approach:

- ✧ smart growth through priority axes 1, 4 and 5,
- ✧ sustainable growth through priority axes 1, 2, 3 and 5,
- ✧ and inclusive growth through priority axes 4 and 5.

The Programme strategy is thus to:

- Foster (based on Priority axis 1) mobility by supporting the enhancement of TEN-T connections, the improvement of navigation on the Danube and enhancement of cross-border connections (supporting the "Resource Efficient Europe" flagship initiative³⁶),

³⁵ Partnership Agreement of the Republic of Bulgaria outlining the support from the European Structural and Investment Funds for the 2014-2020 period, p. 59.

³⁶ The flagship initiative is part of the Europe 2020 Strategy, supporting the shift towards sustainable growth via a resource-efficient, low-carbon economy. For further details with regards to the flagship as well as to the interlinks between sectors, resources and EU policy initiatives in order to heighten resource efficiency, please see: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52011DC0571&from=EN>.



- Support (based on Priority Axis 2) the development of sustainable local tourism by sustaining the continuity of habitats and ecosystems across and along the Danube River (supporting the "Resource efficient Europe" and "An agenda for new skills and jobs"³⁷ flagship initiatives),
- Support (based on Priority Axis 3) the consolidation of risk prevention and management capacity in the cross-border area - susceptible to climate change and natural disasters (contributing to the EU Strategy on adaptation to climate change),
- Facilitate (based on Priority Axis 4) training, inclusion and employment among all age groups and develop networks between cross-border SMEs (contributing to flagship initiatives such as "European platform against poverty"³⁸, "Youth on the move"³⁹ and "An agenda for new skills and jobs"),
- Foster (based on Priority Axis 5) the development of a more strategic cooperative approach in order to compensate for the lack of critical mass that characterises many public and private activities within the region.

Based on the most recent monitoring data, by the end of 2019, the Programme has:

- ✓ Contributed to the reconstruction and upgrading of 30.61 km of roads in the area (representing 25.50% out of the set target for 2023);
- ✓ Supported the development of 2 joint mechanisms to facilitate the connection of secondary/tertiary nodes to TEN-T infrastructure (representing 6.6% out of the set target for 2023)⁴⁰,

³⁷ The flagship initiative is part of the Europe 2020 Strategy, setting out 13 key actions with accompanying and preparatory measures in order to support the development of better functioning labour markets, to support the consolidation of a more skilled workforce, to secure the context for better job quality and working conditions and to develop stronger policies to promote job creation and demand for labour. For more details on the flagship, please see: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:0682:FIN:en:PDF>.

³⁸ The flagship initiative is part of the Europe 2020 Strategy, designed to ensure that social inclusion emerges alongside economic growth - fostering a high-employment economy delivering both social and territorial cohesion throughout Europe. For more details on the platform and its results, please see here: <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/europe2020/MonitoringFlagships/Documents/Final%20report%20poverty.pdf>.

³⁹ The flagship initiative is part of the Europe 2020 Strategy, being designed to respond to the challenges young people face and to help them succeed in the knowledge economy. For more details, please see: https://europa.eu/youthonthemove/docs/communication/youth-on-the-move_EN.pdf.

⁴⁰ The value of this indicator is lower than what was reported in the AIR for 2018, due to issues regarding the sustainability of the results related to project ROBG-1, namely with regards to the functionality of the mechanism



- ✓ Supported the development of one document for the improvement of safety of the navigation on the Danube and Black Sea (representing 20% out of the set target for 2023),
- ✓ Contributed to the increase in the expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attraction in the area⁴¹
- ✓ Contributed to the development of 34 integrated tourism products/services (representing 34% out of the 2023 target),
- ✓ Contributed to the development of 16 common documents for valorising the cultural and natural heritage of the area through its restoration and promotion of sustainable economic uses (representing 32% out of the 2023 target),
- ✓ Supported for 27.058,50 ha of local habitats to attain a better conservation status (surpassing the target for 2023 by 35%),
- ✓ Contributed to 304.370 people benefitting from actions of risk management in the cross-border area (representing 12.1% out of the 2023 target),
- ✓ Supported the development of 7 joint partnerships in the field of joint early warning and emergency response (representing 14% out of the 2023 target),
- ✓ Supported 162 initiatives that activate workforce mobility in the cross-border area (exceeding the 2023 target by 224%),
- ✓ Supported the participation of 18.474 people in joint local employment initiatives and joint trainings (surpassing the 2023 target by 84%),
- ✓ Supported participation of 9.096 people in joint educational and training schemes to support youth employment, educational opportunities and higher and vocational education (surpassing the 2023 target by 354.8%),
- ✓ Contributed to the development of 62 cross-border mechanisms to enhance cooperation capacity (representing 62% of the 2023 target).

Based on the monitoring data, and considering the logical connections between the Programme's objectives and priorities and the Europe 2020 headline targets, we would argue the following:

- ➔ The most substantial contribution of the Programme to the Europe 2020 Strategy targets is focused on inclusive growth, all the relevant output indicators of the Programme having their subsequent 2023 targets surpassed, based on the projects funded up until 2019.
- ➔ The Programme's contribution to smart and sustainable growth needs to be further explored based on in-depth research of the funded projects, however based on the monitoring data it seems that it is more limited in comparison to its contribution towards more inclusive growth.

developed within the project. Corrective measures were implemented, and the results are pending validation, with checks scheduled to be performed in 2020.

⁴¹ Although the measurement unit for this indicator is visits/year, the projects report cumulative values of new visits, which the Programme structures divided in no. of visits per years spent in implementation. Based on this methodology, the value of the indicator is as follows: 2017 – 7,600 visits; 2018 – 42,118 visits and 2019 – 8,606 visits.



4. General Conclusions

The present evaluation report has analysed the impact of the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme in the cross-border area on each specific objective. The main conclusions are presented below:

Conclusions on Transport and Navigability:

The collected evidence consistently points out to a significant contribution of the Programme to transport infrastructure in the area – which is likely to materialise in the next years. On the other hand, there is room for improvement concerning the synergies between the types of projects and the boosting of modal shifts. There is scope for improvement as far as navigation safety is concerned. Programme's contribution is yet to be fully materialised. However, some progress has been made even though it is difficult to attribute it to the Programme itself.

Conclusions on Heritage and Environment:

The Programme contributions to the progress in using sustainably the natural and cultural heritage and in improving the tourism in the cross-border area is high. The key factor that has facilitated the contribution of the Programme to this progress was the quality of the partnerships created inside the projects. Due to the regional importance of the projects, which targeted the cross border natural area, the cross-border added value was higher and generated the premises for regional development in areas where national policies are not focused on.

Conclusions on Risk Management:

The Programme has contributed significantly towards improving joint risk management in the cross-border area. A net impact of the contribution of the Programme's interventions is unfeasible to be measured at the moment.

Conclusions on Employment:

Overall, the implementation of the Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme had positive effects on employment in the eligible region, although difficult to measure quantitatively as a result, and especially in terms of impact. The Programme addresses the issue of employment as a complementary objective, rather residual than one of direct effect, although one of the important indirect effects of the funding.

Conclusions on Institutional Capacity:



The initiatives of the Programme showed to be effective in creating synergies, facilitating the dialogue and creating common development opportunities for stakeholders and actors from a wide range of sectors that would have hardly had space for discussion, improvement and exchange of ideas without the Programme.

Conclusions on Regional Development:

All the priority axes have recorded significant improvements and demonstrated how all the areas of intervention are connected to each other and are capable of creating positive spill over effects in other domains.

Conclusions on Sustainability:

The Programme's outputs and results are likely to be sustainable in the long run. Thus – if the overall same approach would be implemented also in the next programming period – no major issues on sustainability should arise. However, concerns remain over financial corrections and the allocation of funds.