



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

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REVISED FINAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interreg – IPA Bulgaria - Turkey 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 – Turkey 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 – Turkey 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 strengthening the Bulgaria - Turkey cross border cooperation capacity in the field of nature protection and sustainable tourism, leading to enhancement of European territorial cohesion. The Programme covers two thematic priorities according to Regulation (EU) No 231/2014 (the IPA II regulation), namely: 1) Protecting the environment, promoting climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management and 2) Encouraging tourism and cultural and natural heritage.

The Programme is structured along three main priority axes – Environment (Priority axis 1), Sustainable (Priority axis 2) and Technical assistance (Priority axis 3). The total budget of the Programme for the period 2014-2020 is EUR 29 642 896,00, with Union support amounting to EUR 25 196 460.

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 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Directorate for EU Affairs, Department for Union Programmes and Cross Border Cooperation, acting as National Authority (NA). Joint secretariat (JS) is established with main office in Haskovo and a branch office in Edirne.

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 (GfA) 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 GfA 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 and result indicators is quite good, based on data as of end-2018. The majority of the OIs under PA1 have good achievement progress and all of them except two are expected to be overachieved with the completion of the projects from the First Call for proposal. The two indicators which are lagging behind will be achieved with projects proposed for financing under the Second call for proposals.

The OIs in the PA 2 also have satisfactory rates of achievement. Six of the OIs have overachieved their values with the projects from the First call for proposals and two of them reached achievement rate of over 60%. Only 4 of the OIs (namely the ones in SO 1.2 2.1. Increasing the touristic attractiveness of the cross-border area through better utilisation of natural, cultural and historical heritage and related infrastructure) have low achieved values. But their target values will be achieved with the projects proposed for financing under the Second call for proposals.

Result indicators under both priority axis are progressing at a good pace. Two of the result indicators are already fully achieved and the other three indicators achieved over 85% of the envisaged target values.

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 21 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 38% of the total funding available for the two PAs was contracted under the First Call. The financial implementation of the Programme is progressing at a very good pace. 29 projects are completed until the end of 2018 and 12 investment projects are in their final stages of implementation and is expected to be finalised in the beginning of 2019 in the period January – April 2019. The total verified amount for the projects is EUR 4 794 793,63 (48% from the contracted budget) until the end of 2018. Having in mind that all investment projects are still under implementation and final payments for some soft projects finalised at the end of 2018 are still pending, the absorption rate is satisfactory.

Identified possibilities for improvement for the remaining implementation period relate to reallocation of funds from PA 1 to PA 2. This reallocation combined with generated savings from financial resources



allocated under the First Call, would be the most appropriate solution for achievement of full absorption of envisaged Programme resources.

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-TR 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 the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020, the Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy 2014 – 2020 for Bulgaria, the Indicative Strategy Paper for Turkey and the Trakya Region Development Plan 2014 – 2023.

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 information days and the training workshops. The most used communication channel was the Programme website. The general public was successfully reached by publications on the Programme website, the websites of the MA and NA, and on social media.

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.