



# Implementation evaluation of Interreg - IPA CBC Programmes 2014-2020, managed by the Republic of Bulgaria

*Ref.: Interreg-IPA CBC-TA-2018-2*

## REVISED FINAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Interreg – IPA Bulgaria - Serbia IPA Cross-border Programme 2014-2020*

Contracting Authority: Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, Bulgaria

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## Executive Summary

This is an implementation evaluation of Interreg – IPA CBC Bulgaria – Serbia Programme 2014 – 2020. The evaluation was carried out by Ecorys in the period August 2018 – March 2019. The cut-off date of the evaluation is end-December 2018.

The Interreg – IPA CBC Bulgaria – Serbia Programme 2014 – 2020 (the Programme) is implemented under the European Union (EU) Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II), which is established by the Council Regulation (EC) No 1085/2006 and implemented according to Commission Regulation (EC) No 718/2007. The overall objective of the Programme is to stimulate the balanced and sustainable development of the Bulgaria-Serbia border region integrated in the European space – achieved through smart economic growth, environmental change adaptation and learning culture enhancement. The Programme has three thematic priorities: 1) Encouraging tourism and cultural and natural heritage; 2) Investing in youth, education and skills; 3) Protecting the environment, promoting climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management.

The Programme is structured along three main priority axes – Sustainable tourism (Priority axis 1), Youths (Priority axis 2) and Environment (Priority axis 3), with a fourth Priority axis dedicated to the Programme’s management (Technical assistance). The total budget of the Programme for the period 2014-2020 is EUR 34.10 m, with Union support amounting to EUR 28.99 m.

The Programme is managed under the shared management mode. The Managing Authority (MA) for the Programme is the Bulgarian Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, having as counterpart the Government of the Republic of Serbia – Serbian European Integration Office, the National Authority (NA). Joint secretariat (JS) is established with main office in Sofia and a branch office in Niš.

The overall objective of the evaluation is to assess the current programme progress and to provide recommendations for further improvement of the overall management and implementation of the Programme, which could contribute towards successful achievement of its objectives, results and outputs. The evaluation focused on four main topics: evaluation of effectiveness and efficiency of the Programme management system; evaluation of effectiveness and efficiency of the Programme; evaluation of relevance, consistency and complementarity of the objectives of the Programme; and evaluation of effectiveness and efficiency of the Communication strategy of the Programme.

The main sources of information of the evaluation included desk research and primary data collection. The desk research included review of European and national strategic documents; Programme management documents; project documents; and monitoring databases. Primary data was collected through various qualitative and quantitative methods, including in-depth interviews, on-the-spot visits to a sample of projects, and a focus group.

### **Effectiveness and efficiency of the programme management system**

The approach used for project generation is to a great extent oriented towards the Programme objectives, results and outputs, which need be achieved. The application package under the First Call for Proposals was well elaborated, and the Guidelines for Applicants (GA) were fairly exhaustive in content. Full coherence with Programme objectives was ensured through listed eligible activities, eligible applicants, eligible expenditures, and the cooperation criteria that project partners need to comply with. The GA under the Second call addressed some minor deficiencies identified under the First call – the assessment and complaint procedures were streamlined and more details were provided about the measurement of the output indicators. The selection criteria under the Second call were adapted, so that projects that contribute significantly to achievement of the target values of the output indicators were given priority.



The reporting and monitoring processes are structured in such a way as to ensure timely and realistic follow-up of Programme achievements. A smooth reporting process is underpinned by the detailed structure of progress reports and the relatively short deadlines for submitting them. In this way, the JS has high capability of capturing at an early stage various issues concerning achievement of planned project results. The various supportive measures offered to beneficiaries regarding project implementation have been adequate, timely and complementary. The content of all Programme manuals, guideline documents, and training materials reflect to a significant extent the most frequently asked questions and issues raised by beneficiaries. In addition, interviewed beneficiaries expressed very high satisfaction with the direct, ad-hoc support and assistance provided by the JS at different stages of project implementation.

### **Effectiveness and efficiency of the Programme**

The Programme has a well elaborated indicator system, which allows provision of information for the achievement of results and outputs. Most indicators are measurable and time bound, with achievable target values for year 2023. Identified potential for improvement of the indicator system concerns mainly consistency of measurement units used, clear formulation, and simplification of definitions.

The Programme's progress toward achievement of the targets of the output indicators is uneven, based on data as of end-2018. Output indicators (OIs) under PA1 are with a generally good achievement rate, with the exception of SO 1.3 “People-to-people networking”, where no projects contribute to the achievement of OIs. The level of achievement of targets under PA2 is also not balanced, as OIs related to “Skills & Entrepreneurship” are overachieved, while the one under SO 2.2 is lagging behind. Similarly, OIs under SO 3.1 “Joint risk management” progress steadily, while those under SO 3.2 “Nature protection” are lagging behind. Overall, the OIs with weakest achievement rate are those related to soft measures projects. Result indicators under all three axes seem to be progressing at a good pace.

The changed mechanism for selection of project proposals under the Second Call has significant positive impact on the projected achievement of relevant Programme targets. Data shows that all 23 OIs will reach their target values, if the projects proposed for financing under the Second Call are contracted and implemented as planned.

With regard to used resources, approximately 60% of the total funding available for the first three PAs was contracted under the First Call. Most of these funds were directed to PA 1 and PA 3 projects. The financial implementation of the Programme is progressing at a very good pace, as over 52% of total contracted funds are verified as of the end of 2018.

Identified possibilities for improvement for the remaining implementation period relate to reallocation of funds from PA 1 and PA 2 to PA 3. Overall results of the Second Call for Proposals show that current resources and their distribution across the three priority axes do not allow the Programme to reach all of its OIs targets. A transfer of funds from PA 1 and PA 2 to PA 3, combined with generated savings from financial resources allocated under the First Call, and expected savings after completion of the pre-contracting procedures under the Second Call would be the most appropriate solution.

With regard to the next programming period, there is identified potential for improvement of the indicator system. Main recommendations relate to the elaboration of methodological guidelines for the measurement and calculation of output indicators, the simplification of definitions, consistency in measurement units used, and fine-tuning of the measurement methodology for result indicators. In addition, a mixed approach to project generation, which combines strategic projects and grants schemes in the next programming period is suggested. Such an approach would ensure a closer link between Programme results and national priorities in the regional development sector, while at the same time preserving the people-to-people approach, one of the strongest and most sustainable impacts of the Programme over the years.



## **Relevance, consistency and complementarity of the objectives of the Programme**

Although the socio-economic situation on both sides of the border has improved since the start of the Programme implementation, the development of the BG-RS cross-border region is still lagging behind other parts of the two countries, and the core challenges remain the same. Hence, the needs identified through the SWOT and Situation Analysis, as stated in the Ex-ante evaluation of the Programme, are still relevant to the current socio-economic and environmental conditions in the area.

The horizontal principles, as well as examples of specific actions which support them, are duly described in Programme documents. The principles of sustainable development and equal opportunities and non-discrimination are mirrored by a number of output and result indicators. During the stages of application and selection of projects, coherence with horizontal principles is ensured through their integration in the evaluation grid. During the implementation stage, the principles are adhered to and duly reported at both project and programme level.

There is a high level of coherence between the goals of the Programme and the goals set in strategic documents at European, macro-regional, national and regional level. The activities carried out during the implementation of the Programme have significant contribution towards the achievement of the priorities of relevant strategic documents. Most notably, there is strong synergy between the Programme and European Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), as implemented activities directly complement the actions envisaged in the EUSDR Action Plan.

## **Effectiveness and efficiency of the Communication strategy**

There is a high level of coherence between the envisaged communication activities and the objectives set in the Communication strategy of the Programme. The achievement of each general and specific objective is ensured by several communication measures. Communication activities carried out so far contribute to the achievement of objectives, which is evident from the indicator analysis – all indicators have reached their target values, and more than half are significantly overachieved.

Overall, implemented communication activities were adequately tailored to different target groups. Potential beneficiaries were successfully reached by the info days and partner search forums. With regard to direct beneficiaries, the most effective communication activities were the training workshops. The general public was successfully reached by publications on the Programme website, the websites of the MA and NA, and on social media. Last but not least, communication activities were also specifically tailored to the target audience in the two newly added districts in the cross-border area: Vratsa in Bulgaria and Toplica in Serbia.

The combination of online communication tools and mainstream media was very successful in terms of increasing awareness of the Programme. The official Programme website was especially effective, as it was the most popular source of information about the Programme, its objectives, financed domains, and eligibility conditions. Info days were extremely effective, which is evident from the high attendance rates, the positive feedback from participants, and the record number of submitted project proposals under the First Call. The social media tools also appear to be quite popular among the target groups of the Programme.

Overall, the methods envisaged for dissemination and capitalization of projects' and Programme results, are very adequate and effective. A very good method, which should be applied for the rest of the implementation period of the Programme, is the presentation of best practices at appropriate events such as European Cooperation Day celebrations, exhibitions, and fairs.