Evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of the

COOPERATION PROGRAMME INTERREG V-A SLOVENIA – HUNGARY 2014-2020

Final report

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Abbreviations

AA	Audit Authority
AB	Audit Body
AF	Application Form
CA	Certifying Authority
CB	Cross-border
CBC	Cross-border Cooperation
CP	Cooperation Programme
EGTC	European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation
eMS	electronic Monitoring System
EQ	Evaluation Questions
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ETS	European Territorial Cooperation
EU	European Union
FLC	First Level Control
GODC	Government office of the Republic of Slovenia for Development and European Cohesion policy
HIT	Harmonised Implementation Tools
HU	Hungary
HU NA	Hungarian National Authority
IP	Investment priority
JS	Joint Secretariat
LP	Lead Partner
MA	Managing Authority
MC	Monitoring Committee
MS	Member States
NA	National Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OP	Operational Programme
PA	Priority Axis
PP	Project Partner
SCO	Simplified Cost Options
SI	Slovenia
SI NA	Slovenian National Authority
SO	Specific Objective
TA	Technical Assistance
TO	Thematic Objective
VAT	Value Added Tax

Executive summary in English language

This document presents the findings of the evaluation of the Cooperation Programme Interreg V-A Slovenia-Hungary 2014-2020.

The overall objective of the evaluation was to evaluate the functioning of programme structures and the implementation of the programme together with the corresponding projects in order to identify potential improvements, carry them out and prepare guidelines and proposals for the programming period 2021-2027.

The purpose of the evaluation was to identify and evaluate the effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of the programme itself as well as of the projects implemented under the programme. In addition, the evaluation also investigated the performance of the programme structures and their functioning during the implementation of the programme processes, and analysed the reporting procedures, the composition and effectiveness of the partnerships and their project management to draw evaluation conclusions and elaborate the relevant recommendations.

Nine evaluation questions, listed in the introductory chapter of the report were formulated for the purpose of the evaluation. In order to obtain answers to these evaluation questions, we conducted online surveys and interviews with the beneficiaries (JS/Info Points, MA), reviewed our own data (JS) and data stored in the eMS system, and drew from the website and social media statistics.

The joint implementation structure includes programme authorities (Managing Authority - MA, Certifying Authority - CA, Audit Authority - AA and Audit Body - AB) and other programme structures designated to manage and control the programme for the period 2014-2020, namely the Monitoring Committee (MC), the Joint Secretariat (JS), National Authorities (NA) and First-level Control bodies (FLC). All programme structures involved in the implementation of the open call have been effectively set up and operate in a professional manner. Most of the MA, JS, Info Points and NA staff were already employed in the previous programming period and continue to work on the programme in the current programming period. This means that the staff possess a lot of knowledge and experience, which makes the level of institutional memory high. The competence and experience of the personnel involved in the programme implementation and management seem sound. However, in order to secure effective implementation of the communication activities, it is recommended that one person is assigned to perform this specific task (activity manager). The JS (together with Info Points) functions efficiently and effectively, with the staff consisting of both Slovenian and Hungarian members. The staff possess solid knowledge of the relevant languages and of the background of the regions, which ensures that both countries are well represented in the programme implementation and management. The work of the Monitoring Committee (MC) was not analysed. However, the MC meetings are organised regularly (minimum once per year) and all open issues have been resolved so far. Outstanding issues are also solved beyond the scope of MC meetings, namely via written procedures. Both countries regularly organise preparatory meetings at national level, which is considered a good practice. Programme bodies have established Bilateral Working Group which is responsible for regular coordination and tackling of open issues. In this respect, cooperation between the bodies seems to be very effective. In Slovenia as well as in Hungary, FLC is centralised and united for different programmes whose reporting periods overlap. This causes occasional work overload, which in turn results in bottlenecks emerging at the first step of the reporting process. The delays affect the work of the JS which reviews and approves the reports at the project level, after the FLC has done its job. The quality of cooperation among programme partners is perceived as solid. Their communication is good and they work towards fast exchange of information, making sure potential problems are solved quickly and in a constructive manner.

The Cooperation Programme Interreg V–A SI-HU operates on the basis of an open call system. By the end of April 2019, five submission deadlines were completed, while the 6th, probably the last one, is still work in progress. At the time of data collection, 20 projects were approved (and ongoing), 12 of which

were approved under the first and 8 under the second priority axis. The success rate under the deadlines, i.e. the number of approved projects, fluctuated for various reasons. The procedures related to the processing of the first five rounds of submitted applications were carried out in a fairly efficient and effective manner. The overall effects of procedures on the programme level are still rather early to assess.

The support to potential applicants is easily available and the users assess the overall quality of the support provided as very good. However, experience in the processing of the five rounds of applications has revealed further need for support.

Introduced changes to the programme procedures and processes compared to the 2007-2013 period have, to some extent, made the programme for the applicants less user-friendly; in particular, due to a stricter AB check procedure and greater complexity of the application forms coupled with deficiencies in the performance of the eMS. Certain criteria for the assessment of the quality of projects have been too general. The efficiency of the project assessment and selection procedure in terms of the time needed for the MC to make its decision is relatively good, although there are some potential negative effects on the increase of the overall workload in each of the following deadlines due to repeating assessment procedures for the same project.

Overall, programme procedures and processes are running efficiently and effectively. Yet according to the experience with the first administrative and eligibility check of the applications many mistakes in the applications led to a rejection of what could have been a good project, while applicants found it particularly hard to submit a good project application in the framework of the 2nd Priority axis (PA2). Programme authorities should consider changing the way applications are assessed to avoid rejections of applications on the ground of administrative mistakes. On the other hand, closer cooperation between the applicants and the JS in the project generation phase would be established. This could reduce the amount of time needed for assessment. On average, the contracts for approved projects were signed within 17 weeks after receiving the MC decision on project approval.

All key programme and project implementation procedures are supported by the electronic monitoring system (eMS) which is used by all programme bodies, applicants and beneficiaries, albeit with different levels of accessibility. Due to the complexity of the system and the necessary interventions in daily work, a need to engage a person with knowledge in the information field (IT officer) has been demonstrated.

Use of eMS and fewer accompanying documents mostly add to simplifying matters and reducing the overall administrative burden for the beneficiaries. The JS/Info Points promote the use of simplified cost options at the workshops they carry out with the aim of simplifying cost options in order to reduce the amount of needed paperwork and to speed up the reporting, verification and control procedures. The use of simplified cost options is mandatory for the administrative costs category. It is offered by the programme as the only possible way of claiming this type expenditure and thus contributes to simplification for both the beneficiaries and FLC controllers. Compared to the previous programing period, the AB check was simplified as well, yet applicants found it rigorous nevertheless and encountered several difficulties passing it in the first deadlines.

In terms of legal status, the majority of the Lead Partners (LP) (as well as project partners) are regional or local public authorities (8 out of 20), followed by non-profit organisation, NGOs (7) and other. There are three SMEs participating as partners in the programme. In terms of geographical distribution of the beneficiaries in Slovenia, 27 beneficiaries are located in the Pomurska region and only 8 in the Podravska region, while the distribution of Hungarian beneficiaries is more even across the counties Vas and Zala with 19 and 21 partners, respectively. Half of the running projects have a Lead Partner located in Slovenia and the other half in Hungary.

Most of the approved projects are halfway through the implementation phase (four will finish in end of July 2019, whereas for one approved project the subsidy contract was signed in June). Therefore, the

likely progress towards the targets of specific objectives is assessed on the basis of the projects' contribution to the targets achieved up to the cut-off date.

With as many as 92.42% of the programme ERDF funds committed to the approved projects, these are likely to contribute effectively towards the achievement of the output indicator targets. The progress is in particular promising under PA1. The progress towards the achievement of the specific objectives of PA2 has been moderate in terms of the number of approved projects so far. The programme is characterised by a relatively long programming period and subsequent late start of implementation. The programme has achieved all set milestones (2018) of the performance framework. In terms of geographical coverage, the programme achievements are likely to be more visible in the Pomurska region and Vas and Zala counties.

The implementation of the Communication Strategy is making steady progress towards the set objectives in accordance with the indicator target values. The programme authorities effectively established communication tools for the purpose of both internal and external communication. Access to the programme information and funding opportunities and results of the assessment and selection procedures are made available to the public. In comparison to (potential) beneficiaries and programme partners, the general public is most difficult to reach.

The participation of target groups in the programme shows that, according to the programme partners, the target audiences are aware of the existence of CP SI–HU. They perceive it as an attractive, but administratively quite demanding source of financing of their cooperation initiatives.

Communication spending is higher than planned at the moment. Higher expenditures incurred on communication activities in the first few years, which are in line with the plan in the eMS, can be attributed to the needs related to the programme start phase. Unfortunately, lack of the funds earmarked for the implementation of communication activities hinders the use of communication tools to a wider extent.

Executive summary in Slovene language

Dokument predstavlja vrednotenje Programa sodelovanja Interreg V–A Slovenija-Madžarska 2014-2020.

Splošni cilj vrednotenja je bil oceniti delovanje programskih struktur in izvajanje programa in projektov z namenom ugotoviti možnosti izboljšav, jih realizirati in pripraviti smernice in predloge za naslednje programsko obdobje 2021-2027.

Namen je bil ugotoviti in ovrednotiti učinkovitost, uspešnost in ustreznost samega programa kot tudi projektov, ki so v izvedbi v okviru programa. Ob tem je bila vrednotena uspešnost programskih struktur in njihovo delovanje ob izvajanju programskih procesov, analizirani in ocenjeni postopki poročanja, sestava in učinkovitost sklenjenih partnerstev in njihovo upravljanje projektov.

Za namen vrednotenja smo oblikovali devet evalvacijskih vprašanj, ki so navedena v uvodnem, prvem poglavju poročila. Da smo na njih odgovorili, smo izvedli spletne ankete z upravičenci in intervjuje (Info točke, SS, OU), pregledali lastne podatke (JS) in podatke, ki so hranjeni v sistemu eMS, ter v statistikah spletne strani in socialnega medija.

Skupna izvedba temelji na programskih telesih (organ upravljanja, organ za potrjevanje, revizijski organ in revizijsko telo) in drugih programskih strukturah, imenovanih za upravljanje in nadzor programa za obdobje 2014–2020, in sicer Nadzorni odbor, Skupni sekretariat z Info točkama, nacionalni organi in nadzorni organi prve stopnje (FLC). Vse programske strukture, povezane z izvajanjem javnega razpisa, so bile učinkovito vzpostavljene in delujejo strokovno. Zaposleni so bili v veliki meri vključeni že v prejšnjem programskem obdobju ter v fazi programiranja. Imajo veliko znanja in izkušenj, zato je raven institucionalnega spomina visoka. Usposobljenost in izkušnje zaposlenih pripomorejo k uspešnemu vodenju in izvajanju programa. Ker trenutno vodja SS in zaposlena na Info točkah poleg številnih drugih nalog upravljata tudi komunikacijske dejavnosti, bi za še učinkovitejše izvajanje le-teh bilo pomembno imeti eno dodatno osebo (activity manager oz. oseba odgovorna za aktivnosti vezane na komunikacijo). SS in Info točke sestavljajo člani SI in HU narodnosti. Delujejo učinkovito in uspešno, raznolikost jezikovnega znanja in porekla pa omogoča, da sta obe državi dobro zastopani. Delo odbora za spremljanje ni bilo analizirano. Njihove seje so redno organizirane in izvajane (najmanj eno na leto) in odprta vprašanja so bila doslej vedno rešena. Morebitne odprte zadeve pa rešuje odbor za spremljanje tudi izven sestankov s pisnimi postopki (written procedure). Obe državi redno organizirata pripravljalna srečanja na nacionalni ravni, kar velja za dobro prakso. Programska telesa so ustanovila dvostransko delovno skupino, v kateri poteka redno usklajevanje in so obravnavana odprta vprašanja. V tem pogledu je sodelovanje med organi zelo učinkovito. V Sloveniji in na Madžarskem je prvostopenjska kontrola centralizirana za več različnih programov, katerim se obdobja poročanja prekrivajo. To je lahko razlog za veliko preobremenitev zaposlenih z delom, ki lahko povzroči ozka grla na prvem koraku postopka poročanja. Posledica tega so zamude, ki vplivajo tudi na delo skupnega sekretariata, ki pregleda in potrdi poročila na ravni projekta za njimi. Kakovost sodelovanja med programskimi partnerji je dobra; komunikacija tekoče poteka v smeri hitre izmenjave informacij, kar omogoča hitro in konstruktivno reševanje morebitnih težav.

Program sodelovanja Interreg V–A SI-HU izvaja odprti razpisa oddajo projektnih vlog. Do konca meseca aprila 2019 je bilo izvedenih 5 rokov za oddajo, 6., predvidoma zadnji, je v izvajanju. V času zbiranja oz. pridobivanja podatkov za vrednotenje je bilo odobrenih (in v teku) 20 projektov, od tega 12 v okviru prve in 8 v okviru druge prioritetne osi. Uspešnost izvedenih rokov oz. število odobrenih projektov je iz različnih razlogov nihala med roki. Postopki obdelave oddanih vlog v prvih petih krogih so bili izvedeni učinkovito in uspešno. Za oceno učinkov na programski ravni je še vedno zgodaj.

Podpora potencialnim prijaviteljem je dobro dostopna, njeni uporabniki pa splošno kakovost podpore ocenjujejo kot zelo dobro. Izkušnje iz prvih petih postopkov za oddajo vlog kažejo na nadaljnje potrebe po podpori.

Uvedene spremembe programskih postopkov in procesov v primerjavi z obdobjem 2007–2013 so v določeni meri zmanjšale prijaznost programa do prijaviteljev; zlasti zaradi strožjega postopka preverjanja administrativne ustreznosti in upravičenosti in kompleksnosti obrazcev za vloge, skupaj s pomanjkljivostmi pri delovanju eMS. Nekatera merila za oceno kakovosti projektov so zastavljena preveč splošno. Učinkovitost postopka ocenjevanja in izbire projektov glede na čas, potreben do odločitve odbora za spremljanje, je razmeroma dobra, čeprav ponovna ocenjevanja istih projektov na naslednjih rokih lahko negativno učinkujejo v smislu povečanja celotne delovne obremenitve.

Splošno programski postopki in procesi tečejo učinkovito in uspešno. Izkušnje med preverjanjem administrativne ustreznosti in upravičenosti projektnih vlog so pokazale, da je veliko število napak privedlo do zavrnitve sicer potencialno dobrih projektov in da so bile težave pri prijavi kvalitetnih projektov posebej v okviru 2. prednostne osi. Potrebno je razmisliti ali bi v izogib zavrnitvam projektom iz administrativnih razlogov bilo potrebno vpeljati drugačen način ocenjevanja. Po drugi strani bi se vzpostavilo tesnejše sodelovanje med prijavitelji in skupnim sekretariatom pri ustvarjanju projektov. To bi lahko pomenilo tudi krajši čas ocenjevanja. V povprečju so bile pogodbe o sofinanciranju podpisane v 17 tednih po tem, ko so prijavitelji prejeli obvestilo o odobritvi projekta s strani odbora za spremljanje.

Vsi ključni postopki izvajanja programa in projektov so podprti z elektronskim sistemom spremljanja (eMS). Uporabljajo ga vse programske strukture, prijavitelji in upravičenci, vendar z različnimi stopnjami dostopnosti. Zaradi kompleksnosti sistema in potrebnih intervencij ob vsakodnevnem delu je izkazana potreba po osebi z znanjem z informacijskega področja (IT officer).

Spremembe, ki so največ prispevale k administrativnim poenostavitvam, so uporaba eMS in manj obvezne spremne dokumentacije. SS in Info točke na svojih delavnicah predstavljajo in spodbujajo k uporabi poenostavljenih stroškovnih možnosti, z namenom zmanjšati količino potrebne dokumentacije in pospešitve postopkov poročanja, preverjanja in nadzora. Za kategorijo administrativnih stroškov je obvezna uporaba poenostavljenih stroškovnih možnosti. Program ga ponuja kot edini možni način uveljavljanja tovrstnih izdatkov in tako prispeva k poenostavitvi tako za upravičence kot za prvostopenjske kontrolorje. V primerjavi s predhodnim programskim obdobjem je tudi administrativno preverjanje poenostavljeno, vendar so prijavitelji mnenja, da je le-to prestrogo in vzrok težav pri uspešnosti prehoda projektne prijavnice iz administrativnega h kvalitetnemu ocenjevanju v prvih rokih.

Glede na pravni status je večina vodilnih partnerjev regionalni ali lokalni javni organ (8 od 20), sledijo neprofitne, nevladne organizacije (7) in drugi. Podobno razmerje je tudi pri projektnih partnerjih. V programu kot partnerji sodelujejo tri MSP. Primerjava porazdelitve upravičencev po regijah je pokazala, da je ta v Sloveniji v prid Pomurju, kjer je lociranih 27 upravičencev, medtem, ko jih je v Podravju le 8. Geografsko so Madžarski partnerji bolj enakomerno porazdeljeni med županiji Vas in Zala z 19 oz. 21 upravičenci. Polovica vodilnih partnerjev projektov v izvajanju je iz Slovenije in polovica iz Madžarske.

Večina odobrenih projektov je v srednji fazi izvajanja (4 so se končali julija 2019, za 1 odobreni projekt pa je bila pogodba o subvenciji podpisana junija). Zato je napoved napredka za doseganje zastavljenih specifičnih ciljev ocenjena le na podlagi do presečnega datuma doseženih prispevkov.

92,42 % programskih ESRR sredstev je že vezanih na odobrene projekte, ki bodo učinkovito prispevali k doseganju zastavljenih vrednosti programskih output indikatorjev. Napredek je še posebej obetaven v okviru PA1, medtem, ko je pri PA2 zmeren glede na število do zdaj odobrenih projektov. Za program je značilno razmeroma dolgo programsko obdobje in pozen začetek izvajanja. Program je v okviru uspešnosti dosegel vse zastavljene mejnike (konec 2018). Glede na geografsko pokritost bodo programski dosežki verjetno vidnejši v pomurski regiji ter v županijah Vas in Zala.

Doseganje ciljev komunikacijske strategije dobro napreduje. Program je učinkovito vzpostavil komunikacijska orodja za notranjo in zunanjo komunikacijo. Dostop do informacij o programu in možnostih financiranja ter rezultati ocenjevalnih in izbirnih postopkov so na voljo javnosti. V primerjavi s (potencialnimi) upravičenci in programskimi partnerji je širšo javnost najtežje doseči.

Udeležba ciljnih skupin v SI – HU programu sodelovanja potrjuje mnenje programskih partnerjev, da ciljne skupine poznajo program in ga spoznavajo kot privlačen, a administrativno precej zahteven vir financiranja njihovih pobud za sodelovanje.

Poraba sredstev za komunikacijske aktivnosti je trenutno višja od načrtovane. Višje izdatke kot so predvideni z načrtom v eMS v prvih letih lahko pripišemo potrebam začetne faze. Zaradi pomanjkanja sredstev namenjenih izvajanju komunikacijskih aktivnosti širša uporaba komunikacijskih orodij ni izvedljiva.

Executive summary in Hungarian language

A jelen dokumentum az Interreg V–A Szlovénia-Magyarország Együttműködési Program értékelését mutatja be.

Az értékelés átfogó célja az volt, hogy értékelje a program struktúráinak működését, valamint a program, illetve a projektek végrehajtását a lehetséges fejlesztési területek azonosítása és azok megvalósítása érdekében, a következő, 2021-2027 programozási időszakra vonatkozó iránymutatások és javaslatok elkészítése céljából.

Cél volt továbbá a program eredményességét, hatékonyságát és megfelelőségét, valamint a program keretében megvalósítás alatt álló projekteket azonosítani és kiértékelni. Emellett sor került a program struktúrák programfolyamatok végrehajtása során nyújtott teljesítményének és működésének értékelésére, a jelentési eljárások, a létrejött partnerségek összetételének és hatékonyságának, valamint projektmenedzsmentjének elemzésére és értékelésére.

Az értékelés céljából kilenc kérdést fogalmaztunk meg, amelyeket a jelentés bevezető, első fejezete sorol fel. A válaszadás a kedvezményezettek körében online felmérések végrehajtásával, továbbá interjúkkal (Info pontok, KT, IH) történt, továbbá áttekintettük saját adatainkat (KT) és az eMS-rendszerben tárolt adatokat, valamint a honlap és a közösségi média statisztikáit.

A közös végrehajtási struktúra a programhatóságokra (Irányító Hatóság – IH, Igazoló Hatóság – IgH, Audit Hatóság – AH és Audit Szervezet – AB), valamint a 2014–2020 közötti időszak programjának irányítására és ellenőrzésére kijelölt egyéb programstruktúrákra, név szerint a Monitoring Bizottságra (MB), a Közös Titkárságra (KT), a nemzeti hatóságokra (NH) és az első szintű ellenőrző szervezetekre (FLC) épül. A nyílt pályázati felhívás végrehajtásával kapcsolatos összes programstruktúra felállítására ténylegesen sor került, a szervezetek működése szakszerű. Az IH, a KT, az Info pontok és a NH-ok személyi állománya jelentős mértékben vett részt az előző programban és a jelenlegi programozási szakaszban. Így hatalmas tudásuk és releváns tapasztalataik vannak, az intézményi tudás magas szintű. A személyzet programvégrehajtási és -irányítási kompetenciái és tapasztalata megbízhatónak tűnik, azonban fontos lenne a kommunikációs tevékenységek hatékony végrehajtásához egy külön személy (activity manager). A KT (az Info pontokkal együtt) hatékonyan és eredményesen működik, az alkalmazottak között szlovén és magyar kollégák is vannak.

Tekintettel arra, hogy a kollégák szilárd nyelvtudással és régiójuk adekvát ismeretével bírnak, mindkét ország megfelelően van képviselve. A Monitoring Bizottság munkájának elemzésére nem került sor. Ugyanakkor ismeretes, hogy a MB rendszeresen (legalább egyszer évente) ülésezik, és a nyitott kérdéseket ezidáig mindig sikerült rendezni. Nyitott kérdések megoldására MB üléseken kívül is sor kerül, írásos eljárások keretében. Mindkét ország rendszeresen szervez előkészítő találkozókat nemzeti szinten, ami jó gyakorlatnak tekinthető. A programszervek létrehozták a Kétoldalú Munkacsoportot, ahol a szervezetek közötti rendszeres együttműködés zajlik, és nyitott kérdések megvitatására is sor kerül. E tekintetben a szervezetek közötti együttműködés nagyon hatékonynak tűnik. Az FLC Szlovéniában és Magyarországon is centralizált a különböző programok esetében, amelyek között átfedések tapasztalhatók a jelentési időszakok vonatkozásában. Ez tekinthető a nagy túlterhelés okának, ami viszont szűk keresztmetszetet jelenthet a jelentési folyamat első szakaszában. Ez késéseket eredményez, ami a KT munkáját is befolyásolja, ami az első szintű ellenőrzést követően kezdődik a projektszintű jelentések áttekintésével és jóváhagyásával. A programpartnerek együttműködésének minősége szilárdnak tekinthető. A kommunikáció köztük jó, gyors információcserére törekszenek, ezzel lehetővé téve az esetleges problémák gyors és konstruktív megoldását.

Az Interreg V–A SI-HU Együttműködési Program nyílt pályázati felhívást hajt végre. 2019. április végére öt benyújtási határidő befejeződött, a hatodik, talán az utolsó, folyamatai még zajlanak. Az adatgyűjtés időszakában 20 jóváhagyott projekt volt (amelyek még megvalósítás alatt állnak), amelyek közül 12-t az első, 8-at pedig a második prioritási tengely keretében hagytak jóvá. A határidők sikeressége vagy a

jóváhagyott projektek száma különféle okok miatt változatos volt. Az első öt pályázatbenyújtási körben benyújtott pályázatok feldolgozására vonatkozó eljárás meglehetősen hatékony és eredményes volt. Az eljárások programszintű általános hatásait még korai felmérni.

A potenciális pályázóknak nyújtott támogatás elérhetősége jó, és a nyújtott támogatás minőségét az azt igénybe vevők általánosságban nagyon jónak értékelik. Az öt pályázati eljárás tapasztalatai azonban további igényeket tártak fel a támogatásra vonatkozóan.

Összehasonlítva a 2007-2013 közötti időszakkal, a program eljárásaiban és folyamataiban bevezetett változtatások valamelyest csökkentették a program pályázóbarát jellegét; különösen a szigorúbb formai és jogosultsági ellenőrzés (AB check), és a pályázati formanyomtatvány nagyobb komplexitása miatt, ami az eMS teljesítményében tapasztalt hiányosságokkal is párosult. A projektek minőségének értékelésére használt néhány kritérium megfogalmazása túlságosan általános. A projektértékelési és kiválasztási folyamat hatékonysága a MB határozatához szükséges idő tekintetében viszonylag jó, bár az újra beadott projektek esetében megismétlendő értékelési folyamat miatt az egymást követő beadási határidők vonatkozásában az általános munkaleterhelés növekedését illetően negatív hatással lehet.

A programban alkalmazott eljárások és folyamatok általánosságban hatékonyan és eredményesen működnek, viszont a tapasztalatok azt mutatják, hogy egyrészt a pályázatok formai és jogosultsági ellenőrzése során talált túlságosan sok hiba olyan projektek formai elutasításához vezetett, amelyek jó projektek lehettek volna, másrészt pedig azt, hogy jó pályázatot beadni, különösen a 2. Prioritási tengely keretében, nehéz feladatnak bizonyult a pályázók számára. Fontolóra kell venni, hogy szükséges-e eltérő értékelési módszert alkalmazni a pályázatok formai hibák miatti elutasításának elkerülésére. Másrészt szorosabb együttműködésnek kellene kialakulnia a pályázók és a KT között a projektfejlesztés során, ami az értékelés idejét is rövidebbé teheti. Átlagosan, a jóváhagyott projektek szerződéseinek aláírására a MB jóváhagyásáról szóló értesítés kézhezvételétől számított 17 héten belül sor került.

Az összes kulcsfontosságú program- és projektvégrehajtási eljárást elektronikus monitoring rendszer (eMS) támogatja. A rendszert – eltérő jogosultsági szintekkel – a programtestületek, minden egyes pályázó és kedvezményezett használja. A rendszer bonyolultsága és a napi munkához szükséges beavatkozások miatt szükség van olyan szakemberre, aki rendelkezik informatikai tudással (informatikus).

Az adminisztratív terhek egyszerűsítéséhez leginkább hozzájáruló változások az eMS használata és a kevesebb kísérő dokumentáció. A KT / Info pontok workshopokon népszerűsítik az egyszerűsített költségopciók alkalmazásának lehetőségét, hogy a költségelszámolások egyszerűbbé váljanak, és annak érdekében, hogy a szükséges papírmunka mennyisége csökkenjen, és a jelentési, hitelesítési és ellenőrzési eljárások felgyorsuljanak. Az egyszerűsített költségopció használata az adminisztratív költségkategória esetében kötelező. Ezt a program egyetlen lehetséges módszerként kínálja fel az ilyen típusú kiadások visszaigénylésére, és így hozzájárul az egyszerűsítéshez mind a kedvezményezettek, mind az FLC ellenőrök oldalán. A korábbi programozási időszakhoz képest az AB (formai-jogosultsági) ellenőrzés is egyszerűbb lett, de a pályázók mégis szigorúnak találták, és az első beadási határidők esetében számos nehézséggel küzdöttek meg, hogy túljussanak ezen a fázison.

Jogi státuszukat illetően, a vezető partnerek többsége (hasonlóan a projektpartnerekhez) regionális vagy helyi hatóság (20-ból 8), őket követik a nonprofit szervezetek, nem kormányzati szervezetek – NGO-k (7) és más, egyéb szervezetek. Három KKV vesz részt partnerként a programban. A szlovén kedvezményezettek megoszlásához viszonyítva, ahol 27 kedvezményezett képviseli Pomurje régiót, és csak 8 Podravje régiót, a magyar kedvezményezettek megoszlása sokkal egyenletesebb Vas és Zala megyék között, sorrendben 19, illetve 21 partnerrel. A futó projektek vezető partnerei fele-fele arányban vannak Szlovéniában és Magyarországon.

A jóváhagyott projektek többsége a végrehajtás középső szakaszában van (4 fejeződik be 2019. július végén, 1 jóváhagyott projekt esetében pedig a támogatási szerződést júniusban írták alá). Ezért a

specifikus célok elérésére irányuló valószínűsíthető előrehaladás értékelésére az egyes projekteknek a jelentés dátumáig elért hozzájárulása alapján kerül sor.

Tekintettel arra, hogy a program az ERFA-forrásainak 92,42%-át a jóváhagyott projektekre fordítja, az output indikátorok célértékeinek eléréséhez ezek valószínűleg hatékonyan járulnak hozzá. Az előrehaladás különösen a PA1 vonatkozásában ígéretes. A PA2 specifikus célkitűzéseinek elérése felé tett előrehaladás mérsékelt, tekintettel az eddig jóváhagyott projektek számára. A programot viszonylag hosszú programozási időszak, majd későn kezdődő végrehajtás jellemzi. A program a teljesítménykeretrendszer minden kitűzött mérföldkövét (2018) elérte. A földrajzi lefedettséget illetően a programeredmények jobban láthatók Pomurje régióban, illetve Vas és Zala megyében.

A kommunikációs stratégiában meghatározott célok elérése jól halad. A program hatékonyan alakította ki mind a belső, mind a külső kommunikációhoz alkalmazandó kommunikációs eszközök körét. A programmal kapcsolatos információkhoz, finanszírozási lehetőségekhez, valamint az értékelési és kiválasztási folyamatok hozzáférhetők a nyilvánosság számára. A (potenciális) kedvezményezettekkel és a programpartnerekkel összehasonlítva a nagyközönség elérése a legnehezebb.

A célcsoportok SI–HU Együttműködési Programban való részvétele igazolja a programpartnerek véleményét, hogy a célközönség ismeri a SI–HU Együttműködési Programot, amit vonzó, de adminisztrációs szempontból meglehetősen nagy igényeket támasztó forrásnak tekinthetnek együttműködési kezdeményezéseik finanszírozásához.

A kommunikációs kiadások jelenleg magasabbak a tervezettnél. A magasabb költségek, amelyek összhangban állnak az eMS-ben szereplő tervvel, a kommunikáció kezdeti szakaszában felmerülő igényeknek tulajdoníthatók. A kommunikációs tevékenységek végrehajtására szánt források hiánya sajnos nem teszi lehetővé a kommunikációs eszközök szélesebb körű használatát.

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose of evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was to collect and assess the relevant data and to evaluate the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the programme management and implementation (evaluation in terms of the performance of programme structures and processes, analysis of reporting procedures, reimbursement of costs and roles of partners). The performed evaluation also provides reflection on the performance of programme structures in different processes. The evaluation issue of efficiency refers to the use of financial or administrative resources in relation to the outputs and results achieved (the extent to which the resources/inputs (e.g. funds, expertise, time, administrative costs etc.) mobilised to produce the outputs and/or desired effects are used as efficiently as possible (with the lowest possible resources/inputs). The performed evaluation particularly focuses on the project application and selection procedure and implementation of Communication Strategy. The evaluation issue of effectiveness refers to the degree to which the set objectives and targets are achieved (the extent to which the outcomes generated by the activities correspond with the objectives, taking into account their relative importance). Since no projects were completed by the cut-off date (30 April 2019), the evaluation could only concentrate on the expected effects of the projects' achievements comparing them against the planned objectives and results.

Key evaluation questions

The evaluation was designed to answer the following set of key evaluation questions (EQ):

EQ1: How efficient and effective are the programme structures? (Measure: division of tasks, staff issues, scope of work)

EQ2: How effective and efficient are the programme procedures and processes? Are there any bottlenecks identified in the programme procedures and how can they be removed?

EQ3: In how far was simplification and harmonisation of procedures achieved?

EQ4: How user-friendly are the programme procedures and forms? Are there any improvements necessary in the programme procedures?

EQ5: How effective and efficient is the programme implementation (in terms of thematic and geographical coverage, distribution of projects regarding intervention codes, cost efficiency, sustainability of projects, direct effects of projects and their results, achievement of set indicators etc.), also in the context of programme 2021–2027?

EQ6: What are the characteristics of the partnerships (partners by type of institution, most and least involved partners in both countries, reasons for the absence of different types of partners, quality of cooperation between partners)? Do they reflect the expectations of the programme?

EQ7: What is the progress in the implementation of Communication Strategy and the achievement of the set objectives?

EQ8: What is the progress of the programme towards the targets of specific objectives?

EQ9: How is the programme adopted by the target groups, especially by the relevant stakeholders and the general public?

1.2. Methodological steps

Methodological steps:

Step	Timeline
1. Internal meetings within JS to clarify the tasks	March2019
2. Design of the questionnaire for PPs(online Survey)	March2019
3. Analysis of secondary sources	April 2019
4. Processing of online survey for PPs	May 2019
5. Formation of questions and interviews with managerial programme bodies	May 2019
6. Observation, judgment, assessment	Summer 2019
7. Draft report	September 2019
8. Final report	October 2019

The analysis and evaluation mainly built on the monitoring data gathered by the Joint Secretariat (JS) itself, the data obtained from the eMS application forms, and the data available on the programme website. In addition, the data used for evaluation purposes were also collected through surveys and interviews. Certain information, opinions and conclusions were obtained also during every day work, at bilateral meetings, monitoring committee meetings and at other occasions where JS was interacting with other programme bodies and partners. The overall cut-off date for the data collection exercise was 30 April 2019, with the data on the achievement of indicators of the Communication Strategy referring to the status as at 31 December 2018.

Project Partners of all projects (PA1 and PA2) submitted in the first five rounds were invited to take part in an online survey that was open from 18 April to 15 May 2019. The survey was sent to 224 email addresses. Emails were sent to contact persons; if a single person was listed as the point of contact for two or more projects, they received only one survey invitation email. The institutions participating in two or more projects received as many emails as there were contact persons. Out of 224 unique email addresses, about 7% were invalid, while in several cases the e-mail was not delivered as the addressees were no longer employed. We received 50 responses from Project Partners (PP). The figure represents a 25% response rate, which is a relatively good result for an online survey.

In terms of origin of respondents, 46% respondents were from Slovenia and 54% from Hungary. As some of the questions did not apply to all respondents, the sum of answers could differ between questions.

Qualitative data were also collected through interviews with the Managing Authority (MA), JS and Info Points in Slovenia and Hungary. While each authority/body has a specific role and tasks in implementing the Cooperation Programme (CP), only some of the questions were the same/similar, while others were specific applying to their respective role.

The questions focused on the aspects of efficiency and effectiveness of a single body/authority (division of tasks, staff issues, scope of work etc.), administrative burden, project appraisal and selection procedure, potential bottlenecks, use of e-MS, Communication Strategy and achievement of the set indicators.

The main secondary sources used were the following:

- Cooperation Programme Interreg V-A Slovenia – Hungary,
- Manual for beneficiaries and other supporting documents published on the dedicated programme website,
- Communication strategy.

The approved projects are in different implementation phases: the early phase (some of them have even not yet begun) or the final phase (no project has been completed yet, but four of them are soon to finish). The assessment of the progress towards the achievement of the programme specific objectives has been made on the basis of the contribution achieved so far and/or expected contributions to the programme output indicators.

2. Collection of data and analysis

2.1. About the programme and main milestones

The aim of cross-border cooperation (CBC) is to tackle common challenges identified jointly in the border regions and to exploit the untapped growth potential in border areas, while enhancing the cooperation process for the purpose of the overall harmonious development of the European (EU).

The Cooperation Programme Interreg V-A Slovenia-Hungary (CP) was approved by the European Commission on 18 September 2015.

The programme eligible area covers four NUTS 3 regions: Vas and Zala counties in Hungary and Pomurska and Podravska regions in Slovenia. The programme area is the same as in the previous period, covering 10,658 km^2, of which two thirds belong to Hungarian and one third to Slovenian border area separated by a 102kilometre long border. The programme area covers the north-eastern part of Slovenia and the extreme south-western part of Hungary which are characterised by flat and hilly topography.

The programme is structured around two Priority axes and two specific objectives whereas Technical Assistance is designed as Priority axis 3 (see Table 1). Common and programme-specific output indicators were defined for each investment priority (IP) under each PA. The values achieved are aggregated values of outputs of approved projects, as indicated by the programme and project intervention logic. This is also reflected in the application form, which creates a clear and direct linkage with project and programme outputs.

Table 1: Structure of the Cooperation Programme.

Priority axis 1: ATTRACTIVE REGION	Priority axis 2: COOPERATIVE REGION
Thematic objective: TO6, Priority investment 6c	Thematic objective: TO11, Priority investment 11b
Specific objective 1.1: To increase attractiveness through the diversification and cross-border integration of the sustainable touristic offer in the programme area, based on the protection of the elements of cultural and natural heritage and development of products and services in the less developed rural areas linking them to touristic magnets.	**Specific objective 2.1:** To increase the capacity for cooperation in order to reach a higher level of maturity in cross-border relations.
Expected results: A higher level of development of sustainable forms of tourism in the remote, rural regions of the programme area, while building on the experience and attractiveness of the important tourist centres located here.	**Expected results:** Higher level, more stable, as well as more extended legal and administrative cross-border cooperation amongst the institutions and organizations from both sides of the border
Result indicator: Number of overnight stays in the programme area, 5% increase from by 2023 (baseline 2014).	**Result indicator:** The level of cross-border cooperation at institutional level in the programme area; 20% increase on the scale by 2023 (baseline 3.05 in 2015)
Priority axis 3: TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE	
Specific objective: Contribution to the efficient implementation of the Cooperation Programme.	

Source: http://si-hu.eu

All key programme and project implementation procedures are supported by the electronic monitoring system (eMS) which is used by all programme bodies, applicants and beneficiaries, albeit with different levels of accessibility. The eMS has been operating since September 2015.

The programme opening conference was organised on 20 October 2015.

The Monitoring Committee (MC) was set up at its 1st meeting held on 24 November 2015. The documentation for the open call for proposals, the programme eligibility rules, the technical assistance projects, the Communication Strategy and rules on eligibility of expenditures were approved at the same meeting.

2.2. Programme authorities and bodies

The joint implementation structure includes the following **programme authorities**:

- Managing Authority (MA) - Government Office for Development and European Cohesion Policy (GODC), European Territorial Cooperation and Financial Mechanisms Office, Cross-border Programmes Management Division, Republic of Slovenia. MA is responsible for the management and implementation of the programme in accordance with the principle of sound financial management.
- Certifying Authority (CA) - Public Fund for Regional Development of the Republic of Slovenia. CA is responsible for drawing up and submitting to the EC certified statements of expenditures and applications for payment.
- Audit Authority (AA) - Ministry of Finance, Budget Supervision Office of the Republic of Slovenia and Audit Body - Directorate General for Audit of European Funds (Európai Támogatásokat Auditáló Főigazgatóság – EUTAF) in Hungary. They ensure that audits are carried out on the proper functioning of the management and control system of the Operational Programme (OP) and on an appropriate sample of operations on the basis of the declared expenditure. The AA also prepares the report and opinion on the compliance of the management and control systems.

Other programme structures designated to manage and control the programme in the period 2014-2020 are the Monitoring Committee (MC), the Joint Secretariat (JS), National Authorities (NA) and first level control bodies (FLC).

As all abovementioned structures are programme structures, some of them can be classified as national structures. Therefore, when this document refers to Slovenian structures, it means by it the NA and Slovenian FLCs, and when it refers to Hungarian structures, it means by it the NAs and Hungarian regional FLCs.

Monitoring Committee

The Monitoring Committee (MC) supervises the programme and ensures the quality and effectiveness of programme implementation.

The MC of the programme consists of 27 members and their substitutes. Slovenia is represented by six members with voting rights and seven members in an advisory capacity without voting rights. Hungary is represented by six members with voting rights and eight members in an advisory capacity without voting rights.

On the Slovenian side, all voting members come from the central ministries and government offices (6). The advisory members represent further ministries and government offices (3), the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia (1), regional development agencies (2) and NGOs (1).

On the Hungarian side, the voting members are from central ministries (3), from agency (1) and one from each of the two participating counties (2). The advisory members represent further ministries and government offices (4), regional local authorities (2), and representative from NGOs (2).

Managing Authority

Four staff members work for the programme MA with three of them also working on cooperation programmes with Austria and Croatia, while one person works exclusively for the programme Interreg SI-HU.

All programme partners assess the MA work as very efficient and highly appreciate its efforts. All programme procedures and instruments are considered to be examples of best practice compared to other programmes.

Although the MA staff experience heavy workload on a daily basis, no major delays in performing their respective functions have occurred so far.

Joint Secretariat

The MA set up the Joint Secretariat (JS) for the programme after consultation with the programme bodies in compliance with the second paragraph of Article 23of the ETC Regulation. There were no substantial changes to the functions and tasks of the JS compared to the period 2007–2013.

The JS is composed of five full-time staff members, including Head of JS. Four members, including Head of JS will remain in Maribor, Slovenia, three out of four employees are part of the official structures of GODC (Cross-border Programmes Management Division), while one Hungarian member falls under Hungarian authorities. The structural and implementation arrangements within the hosting organisation were kept. Two part-time (one full-time equivalent) staff members work at Info Points in Zalaegerszeg and Szombathely, and perform the same functions as the remaining JS members, i.e. to provide information and advice to potential applicants (in the application phase), and carry out programme management tasks related to projects in the implementation phase. Not all JS staff members speak all three programme languages (Slovenian, Hungarian and English), but all of them are fluent in at least two programme languages; nevertheless, they communicate effectively and efficiently with all relevant programme partners and target groups. As mentioned above, staff members are from Slovenia (3) and from Hungary (3), which makes communication easier especially with the beneficiaries and target groups. In turn, command of the two programme languages facilitates coordination between programme partners from both countries, and ensures knowledge of national/regional legislation and strategies, regional specific topics, regional stakeholder system etc.

JS carries out a wide range of tasks, and faces occasional peaks in workload related to open calls (particularly in terms of assessment of project applications). However, the tasks are undertaken very effectively and in a timely manner.

First Level Control (FLC)

FLC is responsible for carrying out verifications pursuant to Article 125(4) of the Common Provisions Regulation.

Currently, 20 staff members work within Slovenian FLC. They cover all bilateral and transnational cooperation programmes in which Slovenia participates because the reporting procedures are generally unified. For each programme, there is a coordinator and a deputy, who also attends bilateral meetings. The managers and coordinators distribute work among them.

Slovenian FLC faces highly uneven distribution of workload throughout the year and extensive overlapping of deadlines and projects. In certain months of the year (January, February, June to September) the FLC receives up to 30 to 40 reports per day and their processing can be an issue during such peak periods. It would be sensible to consider redefining the reporting periods and setting them on different dates.

The FLC staff possess sufficient knowledge. However, lack of staff and staff turnover are significant, and more employees should be hired.

In the context of transnational programmes, The FLC is developing a sampling method for sample checks (especially for soft activities) in this programming period. If the approach proves to be efficient, it will also be applied to the next generation of cross-border programmes.

On the Hungarian side, control activities related to the Programme are carried out by Széchenyi Programme Office. Within the International Directorate of SZPO the Control Department is responsible for carrying out control activities for the Hungarian beneficiaries. The Control Department is responsible for the FLC activities of all bilateral, transnational and interregional cooperation programmes in which Hungary participates Within the Control Department currently, 50 staff members (national controllers) work as the Hungarian FLC Body. The reporting procedures are generally unified. Control activities related to the Programme are coordinated by the Central Control Unit within the Control Department, where guidelines, manuals and other documents are elaborated in order to provide standard rules and procedures for the activities carried out by the regional control units.

Within the Control Department, the Zalaegerszeg Office of West-Hungarian Control Unit is responsible for verification activities and issuing control certificates. Currently 6 persons are working in this office The Zalaegerszeg Office participates not just in SlHU programme, it also participates in the FLC work of HUCR programme. The 2 programmes have got a different monitoring system and different reporting periods, which results peak loads in different periods within the year.

The staff of West-Hungarian Control Unit has previous experiences in verification of expenditures in the Interreg IIIA programmes, as well as in Cross-border cooperation programmes of the 2007-2013 programming period.

Hungarian FLC faces highly uneven distribution of workload throughout the year and extensive overlapping of deadlines. The applied Simplified Costo options (SCOs) in this programme period help to fulfil the peak loads in certification procedure.

National Authorities

National Authorities (NA) contribute to the programme by setting up the First Level Control (FLC) system, represent the Member States (MS), and as such participate in the MC meetings. Both Slovenian and Hungarian NAs each include two staff members whose job is to focus on the ''big'' picture by having an extensive knowledge of the entire Slovenian or Hungarian territory, the national budget and state aid compliance and supporting the implementation of the programme on its own territory. Not all applicants consult with the NA on project proposals since the consultations are not mandatory. The aim of support provided is to ensure compliance with the programme objectives and provide information regarding potential state aid. In this programming period, the Slovenian NA is less involved in project monitoring than in the previous period as it no longer acts as the contract manager, since there are no national funds for co-financing available on the Slovenian side. On the contrary though, the Hungarian NA is more involved in the project monitoring thanks to availability of national funds for Hungarian partners (10% for all, 15% for national institutions), which resembles the situation in the previous period.

The NA performs its tasks without delays and human resources are considered sufficient.

Certifying Authority

Three staff members work on a partial basis (equal to a total of one FTE) and additional representative of the CA to the MC and other programme meetings are paid from the TA project at the Public Fund for Regional Development for the Interreg SI-HU.

The functions of the CA are performed without any delays and all the relevant procedures are carried out in time.

Project Audit

The programme audit is performed by two units, each functioning in their respective country.

Audit Authority

Two employees with clearly divided tasks work for the AA at the Budget Supervision Office of the Republic of Slovenia (Ministry of Finance). To date, all tasks have been performed well and in time, despite a more stringent timeframe set by the Commission in this programming period and the low utilisation of simplified cost options by the beneficiaries.

Audit Body

One staff member in the AB works on the programme as well. All involved parties assess the tasks delivered by the AB as very professional and efficient.

Apart from the audit of programme implementing structures, both AB and AA select a sample of projects for audit each year.

2.3. Implementation of the Open call

The open call for proposals was published on 18 December 2015. The open call system allows the applicants to submit project applications on a continuous basis up until the programme funds are no longer available. The JS publishes application submission deadlines agreed by the MC for the applications to be included in the project selection procedure at the following MC meeting.

The applications received by the five deadlines were processed by 30 April 2019. A total of 20 projects were approved, one project in the 1st round (subsidy contract signed in September 2016), five projects in the 2nd round (subsidy contracts for three projects signed in March 2017, one in September 2017 and one in October 2017), seven projects in the 3rd round (subsidy contracts for six projects signed in November 2017 and one in February 2018), four projects in the 4th round (subsidy contracts signed in June 2018), and three projects in the 5th round (two subsidy contracts signed in March 2019). One project was included in the analysis (financial, expected contribution to the programme indicators etc.), although its subsidy contract signing procedure was not finished yet.

2.3.1. Project generation and support

The MA/JS in cooperation with NAs offer support to potential applicants in project development and preparation of applications. The main forms of support include:

- CP and guidance available at the dedicated programme website: open call, application pack, frequently asked questions, other relevant information;
- informative workshops for applicants organised by MA/JS and in cooperation with NAs before each deadline. Materials presented at workshops were published on the programme website;
- information, support and advice is provided by JS in Maribor and Info Points at Zalaegerszeg and Szombathely (e-mail, phone, face-to-face meetings); JS/Info Points and MA are available

to discuss any open issues or questions applicants may have. IT support is available to solve any potential problems regarding eMS;

- information, support and advice provided by NAs (e-mail, phone, face-to-face meetings); apart from consultations regarding the content of the project application, NA focuses on tackling questions regarding state aid and deMinimis regulations;
- IT support concerning technical questions regarding eMS.

Usefulness of programme documents and guidelines

Programme documents and guidelines needed for the preparation of the application are available on the dedicated programme website (www.si-hu.eu).

The most useful document facilitating the preparation of the application was the Implementation manual for beneficiaries, followed by the programme and section Frequently asked questions, according to the LP survey respondents. Though useful for most respondents, the highest dissatisfaction levels were expressed for FAQs.

Figure 1: Usefulness of the supporting documents for preparation of applications
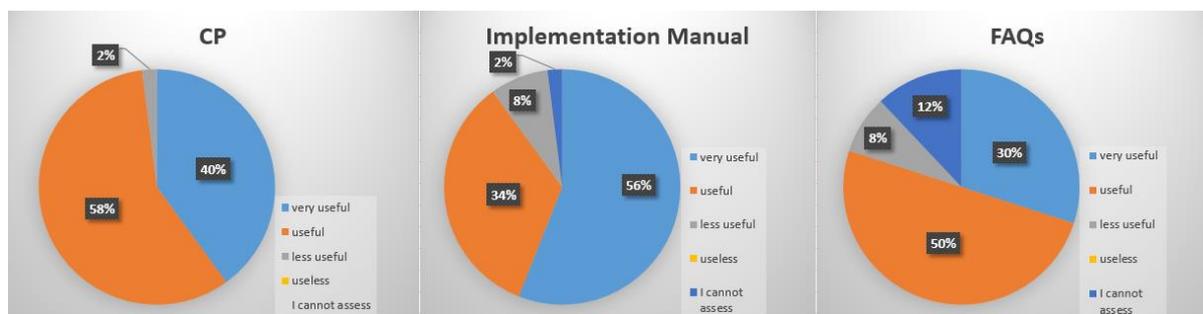
Workshops for applicants

Workshops for applicants were organised after the announcement of application submission. In the 1st round, one workshop was organised on each side of the border, whereas in the 2nd round one workshop was organised in Moravske Toplice, Slovenia jointly for both sides. Under the 3rd, 4th and 5th deadlines, further three workshops were organised by the JS, namely two in 2017 (Zalaegerszeg, Hungary, and Rakičan, Slovenia) and one in 2018 (Gosztola, Hungary). A total of some 400 participants attended the workshops.

Informative workshops were held to convey key messages about the programme, its requirements and guidance regarding the project development. As observed by the the JS/Info Point, participants were not ready to ask specific questions or share project ideas in the plenary. They preferred to use the opportunity during breaks, over e-mail or at scheduled individual meetings. This may be attributed to a relatively small size of the programme area and similar thematic areas addressed by potential projects (e.g. cultural heritage), which made the participants unwilling to share the ''how''.

Respondents to surveys proposed to:
- use the workshops for applicants to support partner search,
- organise workshops at several locations and increase information activities regarding event announcement.

Figure 2: Usefulness of workshops.
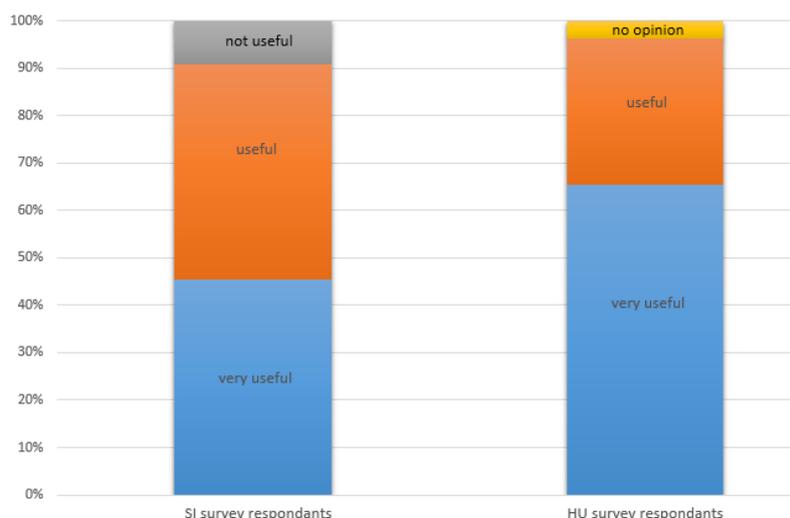
Every following workshop is upgraded with inclusion of lessons learned from processing of applications in previous submission deadline and previous workshop performed. The JS makes every effort to encourage potential applicants to join the workshops, and be open for suggestions and fresh ideas in order to help potential applicants prepare better project applications.

MA/JS has been monitoring participation rate of potential applicants at workshops; the figure was the highest at the second workshop (99 participants), but has dropped by nearly half since then reaching an average of about 50 participants per workshop.

56% of the survey participants agreed strongly that workshops organized by the MA/JS were helpful in getting them understand the whole open call procedure and the requirements for application, and facilitated preparation of the project application.

Project Partnership

To be eligible for financing, the project partnership has to consist of at least two partners, one from Slovenia and one from Hungary, one Lead partner (LP) and one Project partner (PP).

LP must be located in the programme area. PPs should be located in the programme area as well; however, if a partner is located outside the programme area, justification must be provided in the application form.

The total number of all partners in the twenty projects that were approved by the end of the 5th deadline stood at 102 partners, of which 82 were PPs and 20 LPs. The number of partners per project ranges between two and nine, most of them counting four partners, which is followed by projects having five partners. The largest partnership brings together as many as nine partners.

In terms of legal status, the majority of LPs (as well as PPs) are regional or local public authorities (8 out of 20), followed by non-profit organisation, NGOs (7) and other. There are three SMEs participating in the programme.

Geographic distribution of beneficiaries is more even in Hungary accounting for 19 and 21 partners respectively in counties Vas and Zala, compared to Slovenia, where 27 beneficiaries are located in the Pomurska region and only 8 in the Podravska region.

Half of the running projects have an LP located in Slovenia and the other half in Hungary. One Slovenian beneficiary acts as LP in two projects at a time.

According to the online survey, the majority of applicants knew at least some of the partners before submitting their application. While only 10% of successful applicants did not know any of the partners before submitting the application, the share of applicants not knowing any of their partners grew to 12%.

Programme bodies observed that old and relatively stable partnerships were preparing new projects; indeed, it can be said that ''old partners'' prefer to cooperate within already established compositions with proven track record.

According to the survey, only three respondents did not know any of the other PPs before starting the project preparation in contrast to 78% of cases where partners already knew some of the other project partners. 23 survey respondents (46%) stated they encountered no problems establishing a partnership. The most difficult part in this stage of the process was for them to find:

- an appropriate partner (institution) in a particular field of expertise,
- an institution with similar needs in developing a project idea, and
- a qualified institution in terms of project management, personnel and financial capabilities.

In conclusion, according to the beneficiaries, partnerships were not very difficult to form and the majority of PPs or project leaders knew at least some of the other partners beforehand. The beneficiaries spent a certain amount of time finding a suitable match, a partner in a particular field of expertise, or an institution with similar needs in developing a project idea. Another issue they tackled was finding a qualified institution in terms of project management, personnel and financial capacity. 16% of survey participants stated having problems establishing a new cross-border partnership. Successful communication was hindered by the language barrier as the JS noted and partners on the ground confirmed. Trust, previous experience and time play an important role in forming partnerships and developing quality projects.

Development of project proposals

While the survey made in 2017 in the scope of the 1st evaluation on effectiveness and efficiency of the programme revealed that 15 out of 24 respondents (62.5%) had experience with cooperation in the 2007-2013 programme, the latest results differ. Now, 26 out of 50 respondents (52%) have experience cooperating in the scope of the 2007-2013 generation programme. 14 of them were involved in one project, seven of them participated in two projects and the remaining five were partners in three or more projects.

48% of the surveyed partners applied one project, while 26% of them applied two different projects and another 10% participated in three project applications. One of the respondents stated to have been a partner in as many as ten different projects applied.

38% out of the 50 surveyed PPs submitted project applications within one deadline, and 24% within two deadlines. 22% of the respondents applied within three deadlines and further 10% submitted project applications within four deadlines. Three respondents sent project proposals under all five deadlines, which accounts for 6% of all respondents.

The respondents were asked to assess different aspects of project development. The assessments received were quite polarised. Most frequently, the challenges were associated with alignment of the project with the programme requirements (41%), followed by the obligation to ensure co-financing (27%) and establishment of a project partnership along with consolidation of interests among project partners (both 26%). In contrast, 18% of the survey respondents found the alignment of the project with the requirements of the programme easy; similarly, understanding of State Aid rules was easy for 18% of the respondents.

Requests for information and clarification were most numerous after the 1st deadline when most applicants who were rejected for failing to meet quality criteria at the MC meeting sought clarification from the JS. Also, before the 5th and the 6th round, when programme funding was getting scarcer, partners came for advice on how to better prepare projects. The period coincided with some of these partners' projects completion, making their capacities to start new projects available. The questions addressed by applicants to the Info Point can in general be divided into two groups: (i) questions made by partners looking for professional help (regarding the intervention logic, budgeting issues), and (ii) questions of technical nature (regarding information on minimum and maximum budget, use of eMS, deadlines, possible completion/supplementation, date of decision- making, possible date of the project start). The 3rd and the 6th deadlines were the busiest in terms of the number of consultations. In terms of the number of projects requesting consultation, it was the the 4th and the 5th deadlines that were the busiest. At the beginning, some applicants expressed surprise at the downsizing of the programme budget. The maximum amounts were commented to be too low as well.

Programme bodies observed that applicants, in particular those having experience with the cross-border programme in 2007-2013 underestimated the changes to the 2014-2020 programme, which were reflected in increased result orientation, and increased focus on the content and results of the programme. The JS and Info Points also noticed that not all potential applicants carefully read all the documents providing information on the programme. Most of them read at least parts of the Implementation Manual for Beneficiaries, mainly Manual Part 2 – PROJECT DEVELOPMENT and Manual Part 3 – APPLICATION AND ASSESSMENT. Some of them were acquainted with Manual Part 4 – ELIGIBILITY OF EXPENDITURE and Manual Part 6 – INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION (V2). For that reason, applicants failed to sufficiently examine the CP and its intervention logic that had slightly changed compared to the previous period (e.g. by introduction of a new term – deliverable) and even now, with the 6th deadline approaching there are still some applicants who are not familiar with the meaning of certain Interreg terms (e.g. result).

Figure 3: Assessment of specific elements of the project development.
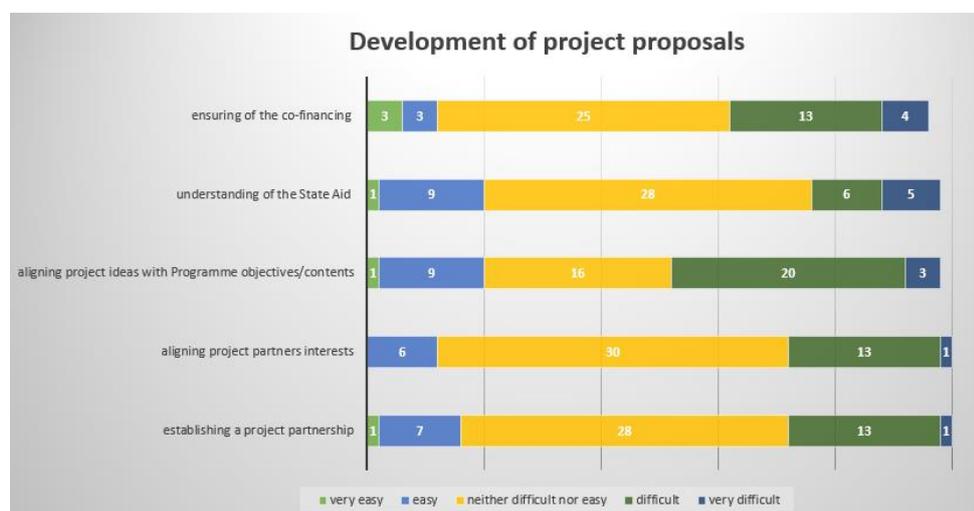
A number of applicants failed to understand the focus of PA2 (capacity building, institutional cooperation) and submitted project proposals that dealt with other key themes relevant for the sectors/thematic areas and not for the programme priority.

Similarly, the MA and the Slovenian NA believe that, too often, projects built on local ideas that were meant to be expanded to a cross-border level; however, the applicants failed to recognise and consider

the real cross-border challenges and potentials. Thus, it was difficult for the applicants to align the project with the programme challenges, intervention logic, indicators and related measuring methods.

Certain project ideas proved to be similar. Only after the MC meeting were the MA/JS able to propose to different applicants to consider working together. Nevertheless, not all applicants decided to follow the recommendation to join forces and team up around a shared idea.

The Hungarian NA worked closely with the Info Points to provide support to potential applicants. The role of the NA was to provide content- related support, such as defining the contribution of the project to the CP objectives. In 2018, Info Points had only four personal consultations, against an average of 10 to 12 consultations per deadline in the preceding years. By experience, interest grows during the programme opening phase and before closure when the remaining funds are granted. One possible reason for the low number of contacts during the programme period would be that projects that failed at the AB check in the 1st round were reapplied and applicants did not seek any additional support. Prior to the 6th deadline, the interest and the need of potential applicants to receive consultation on project application issues by the JS grew again. Hungarian partners demonstrate less interest in PA2.

The JS collected lists of potential beneficiaries and directly informed the potential institutions of the opportunities for taking part in the programme.

According to the LP survey respondents, the JS and Info Points were the main point of contact for getting advice and information at the application preparation stage. Nevertheless, nearly 10% of all survey respondents did not contact any of the programme structures during the project application preparation.

Figure 4: Who was contacted for support.
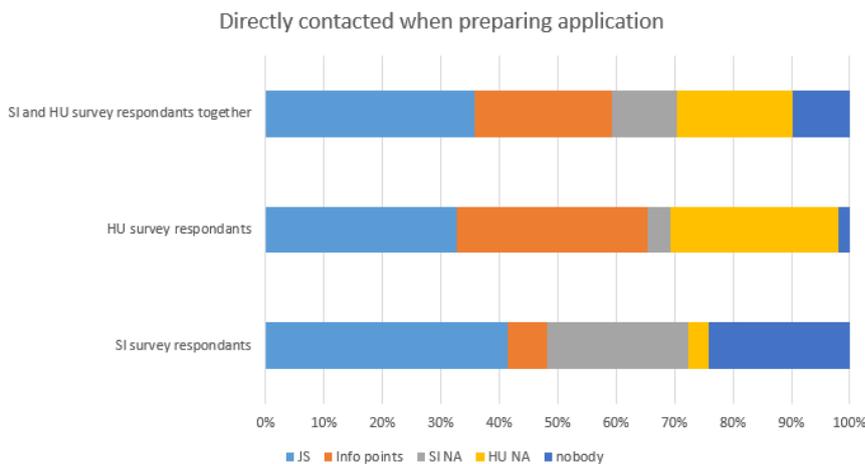
Overall, the degree of applicants' satisfaction with the services delivered by the JS/Info Points was assessed as very high in all listed aspects, with the applicants particularly underlining how forthcoming and helpful the staff were, providing the right amount of information needed. Applicants suggested that consultations should be a mandatory part of the project preparation, since the oral presentation of the project before the JS can provide useful feedback on the level of preparedness of the project idea.

Figure 5: Assessment of provided support.
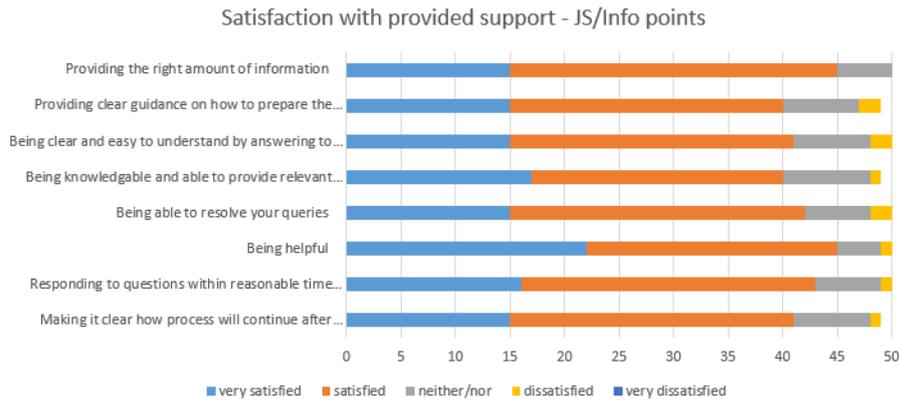
Preparing applications in eMS

The preparation of applications in the eMS was not a challenging task for most of the survey respondents: only 16% of them found the system complicated. In fact, 33% of the respondents assessed the system as relatively easy to use, with the eMS interface for application user-friendly, while a quarter of them thought that completion of the eMS application form was simple and logical.

However, the respondents did comment they observed some differences between the entered data and the printouts, and that the data enter exercise was very much time consuming.

The MA, JS and Info Point noticed that the applicants found it difficult to properly define the reporting periods and link them correctly with the budget. If they did not follow the right order, they lost the work done.

Figure 6: eMS graphic interface layout and use of eMS in project application phased.
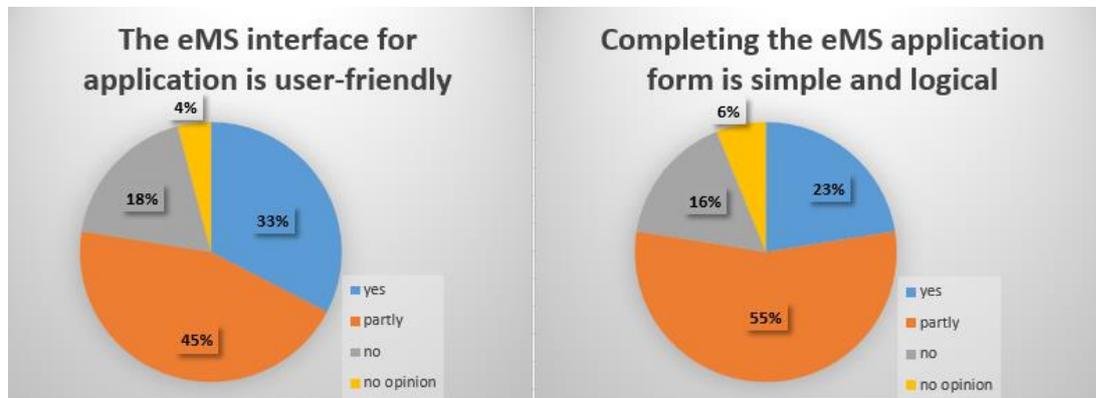
The JS supported the applicants in their use of the system. Often, queries did not relate to the eMS itself, but were rather content-related. The Implementation Manual – Part 3, does provide a very detailed guidance on how to prepare the application, and highlights the possible consequences for applicants not following certain steps.

After analysing the most common mistakes made in the 1st round of submissions, the JS incorporated additional control mechanisms in the application module of the eMS to support the applicants in checking whether all parts of their applications were filled in. However, the fields containing a sign (e.g. -, x, /, …) in order to save (uncompleted) work meant that the alert would not be activated. Later on in the work process, the applicants could easily overlook these fields.

The system can be used by several project partners entering data at the same time, which could potentially lead to mistakes. Also, work process between the project partners is often conducted in the English language but parts of the applications are not translated. Mistakes also often relate to the PPs using their own excel files for budget preparation so that changes are not properly consolidated in the eMS.

The work was mostly done by the LPs themselves or was distributed among all PPs. Sometimes other arrangements were made. According to the survey, language difficulties and preparation and filling out of the workplan and project budget application work packages most frustrated the applicants. On the other hand, many found it easy to enter data about partnership and attachments.

The main problems the beneficiaries reported using eMS were: system slowness, small obligatory attachment size limit, a constant risk of loss of the entered text. Respondents consider the work in eMS to be time-consuming and, and believe the system should be optimized.

Figure 7: Division of work in entering data in eMS.
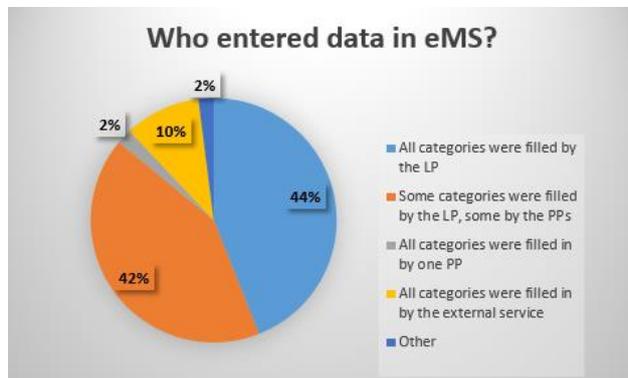
When asked to point out the most difficult work package to prepare in the eMS application (rating scale assessing the level of difficulty of completing the work package ranging from 1 to 7, where 7 represents the most difficult part of the application form, and 1 the easiest part of the application form was used) the results were as follows.

Figure 8: Most difficult workpackage to complete in eMS application form.

27
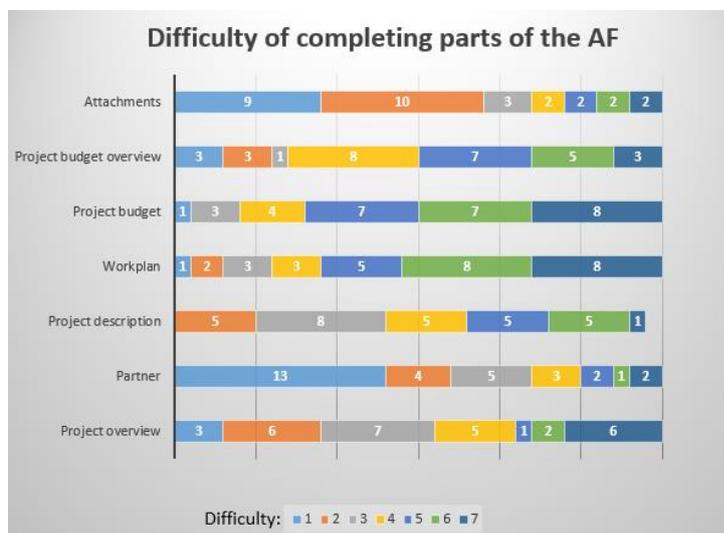
In general, work in eMS has been simplified for programme bodies and the overall satisfaction with eMS is positive, but there is still room for improvement.

Evaluation of support provided by programme bodies compared to the period 2007-2013

Respondents of the PP survey with experience with the 2007-2013 programme assessed the quality of services provided by the programme bodies comparing it to the previous period.

In most cases, they reported service improvement (significant or slight) for the JS (65%), followed by the Info Points (61%) and the MA (48%). While respondents reported decline in the service quality mostly for the Info Points (28%), followed by the JS (13%) and the MA (7%) at the first evaluation of the programme, there was no obvious decline suggested in the analysis of this evaluation survey. In fact, the services of the JS, Info Points and MA were found to be the same or even improved in all cases. The results of the assessment should be taken with caution due to the survey sample size (only 8, 15 respondents).

The Slovenian NA (SI NA) was assessed only by eight Slovenian respondents, while the Hungarian NA (HU NA) was assessed by 14 Hungarian respondents. Improvement of the services by the HU NA and by the SI NA was reported by 43% and 12,5% of respondents respectively. A very high share of neutral scores was given to the Sl NA (87,5%). No respondent found the services of neither of the two NAs worse than in the previous programming period.

Figure 9: Assessment of the support provided by programme bodies in comparison to 2007-2013.
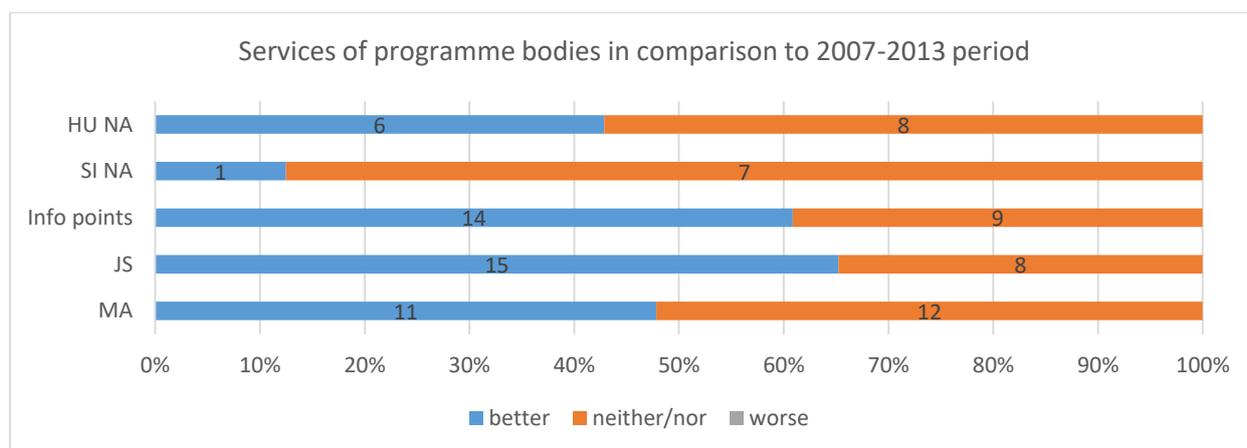
2.3.2. Receipt of applications, assessment and selection procedure

Although the purpose of the open call is to allow the applicants continuous submission of applications, only a few applications were submitted before the deadline and the majority on the final day for submission.

Table 2: Submission of applications

Day of submission	1st deadline	2nd deadline	3rd deadline	4th deadline	5th deadline
5 days ahead of deadline		1 (2%)			
4 days ahead of deadline		4 (10%)			
3 days ahead of deadline		5 (12%)			
2 days ahead of deadline	3 (7%)	5 (12%)			

1 day ahead of deadline	8 (17%)	5 (12%)	5 (19%)	3 (17%)	1 (8%)
Deadline for submission	35 (76%)	22 (52%)	21 (81%)	15 (83%)	11 (92%)
Sum	46	43	26	18	12

Source: Own analysis

Administrative and eligibility check (AB check)

The intention of the MA was to increase the efficiency of the assessment and selection procedure. While planned dynamics foresaw the announcement of two deadlines per year, two deadlines indeed took place in 2016, followed by two deadlines in 2017 and only one deadline in 2018 and 2019

In the previous programming period a number of applicants were asked for clarification or invited to provide the missing documents during the AB check, which prolonged the procedure. In the current programming period however, the AB check is performed by the JS in compliance with the check list published in the Implementation Manual for beneficiaries. The application has to be 100% fulfilled at the submission stage in order for it to pass, which means that in case of inconsistencies or any missing elements, the application is rejected without prior request for clarification or supplements.

A new paragraph addressing administrative compliance and eligibility check was incorporated under the 7th written procedure (April 14th 2018). It sets out that, in case of incorrectly entered fields (maximum of four fields) which are assessed against administrative criterion A4 (the application pack is compiled in the required language(s)), the LP is asked for supplements. The supplements may relate to the compliance with administrative criterion A4 only. The LP can supplement the Application Form within five calendar days after the request was sent via eMS system. If the project still fails to fulfil the administrative and eligibility criteria after the receipt of the supplements or after the period of five calendar days, it is rejected. The project is not further assessed regarding the quality.

The content of the investment documentation is not examined during the AB check. PPs declare and confirm compliance with the programme rules and requirements by signing the Project Partner statement. In case the statement is found false at a later stage, PPs may face prosecution in line with the penal code.

The JS internally aligned the approach to checking the applications (e.g. what is understood by ''filled out Annex'' etc.) and made sure that all applicants were treated equally. The JS agreed one exemption concerning the project budget, namely if data were prepared in one language only, the application was accepted and the bilingual version had to be produced at a later stage provided that the project was approved.

After the AB check a written procedure is used to decide whether project applications are rejected on account of being administratively incompliant and ineligible or proceed to (quality) assessment.

The AB check in the 1st round resulted in 76% of the applications being rejected and the JS/Info Point received negative feedback by the applicants who failed. The main reasons for rejection of applications were formal mistakes, such as mandatory fields not filled in bilingually or not filled in at all, inconsistencies between different parts of the application, incomplete data in annexes etc.

Applicants in the 2nd round were quite successful and the application success rate stood at 79% after the AB check. According to the JS, the application process improved thanks to the measures taken to avoid mistakes in application preparation (workshops, online FAQs section, upgrade of eMS, face-to-face meetings with potential applicants). The MC decided to continue with agreed procedure in the 3rd round.

Results in the 3rd round were again worse since the share of applications rejected after the AB check again jumped to 69%. According to the JS, the most common administrative mistakes are as follows:

- application is not completely filled in,

- not all obligatory annexes are submitted,
- the application package is not compiled in the required language(s),
- minimum and maximum budgets are not respected,
- administrative and formal data in the application package are not consistent with one another or with the call documentation.

In the 4th round, the number of administratively compliant and eligible applications again increased. While the number of submitted applications decreased, the share of applications that passed the AB check reached 56%. Applications in the 5th round were the most successful in terms of passing the AB check with as many as 92% of them being accepted. The JS believes that the good result should be attributed to the measures taken to avoid mistakes in application preparation (workshops, online FAQ section, upgrade of eMS, face-to-face meetings with potential applicants). Also, applicants themselves had already gathered meaningful experience by applying in previous deadlines and knew how to better prepare project applications.

The MC decided to continue with the agreed procedure in the 6th round as well (June 18 2019).

Resolution of complaints

Complaints are only possible at the administrative and eligibility check stage. The programme has adopted internal regulations and procedures on how to proceed with complaints. The members of the compliant panel do not include the JS members who assessed the respective project. MC is informed about the outcome of the complaint.

According to the programme structures, no problems have occurred in this aspect.

Quality assessment

The assessment procedures and criteria are published in Part 3 of the Implementation manual for beneficiaries (Application and Assessment). The surveyed PPs self-assessed to what extent they were familiar with them.

Of 50 respondents, 46% were of opinion that the eligibility and quality criteria applied in the assessment procedure were clearly communicated (e.g. in the guidelines for beneficiaries); 44% partly agreed; 4% disagreed and 10% did not know and did not get familiar with quality criteria when preparing the application.

42% of 50 respondents were fully acquainted and 44% were partly acquainted with eligibility and quality assessment criteria before submitting the application. They themselves verified the fulfilment of criteria during the preparation of the application.

Of 50 respondents, 52% fully agreed and 36% partly agreed that their partnership was informed timely and sufficiently about the outcome of the assessment and the decision made by the Monitoring Committee.

Most of the answers considered the duration of the period between the application submission and the announcement of decision whether the project was acceptable; 28% of the respondents agreed that the period duration was acceptable, 44% partly agreed, 22% did not agree at all and 4% did not even know it.

The criteria for quality assessment were designed on the basis of HIT tools. In accordance with increased result-oriented approach, the programme attributed the highest importance to the strategic aspects of project assessment.

Compared to other cross-border programmes (and proposed criteria in the HIT tools), the assessment of the contribution to wider strategies is not included in the chosen criteria, though inputs are requested in the application form.

The previous evaluation of the programme found that two guiding principles were unclear to some extent and partially overlapped, namely a distinction of what is assessed under criteria C20 and C22 which concern projects under 11b, is not evident. Both criteria assess capitalisation on the project results implemented in the past. Although assessors adopted the same approach, this is not shown transparently in the Implementation manual. To a certain extent, C20/C22 also overlap with strategic criterion C2 which observes the use of available knowledge and how the project builds on existing results and practices.

Table 3: Quality assessment criteria and their importance in the total score

Set of criteria	Sub-criteria and max. points	Max. points	% of total score
Strategic assessment	Relevance and strategy (C1- C2), max. 9 points Project's contributions to the programme's objectives, expected results and outputs (C3-C8), max. 27 points Horizontal principles (C9), max. 3 points (1 for each principle)	39	36%
Specific guiding principles for PA	6c: 6 guiding principles for each intervention area, (C10-C13-C18), max. 27 points 11b: 6 guiding principles for each intervention area, (C19-C23), max. 27 points	27	25%
Cooperation selection	Cooperation character and cooperation approach (C24-C27), max. 17 points	17	16%
Operational assessment	Management (C28-C29), max. 6 points Work plan (C30-C32), max. 12 points Budget (C33), max. 6 points	24	22%
Total		107	100%

Source: Implementation manual for beneficiaries, own analysis

The JS addressed the issue and complemented the description of both criteria in Part 3 of the Implementation manual for the beneficiaries: The criteria C20 and C22 are assessed only for the projects under PA2. Under criterion C20 the assessor assesses if the applicants build upon/upgrade the existing results of their own previous projects. In criterion C22 the assessor assesses if the applicants take into account the results of other projects and build upon/upgrade them in another area.

Furthermore, for certain criteria descriptions are too general. The analysis of quality checklists revealed that certain criteria do not contribute to quality assessment of the projects, since there are situations where all projects score the same or the topic of the criteria is covered more than once (overlapping).

Quality assessment of applications is done by three assessors of the JS who are not involved in the project development support. Each application is numerically assessed by two evaluators and their assessment and arguments/comments are available in the eMS.

In previous programmes (external assessors, external assessors in combination with the JS) various approaches to assessment were taken. According to the MA/JS, the use of internal assessors proved to be the best option compared to previous practices. The JS personnel were involved in the programming process having good knowledge of the programme objectives, contents, expected results. The weakness observed by some assessors is a lack of specific thematic knowledge or knowledge of specific national legislation. The JS has a possibility to engage external expertise.

Assessors attended training organised by the MA for three cross-border programmes (SI-AT, SI-HR and SI-HU). The team was additionally coordinated internally.

Each application is assessed independently by two assessors. If projects relate to infrastructure and works, the assessors can request applicants to submit investment documentation for checking.

The final score is the average of two assessments. Assessors' comments are summarised in a Summary Appraisal Grid which is presented to the MC. In 58% of cases, the difference in given score between the two assessors was between 0 and 5 points (up to 5% of the total score), 27% of assessments differed between 6 and 11 points (up to 10% of total score), and 11 % differed from 12 to 15 points (11% to 14%). The highest difference in the scored between both assessors was 22, which happened in the 3rd round. Higher differences were more frequent in assessment of projects below the threshold.

In the first two rounds, more than half of the assessed projects did not reach the threshold (64 points or more), the share was significant especially in the 2nd round (68%). In the 3rd round the number of projects that reached the threshold was the highest, namely 66.7%. There were still very few good projects under the 2nd priority. While the general idea in projects was good the applicants in the attempt to make project bigger (in financial sense) lost the basic concept of the planned project; organisations that already cooperate did not upgrade the cooperation but instead planned to sign the protocol (focusing on already existing partnership); project idea presented in the application could be implemented without cross-border cooperation. For these reasons and the fact that the funds under the 1st priority were more or less allocated, the focus in information actions within the 4th deadline was decided to be given to the 2nd priority and introduced to potential applicants through a focused workshop (with a presentation of what a good project is) and roundtables (ex-ante conditionality, targeting and sustainability, quality of projects, implementation of the programme). In the 4th round only half of the submitted project applications reached the threshold. In addition to the planned workshop with a round table, 37 face-to-face and phone consultations were carried out as well. In the 5th round, the percentage of projects that reached the threshold decreased to 36.4%.

Table 4: Quality assessment of applications

Applications 1st deadline	PA1	PA2	Total, % of all assessments
Number of applications scored 70% and more (75 points and more)	1	0	1 (9,1%)
Number of applications scored between (64-74 points)	3	1	4 (36,4%)
Number of applications scored less than 60% (less than 64 points)	2	4	6 (54,5%)
Applications 2nd deadline	PA1	PA2	Total, % of all assessments
Number of applications scored 70% and more (75 points and more)	7	1	8 (23,5%)
Number of applications scored between (64-74 points)	1	2	3 (8,9%)
Number of applications scored less than 60% (less than 64 points)	14	9*	23 (67,6 %)
Applications 3rd deadline	PA1	PA2	Total, % of all assessments
Number of applications scored 70% and more (75 points and more)	4	4	8 (44,4 %)
Number of applications scored between (64-74 points)	3	1	4 (19,0 %)
Number of applications scored less than 60% (less than 64 points)	4	2	6 (33,3 %)
Applications 4th deadline	PA1	PA2	Total, % of all assessments
Number of applications scored 70% and more (75 points and more)	2	2	4 (40,0 %)
Number of applications scored between (64-74 points)	0	1	1 (10,0 %)
Number of applications scored less than 60% (less than 64 points)	1	4	5 (50,0 %)

Applications 5th deadline	PA1	PA2	Total, % of all assessments
Number of applications scored 70% and more (75 points and more)	2	2	4 (36,4 %)
Number of applications scored between (64-74 points)	0	0	0
Number of applications scored less than 60% (less than 64 points)	1	6	7 (63,6 %)

Source: Own analysis

Also, the overall quality of the projects above the threshold was rather low in the 1st round, as only one project was assessed with over 70% of total points, approximately one third of the assessed projects scored below 70% of total points. While in the 2nd and 3rd rounds, 8 (of 34 and 18, respectively) projects were assessed with over 70% of total points, the quantity of those below 70% was smaller (three and four, respectively). The project with the highest score of 90.19% of total points was assessed in the 4th round. In addition, 4 projects scored over the threshold (but below 70% of total points). In the 5th round of 11 projects only 4 were assessed with 70% or more of the total points.

The share of applications proposed for approval increased from 9% in the 1st round to 23.5% in the 2nd round. Then, it reached its peak in the 3rd round with 44 % and decreased to 40% and 36% in the 4th and 5th round.

MC decision on projects proposals

The MC discusses projects assessed by the JS. Projects are categorised in three groups (recommended for approval, recommended for approval with conditions and recommended for rejection).

The MC project selection procedure introduced a new step compared to the previous period, namely the possibility to postpone a project with prospects to be approved if meeting certain conditions. Support of the JS and NAs regarding improvements was made available. The applicants were able to work on the same application already entered in the eMS.

The Hungarian NA is of the opinion that it can sometimes be difficult for the assessors to be aware of any specific regional or national circumstances and therefore the MC meeting is the means to discuss such situations. Different views or positions of the cooperating sides were solved and agreed on at MC meetings and the ranking list was usually followed.

According to the MA, the time reserved for an in-depth presentation of a project at the MC meeting is too limited. Divergence in the views of the MC members was observed when projects under the 2nd round were discussed, so the final decision was taken at the next meeting.

Overview of received and approved projects

Interest of potential applicants in the programme was quite high under all deadlines. Altogether 143 applications were received within all deadlines, 46 in the 1st round, 43 in the 2nd round, 26 in the 3rd round, 18 in the 4th round and 12 in the 5th round.

58% of the applications addressed PA1 and 42% PA2. Whereas only one application (2% of the total received applications) was approved in the 1st round, the share increased in the 2nd round with five approved applications (12% of the total received applications). In the next three deadlines, the number of received applications decreased. In the 3rd round, seven applications were approved (27% of the total received applications). In the next period, the number of submitted applications decreased, standing at merely four approved applications (22% of the total received application). In the last (5th) deadline only three applications were approved (25% of the received applications).

Considering the relatively small size of the programme area and the limited pool of potential beneficiaries, the programme attracted a high number of applications. For comparison, 190 applications were received in the same period for a much bigger Interreg V-A SI-AT Programme.

The number of submitted applications varied from deadline to deadline, dropping most under the 5th deadline (June 2018) with only 12 applications submitted. The potential reasons according to the JS/Info Point could be that partnerships decided not to develop further projects that failed in the early rounds or that limited capacities of partners engaged in other projects (ETC, national) at the time did not allow them to engage in further projects. NUTS-3 regions cooperating in this programme are also eligible in other cross-border programmes with Austria and Croatia.

Table 5: Received and approved projects (1st to 5th deadline for submission) per PA

Applications 1st deadline	PA1 6c	PA2- 11b	Total
Submitted applications, % of total received applications under 1st deadline	32 (70%)	14 (30%)	46 (100%)
Administratively compliant &eligible applications, % of received under IP	6 (17%)	5 (35%)	11 (24%)
Approved & signed contracts	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Applications 2nd deadline	PA1 6c	PA2- 11b	Total
Submitted applications, % of total received applications under 2nd deadline	28 (65%)	15 (35%)	43 (100%)
Administratively compliant &eligible applications, % of received under IP	22 (79%)	12 (80%)	34 (79%)
Approved & signed contracts	4 (14%)	1 (7%)	5 (11.6%)
Applications 3rd deadline	PA1 6c	PA2- 11b	Total
Submitted applications, % of total received applications under 3rd deadline	14 (54%)	12 (46%)	26 (100%)
Administratively compliant &eligible applications, % of received under IP	5 (36%)	3 (25%)	8 (31%)
Approved & signed contracts	4 (29%)	3 (25%)	7 (27%)
Applications 4th deadline	PA1 6c	PA2- 11b	Total
Submitted applications, % of total received applications under 4th deadline	7 (39%)	11 (61%)	18 (100%)
Administratively compliant &eligible applications, % of received under IP	3 (43%)	7 (64%)	10 (56%)
Approved & signed contracts	2 (29%)	2 (18%)	4 (22%)
Applications 5th deadline	PA1 6c	PA2- 11b	Total
Submitted applications, % of total received applications under 5th deadline	3 (25%)	9 (75%)	12 (100%)
Administratively compliant &eligible applications, % of received under IP	3 (100%)	8 (89%)	11 (92%)
Approved & signed contracts	1 (33%)	2 (22%)	3 (25%)

Source: JS/MA, programme website

2.3.3. Timeline for processing of applications

Overview of the main milestones in processing of applications shows that the process from the receipt of applications to the signature of the subsidy contract for all rounds takes from seven to eight months. Differences exist in the achievements of intermediate milestones.

In the 1st round, the Administrative & Eligibility check (AB check) was done more quickly than in the 2nd round which was partly due to summer holidays. In the 3rd round, 29 days passed from the submission date to the conclusion of the AB check, which was a result of fewer working days due to Easter and Labour day. In the 4th and 5th round, 14 days were needed to carry out the AB check.

The Quality check in the 2nd round was done more quickly than in the 1st considering the increased number of applications. In the following deadlines, it varied from one to three months, depending partly on the presence of the assessors, but mostly on the date of the planned MC meetings where the projects were considered for approval/postponement/rejection, which enabled more loose working deadlines.

State aid check is done in approximately one month and was to some extent done in parallel with the quality check.

From the 4th deadline on, the Arachne analysis was also carried out for each project. The ARACHNE risk scoring tool aims to provide the MS authorities involved in management of the Structural Funds with an operational tool to identify their riskiest projects, beneficiaries, contracts and contractors. The objective of this tool, which was developed by the European Commission, is to support the Management and Control Systems of the Programmes to lower the error rate and strengthen fraud prevention and detection. Arachne is an integrated IT tool for data mining, using some key (internal) data of the projects enriched with publicly available information (external data). With the use of Arachne, the Programme can build an overall better defence against fraud and errors. The time needed to perform Arachne analysis depends on many factors (e.g. number of projects, the import of data into Arachne, the need for an in-depth review). On average, two projects per day can be analysed.

Table 6: Timeline for processing of applications

Steps	1st deadline 12/02/2016	2nd deadline 25/07/2016	3rd deadline 11/04/2017	4th deadline 14/11/2017	5th deadline 29/06/2018	6th deadline 18/06/2019
0. Publication of the Open call / announcement of the deadline	18/12/2015	24/05/2016 (website)	17/01/2017 (website); before that at different events and occasions	06/11/2017 (website); before that at different events and occasions	26/04/2018 (website); before that at different events and occasions	23/01/2019 (website); before that at different events and occasions
1. Informative workshops for applicants	13/01/2016 Szombately, HU 18/01/2016 Radenci, SI	14/06/2016 Moravske Toplice, SI	02/03/2017 Zalaegerszeg, HU	22/06/2017 Rakičan, SI	08/05/2018 Gosztola, HU	14/05/2019 Maribor, SI
2. Receipt of applications in eMS	12/02/2016 at 23:59	25/07/2016 at 12.00	11/04/2017 at 12.00	14/11/2017 at 12.00	29/06/2018 at 12.00	18/06/2019 at 12:00
3. Administrative & eligibility check (AB Check)	15/02/2016 – 29/02/2016 (46 app., 14 days)	26/07/2016 – 29/08/2016 (43 app., 35 days)	12/04/2017 – 10/05/2017 (26 app., 29 days)	15/11/2017 – 29/11/2018 (18 app., 14 days)	30/06/2018 – 13/07/2018 (12 app., 14 days)	
4. Quality check of applications (C check)	01/03/2016 – 22/04/2016 (11 app. x 2 assessments, 42 days)	08/09/2016 – 27/10/2016 (34 app. x 2 assessments, 50 days)	03/05/2017 – 05/06/2017 (18 app. x 2 assessments, 33 days)	04/12/201x – 07/03/2018 (10 app. x 2 assessments, 94 days)	11/07/2018 – 03/09/2018 (11 app. x 2 assessments, 55 workdays)	
5. State aid check/opinion for projects	08/04/2016 – 09/05/2016	10/10/2016 – 14/11/2016	18/05/2017 – 15/06/2017	30/01/2018 – 26/02/2018	06/09/2018 – 24/09/2018	
6. Arachne analysis	-	-	-	19/02/2018 – 22/02/2018	04/10/2018 – 24/10/2018	
7. MC meeting – decision on projects	26/05/2016 (105 days from submission to decision)	16/01/2017 (176 days from submission to decision)*	06/07/2017 (127 days from submission to decision)	23/03/2018 (130 days from submission to decision)	12/11/2018 (137 days from submission to decision)	

Steps	1st deadline 12/02/2016	2nd deadline 25/07/2016	3rd deadline 11/04/2017	4th deadline 14/11/2017	5th deadline 29/06/2018	6th deadline 18/06/2019
8. Preparation and sending out decision letters	31/05/2016 – 20/06/2016, 28/06/2016	14/10/2016, 08/02/2017, 09/02/2017	20/07/2017	17/01/2018, 04/04/2018	02/08/2018, 29/11/2018	
9. Face-to-face meetings with beneficiaries	24/06/2016	15/02/2017 22/02/2017 09/03/2017	17/08/2017 22/08/2017 05/09/2017 03/10/2017 23/10/2017	11/04/2018 12/04/2018 16/04/2018 17/05/2018	09/01/2019, 15/01/2019, 16/01/2019	
10. Preparation of ERDF contracts (fulfilling conditions by beneficiaries)	25/06/2016 – 01/09/2016 (1 contract)	20/02/2017 – 24/03/2017 (3 contracts), – for 2 contracts the preparation took longer (therefore, also signing of the contracts was later)	24/10/2017 – 06/11/2017 (6 contracts) – for 1 contract the preparation took longer (therefore, also signing of the contract was later)	17/04/2018 – 20/06/2018 (4 contracts)	17/01/2019 – 04/03/2019 (2 contracts) – for 1 contract the preparation took longer (therefore, also signing of the contract will follow later)	
11. Signing of ERDF contracts	21/09/2016 (1 contract)	27/03/2017 (3 contracts) 18/09/2017** (1 contract) 26/10/2017** (1 contract)	07/11/2017 (6 contracts) 14/02/2018** (1 contract)	22/06/2018 (1 contract) 26/06/2018 (1 contract) 27/06/2018 (1 contract) 29/06/2018 (1 contract)	05/03/2019 (2 contract)	
13. Duration from decision to signing of the Subsidy contracts	12 weeks	7 weeks, 32 weeks, 37 weeks	16 weeks, 30 weeks	22 weeks, 23 weeks	14 weeks	
12. Duration from submission of application to signing of the Subsidy contracts	32 weeks	35 weeks, 60 weeks, 65 weeks	30 weeks, 44 weeks	31 weeks, 32 weeks	36 weeks	

* decision not taken at the meeting 5-6 December 2016 as planned first but postponed to 16 January 2017

When considering all five deadlines, the score was known on average within 11 days from the submission of the application, the administrative & eligibility check (AB Check). The AB Check was most quickly carried out in the 1st, 4th and 5th deadlines (within two weeks after the deadline for submitting applications), and took the longest time to be completed under the 2nd deadline (within five weeks after the deadline for submission of applications).

The period from submission of applications to notifying the applicants on the MC decision lasted 20 weeks in the 1st round and 28 weeks in the 2nd round, where the decision was postponed and taken at the following MC meeting. In the 3rd round, it took 14 weeks and the period again extended in the 4th and 5th round to 20 and 22 weeks respectively.

On average, the co-financing ERDF subsidy contracts were signed within 22 weeks after receiving the MC decision on rejection/approval of projects that scored above the threshold in Quality check of applications (C check). With the exception of three projects - exceptions** (two projects on road/cycle path investments - 6 months' additional period for updates and one project - 3 months' additional period for fulfilling the conditions and thus confirmation of the project originally planned as postponed), the contracts of approved projects were signed on average within 17 weeks after receiving the MC decision on their approval. The shortest contract signing period took seven weeks (under the 1st

deadline), while the longest, 23-week long, period to sign a contract took place under the 4th deadline (23 weeks).

Almost one third (29%) of the 49 survey respondents are of the opinion that the assessment procedure is performed in an acceptable amount of time, 45% partly agree and 22% think it takes absolutely too long. 4% of survey respondents could not make any judgements on the matter.

Contracting for ERDF funding

Individual consultations (face-to-face meetings between LPs of approved projects and project managers (assessors) of the JS) are organised to clarify any considerations prior to the signing of the subsidy contract. Other PPs are always invited and even recommended to participate. Notably, some adjustments to the application forms in terms of the timeline, indicator/deliverable values and budget are also recommended. The applicants mostly clarify output indicators, methodologies for monitoring of indicators, activities, number of target groups, adjust the timeline for implementation and the like. Afterwards, the contract for financing is prepared and signed.

These meetings are assessed as very positive by the MA.

Applicants, whose projects are rejected or postponed, have the possibility to discuss the project weaknesses with the Head of the JS or the NAs and clarify them.

2.3.4. Project implementation, reporting and control

Monitoring and support to the project

After the project approval, a contract manager (member of the JS) is appointed for each project to monitor its progress and arrange possible project changes with the LP.

Contract manager maintains regular communication with programme and project partners, reviews requests for modifications, reports and other project-related documents, evaluates and monitors projects in implementation, performs on-site visits of completed activities and prepares reports on performed controls. In addition, the role of the contract manager is to support and cooperate in audits keeping track of costs, payments and irregularities at project level.

Project modifications

The projects are often subject to modification during implementation. Modifications may be of financial nature or content-related (but not influencing the result or output indicators confirmed at project approval). Possible reasons for the need to change projects lie in staff turnover, change in allocation of workload among partners, occurrence of unexpected costs, rejected approval of certain costs, incorrect definition of costs in the application form, residue of funds in certain work packages due to rejected approval of certain costs or change of the market prices, project extension/shortening, delay of project implementation due to unforeseen reasons or other.

Reporting

All PPs, including LPs, should submit their partner reports one month after each 6-month reporting period. They should provide adequate and accurate documentation on the costs incurred. Project expenditures have to be clearly linked to project activities in the AF (checked by the FLC). Partner reports are checked by the Slovenian and Hungarian FLCs. All reports with the supporting documentation are submitted electronically via eMS.

After performing the check, the FLCs send partners a certificate of expenditure, which includes the amount of costs acknowledged as eligible or ineligible stating the reasons for the costs being ineligible. If relevant, the document provides recommendations for improvement of future reports.

After receiving all partner report certificates from the FLC (including their own), the LP prepares and submits the project progress report in the eMS, which, after approval by the JS (which takes up to one month at the most), serves as the basis for the reimbursement of all project costs for the relevant period to the LP, who subsequently transfers the funds to the PPs.

Table 7 shows the number of reports submitted to the appointed FLCs by partners from the beginning till the cut-off date April 30 2019. The timeframe takes into account the reports that were already concluded. The reports of TA projects are not included in the table.

The first contract for a project approved under the 1st deadline (February 12 2016) was signed on September 21 2016. The project started almost two months before, on August 1 2016. Since reporting is done usually after a 6-month period of implementation, consequently there were no reports submitted before the year 2017. Since the number of projects to be underway in 2018 and 2019 considerably jumped, the number of submitted reports drastically rose in response.

Table 7: Analysis of submitted reports per year

Year of submitted report	FLC	No. of received reports	Timeframe of checking the reports in days		
			min	max	average
2016	HU	0	/	/	/
	SI	0	/	/	/
2017	HU	31	20	90	56
	SI	36	4	91	30
2018	HU	92	4	97	71
	SI	92	19	125	70
2019, April 30th	HU	36	17	105	83
	SI	41	60	204	137
Sum		328			

Source: eMS, own analysis

Submitted partner reports reflect the number of projects being implemented each year as well as territorial distribution of project partners. Generally, partner reports are checked by the FLC in 75 days. In 2019, the number of days for report check considerably grew; while the average time needed by Hungarian FLC was still within 90 days' time window, for Slovenian FLC it jumped up to an average of 137 days per report leading to a bottleneck situation. However, it is not expected that the number of partner reports will rise with newly approved projects in the following year, since the first projects are about to finish soon.

The majority of the surveyed beneficiaries agreed that the template for PP reporting was appropriately structured and clear, with a higher share of stronger agreement with this statement among the Hungarian beneficiaries. Some of the beneficiaries believed that the preparation of the reports took too much time and effort, that the reports were too detailed and expected the guidelines for the report preparation to be more detailed.

Over 90% of the surveyed beneficiaries thought that the workshops on reporting helped them implement projects in compliance with the rules, with slightly higher satisfaction levels on the Hungarian side.

The dissatisfaction with the administrative burden that partner reports represent for PPs was high among the beneficiaries surveyed. Their opinion was that the reporting was a procedure requiring excessive effort, and that duplication of evidence and reporting was unnecessary.

While the Hungarian FLC calls PPs for potential clarifications and amendments of a report as many times as needed, its Slovenian counterpart does it only once, giving the beneficiaries five calendar days to submit the required information. Some of the surveyed beneficiaries commented that the timeframe taken by the FLC to process the report was long and that they were given too short deadlines to prepare the clarifications.

The FLC effectiveness, which is identified as the main bottleneck in programme procedures, could be improved by increasing the number of employees in FLCs, simplifying reporting, organising more workshops, and implementing further simplifications (simplifications of the financial part of the eMS reporting).

The FLC controls the project by checking the PP reports and carrying out on-the-spot checks. The project manager controls project implementation through project progress reports and site visits. Apart from those, the programme/projects are subject to audits.

2.4. Overview of projects approved in the first five deadlines

2.4.1. Contribution of approved projects by PA

The outcome of the assessment and selection procedure carried out under five deadlines for project submission were 20 approved projects. Contracts were signed for 19 projects by the cut-off date.

The highest interest of potential beneficiaries measured in the number of received applications under the deadlines was for PA1. **12 approved projects** are expected to contribute to the programme specific objective. The expected result is developed sustainable tourism offer of the programme area based on the protection of natural and cultural resources and activation of local resources to support the increase of overnight stays and leading indirectly to increase in the number of local service providers, enterprises and local jobs.

Under the first two deadlines, 70% and 65% of all received applications targeted this intervention area. The percentage dropped steadily in the following three rounds, reaching (54%, 39% and finally 25% under the fifth deadline). The main reason for this drop lies in the fact that the amount of funds available for the PA gets scarcer with each deadline.

The approved projects (**GREEN EXERCISE, GO IN NATURE, ESCAPE, Guide2Visit, Iron Curtain cycling, Mura Raba tour, TELE-KA-LAND/TELE-KA-LAND, HORSE BASED TOURISM – HBT, GardEN, ETHOS LAND, Wine picnic** and **HOUSES**) contribute, by linking cultural and natural heritage and healthy life motives into new tourist products and packages that will attract more visitors to stay in the region for a longer period of time and provide a high standard of services for them. The programme area will benefit from new green parks, fairy-tale park network, energetic parks, new accommodation facilities, eco camps, museums, network of local providers, creation of new wine tourism products, new themed routes (wine routes, route of traditional houses etc.) and development of different new tourism packages (offering active holidays (including cycling, hiking, water activities) or equestrian, culinary, natural, cultural experiences of the area), other tourism-related services and capacity building actions will also be implemented. One of the strongest themes (also finance-wise) in the frame of this PA is cycling. Almost half of the approved projects are focused on developing and promoting cycling tourism, by developing/upgrading cycling routes that promote natural and cultural heritage on their way and connect them to the cross-border cycling destination. In addition, they will improve cycling-friendly services (cycling centres, e-bike chargers, biker-friendly accommodation, joint mobile app, themed routes etc.). Emphasis is also given to the promotion of new tourism products.

Expected contribution of projects approved under PA1 to the programme output indicators:

- projects will contribute to the increase in the number of visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attractions with 44,325 visitors, representing 440% of the target value of indicator C0009;
- the indicator 6c.2 (people participating in interpretation and educational events related to cultural and natural heritage) has already been overreached standing at 310% of the target value, which means that 6,261 people will be involved in interpretation and educational events;
- 96 new CB-tourism products/services account for 760% of the target value of indicator 6c.3 ;
- approved projects will also contribute to the indicator 6c.4 (cycle tracks and footpaths) with 28.14 km of newly built or reconstructed roads/cycle tracks and footpaths. The indicator value was surpassed (350%).

Other applications submitted for the programme co-financing show that project applicants in the programme area do not cooperate significantly, as similar applications were received from different applicants. To establish synergy between such project applications, the JS enhanced counselling services provided at project development stage and targeting applicants with similar ideas. The JS tried to unite project applicants with similar ideas to avoid as much as possible having too similar projects with the objective to reach as many applicants as possible and cover larger areas within the programme.

The objective of the programme is also to increase the diversity of the projects, thus covering various topics with a similar amount of co-financing.

Eight projects were approved under **PA2** (**Back in the day, E-CONOMY, e-documenta Pannonica, Folk Music Heritage, Green Line, Right Profession II, SENS NETWORK** and **DUAL TRANSFER**), which account for 70% of ERDF funds allocated to this PA. The projects address institutional cooperation in the field of environmental protection, energy efficiency, renewable energy, employment, cultural cooperation, education and local economic development. The fields that have not been tackled yet are social services (social innovation), healthcare, spatial planning, accessibility, civil protection, risk prevention and management.

The result is expected to reflect in a higher level of cooperation, more stable, as well as more extended legal and administrative cross-border cooperation among institutions and organizations from both sides of the border, more efficient public administration, delivery of quality public services and functional governance initiatives to effectively address the joint challenges manifested in the programme area.

Altogether 61 applications were received in the scope of all five deadlines by the end of 2018 (42% of total received applications) under this PA. No projects were selected under the 1st deadline mainly due to the fact that the general project idea was ok, but grew into something too complex (finance- and content-wise) losing the basic concept of the planned project; organisations that already cooperated did not upgrade the cooperation, instead they just signed the protocol and continued focusing on partners that they already knew, a lot of project ideas could be implemented without the cross-border cooperation dimension. The problem kept resurfacing in all subsequent deadlines, but the MA and JS managed to reduce these problems by working together on extra measures. The programme received many applications for PA2, but in terms of the content these applications did not fulfil qualitative criteria nor were they aligned with cooperation programme. The application assessment showed that applicants did not understand properly the intention of the programme priority, so the MA and JS discussed and decided to use a more targeted approach under the PA2.

The approved projects contribute to increasing the level of cross-border cooperation, connecting and exchanging experience, knowledge and existing best practices of involved organisations, making the cross-border area the centre of European economic renewal, establishing a common cross-border regional development platform and knowledge centre network, facilitating better addressing of labour marker challenges (better coordination between the supply of occupations and demand in the labour

market) – better regulation of staff needs in the area, establishing the database of cultural-historic data about localities, increasing the cooperation between educational institutions as well as to exchanging experience and good practices. Everyone involved will put big effort to establishing strategic relevant partnerships.

Expected contribution of projects approved under PA2 to the programme output indicators:

- 291 institutions will participate in CB structures, so far there are already 337 institutions, which makes for 337% of the target value of indicator 11.1 - Increase the number of institutions/organisations involved in cross-border initiatives;
- approved projects will also contribute to the indicator 11.2 - Number of joint professional agreements and protocols with four signed agreements by the end of year 2018, which is 20% of the final target value but 133% of the set milestone at the end of year 2018.

2.4.2. Geographical distribution of the approved projects

Table 8 shows project partners as identified in the approved projects. Those who were not included in the partnership before that deadline (they joined the partnership in the current programming period submitting the respective project) are marked in bold. Partners who already have a project running and applied for the 2nd time or more are listed in brackets. Taking into consideration that some institutions participated in more than one project, a total of twenty approved projects will be implemented by altogether 81 different institutions participating in the CP Interreg V-A Sl-HU. Six of these partners are located outside the programme area (three on the Hungarian and three on the Slovenian side of the border). 43 partners are from Hungary (55%). The majority of project partners are located in the Pomurska region (27), followed by Zala and Vas counties with 21 and 19 partners respectively. The programme is less represented in the Podravska region with only eight project partners, which resembles the results of the first evaluation.

Most of the Lead Partners (LP) are located in the Pomurska region, i.e. eight, followed by Vas and Zala counties (each five LPs). Only one LP is located in the Podravska region.

Legal forms of participating institutions differ, there are private and public institutions, NGOs, counties, municipalities, SMEs, research and development organisations.

Table 8: Location of project partners by NUTS 3 areas (projects approved within first five deadlines)

Slovenia	1st / PPs	2nd / PPs	3rd / PPs	4th / PPs	5th / PPs	Total PPs	Hungary	1st / PPs	2nd / PPs	3rd / PPs	4th / PPs	5th / PPs	Total PPs
Pomurska regija	4	10 (+1)	7 (+5)	4 (+2)	2 (+3)	27 (+11)	Vas County	4	8	6 (+1)	(+3)	1 (+1)	19 (+5)
Podravska regija	0	5 (+1)	2 (+1)	1	0 (+1)	8 (+3)	Zala County	0	7	5 (+1)	6 (+1)	3	21 (+2)
Osrednje-slovenska	0	2	0	1	0	3	*Budapest*	0	1 (+1)	0	0	0	1 (+1)
							Veszprém	0	0	2	0	0	2
Total	4	17	9	6	2	38		4	16	13	6	4	43

Source: eMS, own analysis

2.5. Selected financial data

Commitment of ERDF Funds

92.62% of ERDF funds available for the implementation under PA1 and PA2 will be committed to the projects approved in the scope of five funding rounds.

The funds committed under PA1 account for 100.27% of the priority axis allocation and for 69.39% of the priority axis allocation under PA2. Funds for Technical Assistance were committed in full at the start of the programme implementation. The remaining funds under PA2 are expected to be committed in the 6th round. By the end of March 2017, no payments were made from the programme.

Table 9: Committed ERDF funds per PA

	Programme funds ERDF	Share of ERDF funds committed in %				
		1st deadline ERDF (%)	2nd deadline ERDF (%)	3rd deadline ERDF (%)	4th deadline ERDF (%)	5th deadline ERDF (%)
PA1 (6c)	10.000.000,00	882.321,29 (8,82 %)	6.293.272,26 (62,93 %)	8.535.857,42 (85,36 %)	9.690.491,03 (69,90 %)	10.027.416,14 (100,27 %)
PA2 (11)	3.295.015,00	0,00 (0 %)	332.722,89 (10,10 %)	1.070.830,77 (32,50 %)	1.759.633,83 (53,40 %)	2,286,446,98 (69,39 %)
Subtotal	13.295.015,00	882.321,29 (6,64 %)	6.625.995,15 (49,84 %)	9.606.688,19 (72,26 %)	11.450,124,86 (86,12 %)	12.313.863,14 (92,62 %)
TA	1.500.000,00	1.500.000,00 (100%)	/	/	/	/
Total	14.795.015,00	2.382.321,29 (16,10 %)	8.125.995,15 (54,92 %)	11.106.688,19 (75,07 %)	12.950.124,86 (87,12 %)	13.813.863,12 (93,37 %)

Source: Own calculation

Average size of project budgets

The open call defined the minimum and maximum rate of co-financing by ERDF funds (maximum 85% of total project cost) for each PA:

- PA1: minimum EUR 50,000 and maximum EUR 2,000,000 and
- PA2: minimum EUR 20,000 and maximum EUR 350,000.

The average ERDF contribution for the projects under PA1 stands at EUR 983,080.01and is below the limits set in the open call. The ERDF contribution for the projects supported under PA2 is closer to the upper limits of the open call at EUR 336,242.20. Average total project costs and costs per PPs are shown in the table below.

Table 10: Project budgets overview (total costs)

Priority Axis	No. of projects	No. of PPs	Total project costs in Euro	Average budget per project in Euro	Average budget per PP in Euro
PA 1 – 6c	12	68	11.796.960,06	983.080,01	173.484,71
PA 2 – 11	8	34	2.689.937,61	336.242,20	79.115,81
Total	20	102	14.486.897,67	724.344,88	142.028,41

Source: JS, own calculation

Simplified cost options were introduced in the programme to reduce administrative burden for the beneficiaries:

- lump sum for preparatory costs in the amount of EUR 2,000 per project,
- flat rate of 20% of direct costs other than staff costs/10% for projects including infrastructure and works,
- office and administrative expenditure is reimbursed by the programme according to a flat rate of 15% of eligible direct staff costs (budget line staff costs), no documenting is required.

It is reasonable to compare cost categories under each PA separately.

In the context of PA1 with 12 approved projects, costs for infrastructure and works emerge as the main cost category in one approved project. Staff costs in total project budgets range between 8.97% and 34.94%, and two projects exceed 30%. External expertise and services make up a significant share in three projects, exceeding 50%, whereas nine projects range between 11.99% and 42.05% of total project costs.

Table 11: Main cost categories in approved projects, PA1

Cost category	No. of projects		
	Less than 29,99 %	30 %-49,99 %	50 % - 75 %
Staff costs	10	2	0
External expertise and services	7	2	3
Equipment	11	1	0
Infrastructure and works	7	4	1

Source: Application forms

In terms of PA2 with a total of eight approved projects, staff costs emerge as the main cost category in five approved projects, reaching at most 72.18% of total project costs. External expertise and services make up for between 16.16% and 48.11% of total project costs, with four projects exceeding 30%. Costs for equipment stand below 10% in seven approved projects, one project reaching 24.88%. The share of costs for infrastructure and works is negligible in projects under PA2, whereby seven projects incurred no costs in this respect and one 4.34% of total project costs.

Table 12: Main cost categories in approved projects, PA2

Cost category	No. of projects		
	Less than 29,99 %	30 %-49,99 %	50 % - 75 %
Staff costs	0	3	5
External expertise and services	4	4	0
Equipment	8	0	0
Infrastructure and works	8	0	0

Source: Application forms

Use of simplified cost options in approved projects:

- in 97 of 102 cases (95%), PPs planned office and administrative costs, which are calculated on a 15% flat rate basis, five PPs in three different projects did not plan any costs in this category;

- the option of applying 20% flat rate for staff costs was used by ten PPs (10%) in six different projects; 10% flat rate for staff costs was applied by twelve PPs (12%) in four different projects.

All but three projects (85%) used the option of a lump sum for preparatory costs according to the JS.

23 of 50 survey respondents (46%) used simplified cost options; 43% of them applied them to preparatory costs, 65% of them to staff costs and as many as 82% of the beneficiaries used simplified cost options for office and administration costs. 91% of the respondents found simplified cost options efficient.

Expected achievement of performance indicators

Common and programme-specific output indicators were defined for each priority axis. The values achieved are aggregated values of outputs of approved projects, as indicated by the programme and project intervention logic. This is also reflected in the application form, which creates a clear and direct linkage with project and programme outputs.

Table 13 shows the progress in programme implementation towards the target values of programme output indicators for each IP. Where applicable, two values are presented for each indicator. One is marked with "S", which represents the generated values of 27 selected (approved) projects from the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th deadlines for the submission of applications, which contribute to this indicator. Thus, they indicate the targeted values of what the projects intend (and are obliged) to perform, but have not performed yet. The second set of values, marked with "F", show only the achieved values of the already concluded projects. When this figure is zero, it means that no project that contributes to this indicator has been concluded yet.

Table 13: Common and programme specific output indicators (by PA, IP)

S – Selected operations / F – Fully implemented operations	ID	Indicator (name of indicator)	Measurement unit	Target value[1] (2023)	Cumulative Value					% of Target Value
					2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	
S	CO09	Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attractions (EU)	Visits/Year	10.000	0	0	3.000	28.225	44.325	
F					0	0	0	0	0	
S	6c.2	Number of people participating in interpretation and educational events related to the cultural and natural heritage (P)	Number	2000	0	0	0	3.991	4.261	
F					0	0	0	0	0	
S	6c.3	Number of joint cross-border touristic products / services newly developed (P)	Number	12	0	0	8	75	95	
F					0	0	0	0	0	
S	6c.4	Length of cycle tracks and footpaths	km	8	0	0	0	28,14	28,14	
F					0	0	0	0	0	
S	11.1	Number of institutions/organizations involved in cross-border initiatives	Number	100	0	0	0	277	291	
F					0	0	0	0	0	
S	11.2	Number of joint professional agreements and protocols	Number	20	0	0	0	13	16	
F					0	0	0	0	0	
S	3.1	Number of successfully implemented projects	Number	36	0	7	8	19	27	
F					0	0	0	0	0	
S	3.2	Number of programme events	Number	14	0	1	5	9	14	
F					0	1	5	9	14	
S	3.3	Full time equivalent positions financed by the Technical Assistance for the implementation of the Cooperation Programme	Number	9	0	9	9	9	9	
F					0	3,5	9,14	9,14	9,75	

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[1]   Targets are optional for technical assistance priority axes.

The programme has achieved all set milestones (2018) in performance framework.

According to an overview of all planned values that take into consideration the planned achievements of 27 approved projects, it is expected that the target value for 2023 will be achieved; even more, for most of the indicators the value will be more than doubled.

Table 14 shows the progress of programme in achieving the target values of the performance framework, indicating the achieved 2018 milestone values. Financial performance covers the period by the cut-off date of 2 April 2019. The set amount of EUR 1,714,202.46 for indicator P1.1 was reported and certified by the end of 2018. The amount that was spent but not reported and certified by the end of 2018 stood at EUR 3,868,442.81. This amount was reported, certified and sent to the Commission in 2019 (two applications for reimbursement were sent to the Commission (on 1 February 2019 and 2 April 2019). The amount that was reported and certified in the scope of financial indicator P2.1 by the end of 2018 stood at EUR 394,773.23. The amount that was reported but not certified by the end of 2018 equalled EUR 107,506.12. The amount was certified in 2019. The final amount of reached indicator by the end of 2018 amounted to EUR 502,279.34.

Table 14: Information on the milestones and targets defined in the performance framework

Indicator type	ID	Indicator / key implementation step	Measure. unit	Milestone 2018	Final target 2023	Reached by the end of 2018	Reported and certified by the end of 2018
Financial indicator	P1.1	Amount of certified expenditure for PA1	EUR	600.000,00	11.764.705,89	3.868.442,81	2.154.240,35
Output indicator	CO09	Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural or natural heritage and attractions	Visits/year	800	20.000	12.653	498
Financial indicator	P2.1	Amount of certified expenditure for PA2	EUR	465.755,10	3.876.488,24	502.279,34	394.773,23
Output indicator	11b.1	Number of institutions/organizations involved in CB-initiatives	Number	12	100	337	337
Output indicator	11b.2	Number of joint professional agreements and protocols	Number	3	20	4	4

Source: JS

The number of visits (indicator Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural or natural heritage and attractions) made by the end of 2018 and reported stood at 498. The total number of visits made but not reported in 2018 was 12,155. The number was reported and confirmed by April 2019. Total number of visits made by the end of 2018equalled 12,653. The target number for indicator Number of institutions/organizations involved in CB initiatives was achieved and reported by the end of 2018. The total number reached by the end of 2018 was 337, which can mainly be attributed to the project Right profession II with the target value set at 201, but where there are already 299 involved organisations. Also, output indicator Number of joint professional agreements and protocols was achieved with 54 signed professional protocols.

The presented data show that all milestone values, as defined in the performance framework, were reached. This proves that the programme is performing well and faces no major difficulties that would hinder the implementation of projects and compromise the achievement of objectives and respective targets. Consequently, the programme was not subject to financial corrections, i.e. decommitment by the Commission. It is expected that the final target values for 2023 will also be achieved if the identified activities and target values of the approved projects and established structures progress well.

Table 15 presents the values of programme-specific result indicators, which had to be reported in 2018. The target values for these indicators were reached as well, whereas the indicator Number of overnight stays in the programme area had already reached the 2023 target value.

Table 15: Result indicators (by PA and specific objective)

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Baseline Value	Baseline Year	Target Value (2023)	Interim Value (2018)
1.1	Number of overnight stays in the programme area	Number	5.269.268	2014	5% increase 5.532.728	6.601.261
2.1	The level of cross-border cooperation at institutional level in the programme area	Scale	3,05	2015	20% increase 3,66	3,58

Source: JS

2.6 Communication activities

The MC adopted the Communication Strategy of the programme at its first meeting held in November 2015.

The document builds on the activities and experience of programme communication activities of the previous programming period. An annual communication plan is adopted each year by the MC, and the progress of communication strategy implementation and the annual implementation plan is monitored.

The responsibility for programme communication lies with the MA. In operational terms, communication activities are carried out by the Head of JS and Info Points. The Head of JS is responsible for the overall programme communication. Additionally, programme beneficiaries of supported projects are required to undertake specific project-related communication activities within the scope of their respective projects. The JS provides support to the beneficiaries in the implementation of communication activities and monitors their communication activities.

The general objective of communication is to enhance public awareness of the EU support for projects in the programme area by means of effective use of communication tools, especially by communicating the existence of the EU funding and added value that Cohesion Policy represents for the CP Interreg Slovenia-Hungary in the period 2014-2020. The Communication Strategy sets out three main objectives it pursues, identifies the corresponding activities and interventions to be undertaken, and describes the means/communication tools used to undertake the communication activities in order to achieve the set objectives:

1. The purpose of Communication Strategy is to:
- increase awareness about the programme, EU Cohesion Policy and EU funding among the general public, the stakeholders, the expert public (political audience), the media and the beneficiaries, and highlight the role, achievements and impact of the Cooperation Programme and its projects,
- inform potential beneficiaries about funding opportunities under the Cooperation Programme.

2. Specific objectives at programme level (to motivate potential beneficiaries and to communicate the possibilities of using the EU Funds) are to:

- ensure a well-functioning internal communication system between the programme bodies to make the programme function effectively,
- provide information on all programme-related issues (programme documents, eligible area, available funds etc.),
- strongly promote funding opportunities to activate the potential beneficiaries,
- support the beneficiaries in all phases of project implementation to guarantee the best possible outcome of the projects,
- actively cooperate with other Interreg programmes to share information and best practices and learn from one another, and share general public information on co-financed projects,
- promote the benefits of cross-border cooperation in the programme area.

3. Specific objectives at project level (to inform the target audiences about the practical benefits of the projects implemented and their impact on day-to-day life of the citizens in the cross-border area) are to:

- inform the beneficiaries of the obligations and responsibilities associated with funding,
- support and encourage the beneficiaries in communication activities,
- underline the benefits of cross-border cooperation for the general public in the programme area.

The Communication Strategy also identified the main communication phases and highlighted the main focus of communication:

- promoting the results, benefits and best practices of the OP SI-HU 2007-2013,
- promoting funding opportunities in the frame of the CP Interreg SI-HU 2014-2020,
- promoting the results, benefits and best practices of the CP Interreg SI-HU 2014-2020,
- providing information and support to (potential) beneficiaries and programme partners.

Figure 10: Communication phases
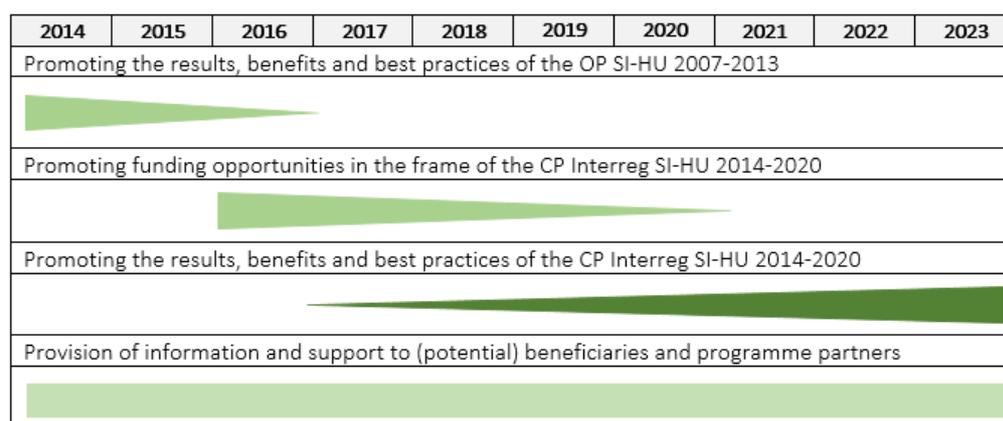
Activities and interventions

The focus of recent activities related to the current programme was on promoting funding opportunities and providing information for potential applicants about how to prepare project proposals. Additionally, promotion of results and best practices is also an important ongoing phase and aspect of communication activities.

1. a) Increasing the level of awareness of the EU funding among the general public and of the benefits of cross-border cooperation for the general public in the programme area in order to create a positive perception of the European Cohesion Policy among members of the general public by:
   - publishing and distributing the brochure on projects of the previous programming period,
   - creating project-related events (e.g. contract signature events) for PPs,
   - organising an event to see good practices on the occasion of European Cooperation Day (2016, 2017, 2018),
   - active media communication,
   - supporting the beneficiaries in carrying out communication activities in their specific sphere.

   b) Ensuring access to programme-related information by:
   - creating and continuously managing the programme website as the main source of information about the programme,
   - disseminating news via the e-newsletter,
   - publishing news on the programme Facebook page,
   - organising workshops on funding opportunities and implementation requirements for potential beneficiaries, applicants and beneficiaries,
   - publications.

   c) Encouraging the integration of potential beneficiaries in Hungary and Slovenia to jointly apply for EU funding supporting cross-border cooperation by:
   - publishing and distributing the brochure on projects of the previous programming period,
   - disseminating information about the open call via e-newsletter, Facebook and on the website,
   - active media communication,
   - seminars and workshops on funding opportunities and implementation requirements for (potential) beneficiaries and applicants.

2. Ensuring a well-functioning internal communication system between the programme structures to make the programme function effectively by:
   - providing all programme-relevant information (and the eMS) on the programme website,
   - communication and information exchange at the MC meetings.

   a) Providing information on all programme-related issues (programme documents, eligible area, available funds, etc.) by:
   - providing all programme-relevant information on the programme website,
   - publishing programme documents, information on calls for proposals and manuals for project implementation;

   b) Strongly promoting funding opportunities to activate potential beneficiaries by:
   - providing all programme-relevant information on the programme website,
   - publishing programme documents and information on calls for proposals on the website, Facebook and via e-newsletter,
   - active media communication,
   - organising events (such as the kick-off event);

   c) Supporting the beneficiaries in all phases of project implementation to guarantee the best possible outcome of the projects by:
   - providing all programme-relevant information on the programme website,

- publishing programme documents, relevant forms and manuals for project implementation,
- face-to-face support from the JS, the NAs, and the FLC;

d) Actively cooperating with other Interreg programmes to share information and best practices, and to learn from one another by:
- providing all programme-relevant information on the programme website,
- communicating programme information via Facebook and e-newsletter,
- organising and participating in seminars (e.g. Interact) or meeting with other cross-border programmes to exchange experience (meeting with Interreg SI-AT, Interreg SI-HU, Interreg AT-HU, Interreg HU-CRO, Central Baltic); study visit of the representatives of executive bodies of the cross-border cooperation programme Kosovo-Macedonia;

e) Providing information on co-financed projects to the general public by:
- publishing a project map and a list of supported projects and relevant project information on the programme website,
- disseminating this information via Facebook and e-newsletter,
- organising an excursion to see good practices on the occasion of European Cooperation Day (2016, 2017),
- supporting the beneficiaries in carrying out communication activities in their specific sphere,
- publishing and distributing the brochure on projects of the previous programming period,
- active media communication;

f) Promoting the benefits of cross-border cooperation in the programme area by:
- organising an excursion to see good practices on the occasion of European Cooperation Day (2016, 2017),
- supporting the beneficiaries in communication activities in their specific sphere,
- publishing and distributing the brochure on projects of the previous programming period,
- active media communication,
- creating project-related events (e.g. contract signature events);

3. a) Informing the beneficiaries about the obligation and responsibilities associated with funding by:
- providing all programme-relevant information on the programme website,
- publishing programme documents, forms and manuals for project implementation,
- face-to-face support from the JS and the FLC;

b) Supporting and encouraging the beneficiaries in communication activities by:
- the JS supporting the beneficiaries in carrying out communication activities in their specific spheres,
- providing the Communication Manual for project implementation,
- publishing project news on the programme website, Facebook, and e-newsletter,
- active media communication,
- creating project-related events (e.g. contract signature events)
- face-to-face support from the JS and the FLC;

c) Highlighting the benefits of cross-border cooperation for members of the general public in the programme area by:
- publishing project information on the programme website,
- disseminating this information via Facebook and e-newsletter,
- organising an excursion to see good practices on the occasion of European Cooperation Day (2016, 2017),

- supporting the beneficiaries in carrying out communication activities in their specific sphere,
- publishing and distributing the brochure on projects of the previous programming period,
- active media communication;

Communication tools

In order to achieve both communication objectives set, different communication tools, including the annual event in the context of the European Cooperation Day initiative, website, newsletter, Facebook profile and signing ceremonies of ERDF contracts are used to reach the target audience, i.e. the general public, potential beneficiaries, experts, political audience and the media.

The communication strategy envisages a set of communication tools, including:

- programme website,
- social media (Facebook),
- e-newsletter,
- publications,
- promotional materials, giveaways etc.,
- conferences,
- seminars and workshops,
- events for members of the general public,
- media communication (press conferences, press releases etc.),
- advertising,
- electronic media (radio, TV),
- best practices.

On-line communication

Programme website

The programme website is the main communication tool for communicating with the (potential) beneficiaries, general public, programme partners'/expert public and the media in line with the programme communication strategy. The dedicated website operates in three languages (English, Hungarian and Slovenian).

The programme website was launched on December 18 2015. The website is designed in compliance with the relevant requirements of the Commission and is intended for all target audiences of the CP SI–HU. It is available in three language versions (SI, HU, EN) and is continuously updated. The website menu contains News, Programme, Open Call, Projects, Map, Partner Search and a section about the relevant programme structures. The intranet was also set up to facilitate work for the JS and programme partners.

The website use is monitored with Google Analytics. The following data apply for the period from December 2015 to December 2018: altogether, there were over 24,000 users and the webpage is well visited, with most visitors recorded in 2016. On average, sessions last 3 minutes and 5 seconds; a bit over 55% of users come from Slovenia, and one third from Hungary. By the end of 2018, 104 news articles were published on events, activities and other relevant information.

Table 16: Information on website use

Year (period)	Users	Page views	Sessions	Sessions SI in %	Sessions HU in %
2015 (Dec 18 – Dec31)	635	7.366	1.105	80,00	17,83
2016	8.964	70.974	21.540	56,43	28,91
2017	6.536	50.623	17.178	57,86	32,27
2018	6.813	39.759	16.277	51,41	32,29
2019 (Jan 1 – Apr 30)	2.755	13.114	5.557	55,01	32,99
Together	24.301	181.836	61.657	55,80	30,91

Source: Google Analytics

While the first evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of the programme carried out in July 2017[2] revealed that the programme website was the main communication channel used to find out information about funding opportunities for 64% of survey respondents (followed by potential project partners, 36%), the situation changed within the following two years. According to the 2019 PP survey, applicants gained information from many sides and sources simultaneously, but most of them heard about the open call for proposals from potential project partners who were the source of information for 35% of survey respondents. The programme webpage was also a significant source of information (28%).

Figure 11 shows that many other communication channels were used, but to a lesser, yet not negligible extent.

Figure 11: Most common communication channels used by LPs
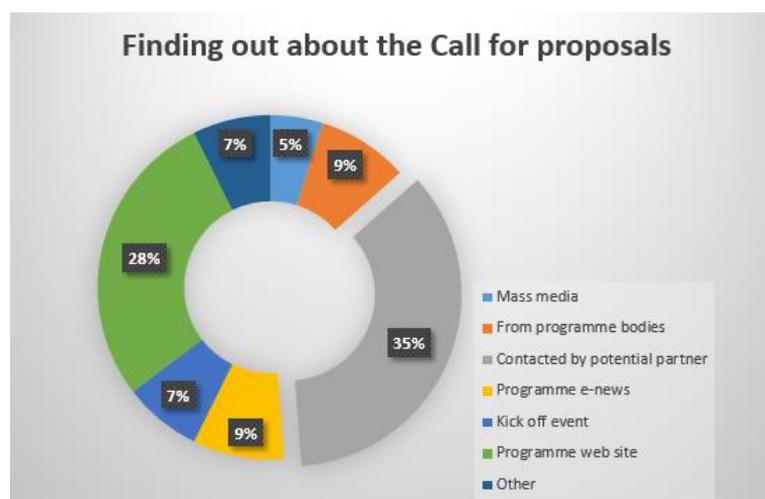
Figure 12 shows that web traffic somewhat decreases around Christmas time every year. There are also peaks recording a traffic of180-200 users per week, which occurs at important dates, such as announcements of deadlines, events, interesting e-news.

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[2] Evaluation of COOPERATION PROGRAMME INTERREG V-A SLOVENIA-HUNGARY, Final report, July 2017.

Figure 12: Overview of the website users
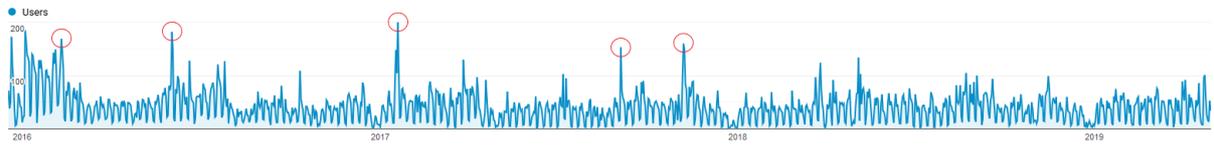
2 % of surveyed respondents use the programme webpage, approximately half of them regularly.

Figure 13: How often is programme web page used by beneficiaries
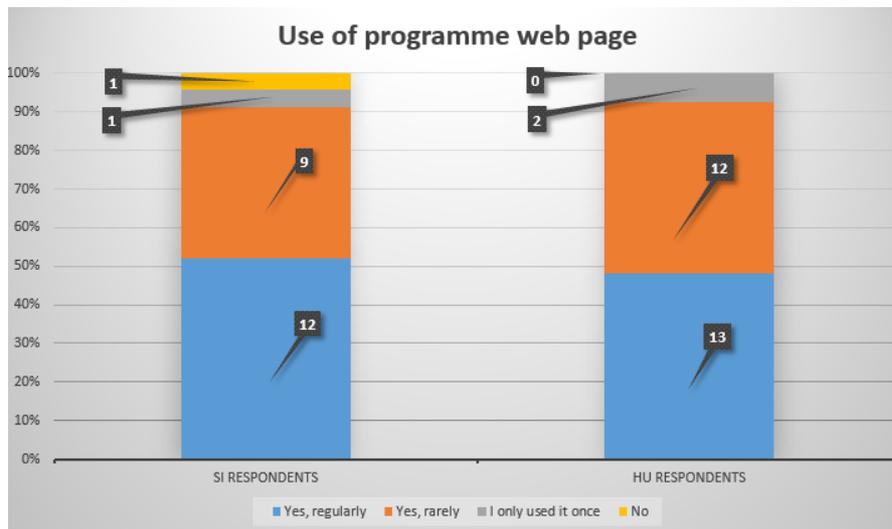
Figure 14: Assessment of the programme website
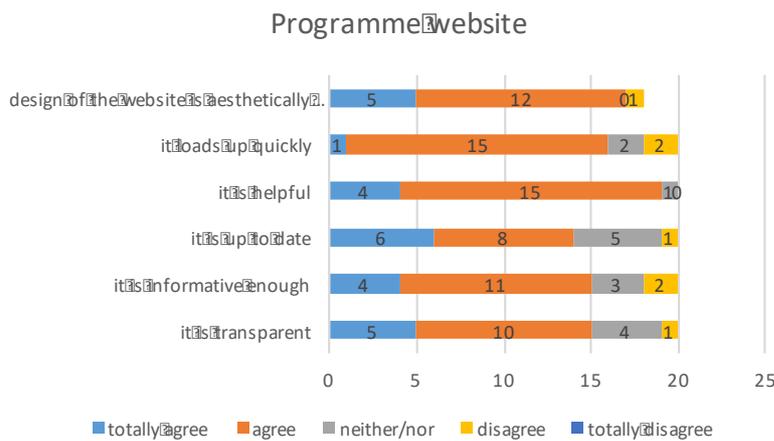
PP survey revealed that for majority of respondents rated the website as appropriate in terms of all of the listed aspects, and indicated the highest level of agreement (75%) with the statement relating to the website being helpful. According to the respondents, there is room for improvement in terms of regular updating of the website, provision of even more informative contents and increased transparency.

The website (www.si-hu.eu) is well recognized and mostly used by the beneficiaries for searching instructions and project news. According to the users/beneficiaries, the website is user-friendly and transparent.

<u>E-newsletter</u>

The e-newsletter is designed to provide news on the programme and supported projects. By the end of 2018, 127 e-newsletters were sent out. The number of subscribers stands at only 212 (after the resubscription which was necessary due to GDPR, the previous figure was 246). 58% of the respondents are subscribed to e-newsletters, of those 34% read each issue and 66% most of issues.

<u>Social media</u>

CP Interreg SI-HU is active on Facebook. The news shown on the website and distributed via e-newsletter are also published on social media.

In October 2016, the programme started building its social media presence by creation of a Facebook profile. During its operation by the end of 2018, altogether 161 people signed up and liked the page, which is followed by almost two thirds of survey respondents, while 12% of them follow it regularly.

Direct communication

<u>Workshops</u>

By the end of 2018, altogether six workshops were carried out addressing potential applicants and beneficiaries and featuring almost 400 participants. The workshops were designed to introduce participants to the programme requirements and eMS system, and provide them with tips on how to prepare a quality project using the intervention logic and which common mistakes to avoid in the preparation of projects. The reporting workshops highlighted the programme rules the beneficiaries need to take into consideration when implementing the activities on information and communication.

The beneficiaries consider workshops as the best source of concise information about the programme.

<u>Events for members of the general public</u>

Every year, the programme organises an event for the general public. The programme was launched in 2015 with a kick-off event. In 2016, 2017 and 2018, these events were held in the framework of European Cooperation Day.

To mark the European Cooperation Day, the JS organised excursions for citizens to visit the supported projects in the border region, and organised a cycling tour across the border area (Raba region) in 2018. Up to 760 people participated in these events.

Both programme partners and the beneficiaries consider such events to be very important for communicating the programme's benefits to members of the general public.

Communication with media and PR / Media communication – advertising

<u>Media communication (press conferences, press releases, etc.)</u>

Press was invited to all public events to promote the programme in the local media (TV AS). During the events, roll-ups are used in order to visualise the programme. Media communication is done via the JS (preparation of press releases and media materials for programme events) in both programme languages (Slovenian and Hungarian). The office for public relations within Government Office for Development and European Cohesion Policy uses different channels to distribute programme-related information to the media.

Electronic media (radio, TV)

Electronic media have not been directly used by the JS or the MA. The JS, however, has supported projects with information, materials, and advice when they were contacted by or contacted media for their project-related presentations in electronic media.

Other communication tools

Publications

The following materials have been published:
- Citizen summary of the Cooperation Programme Interreg SI-HU (in English and in the Slovenian/Hungarian language): 1,200 copies,
- the Cooperation Programme Interreg V–A Slovenia–Hungary (English): 200 copies

These materials were distributed by the programme partners at events, media contacts and at individual meetings.

Promotional materials, giveaways

Practical utensils such as pens, writing materials, USB-sticks with the programme logo have been distributed to participants at events and workshops. Moreover, the uniform visual identity was used for all programme documents (e.g. invitations, handouts, presentations), on the programme website and on promotional materials in the scope of the events and other activities.

On the occasion of European Cooperation Day, giveaway packages with cycling T-shirts, backpacks, water bottles, etc. all featuring the programme logo, were handed out to participants.

Best practices

A brochure on projects supported under the CP Interreg SI-HU in the previous programming period was published in 2015.

Indicators and monitoring

The communication strategy defines a set of result (three) and output (seven) indicators for monitoring the progress and achievements of programme communication.

For the general objective "Enhancing the public awareness of the EU support for projects in the area of CBC" these result indicators have been defined:

- awareness about the EU funded cross border projects,
- recognisability of the CP Interreg SI-HU,
- knowledge of the programme website,
- number of visits to the website.

In January 2018, a survey was carried out targeting the general public as respondents and aiming to measure the visibility and recognisability of the programme. With a 10% response rate it can be said that the survey was successful and can be used as the basis for the communication indicators "Recognisability of the CP Interreg SI-HU" with an achievement of 100%, every respondent already knew the programme, 66% of them also knew the programme website (indicator "Knowledge of the Programme website").

Seven output indicators were defined for the two specific objectives:

(1) "Motivate (potential) beneficiaries / communicate the possibilities to use the EU Funds" and

(2) "Inform target audiences of the practical benefits of the projects implemented and their impact on day-to-day life of the citizens in the cross-border area"

The cumulative values of the implemented activities as well as the indicators achieved by the end of 2018 based on the list of communication tools are presented in Table 17.

Table 17: Assessment of the programme website

Indicator	Units	Target value	Source	2015	2016	2017	2018	Cumulative 2015–2018
Awareness about EU funded CB projects	%	45%	Survey					X
Recognisability of the CP SI-HU	%	60%	Survey				167%	167%
Knowledge of the programme website	%	80%	Survey				66%	82%
Number of visits to the website[3]	Visits	10,000	Monitoring		21.540	17.178	16.277	70.520
Number of submitted electronic messages with informative content	Messages	40	JS	3	25	38	38	104
Number of workshops performed[4]	Workshops	8	JS	0	3	2	1	6
Number of participants at workshops	Participants	400	JS	0	260	101	57	418
Number of mailing list members	Addressee	500	JS		212	256	212[5]	212
Number of created information materials	Issues	1.000	JS	1.300	0	0	0	1.300
Number of events performed	Events	8	JS	1	1	1	1	4
Number of participants at events	Participants	600	JS	150	108	351	150	759

The programme website as the main tool and channel of communication has already greatly exceeded the final target value for 2023, with the indicator "Number of visits to the website" standing at 70.520 visits (targeted value 10,000 visits to the website by 2023).

Altogether six workshops (target value 8.75% success rate of the indicator "Number of workshops performed") were carried out, addressing potential applicants and beneficiaries and featuring over 400 participants (target value 400, which means that the final target value for 2023 of the indicator "Number of participants at workshops'' was achieved).

The number of addresses in the JS database for the mailing list decreased in 2018 (from 246 to 212) due to the GDPR requiring the contacts to actively confirm their willingness to remain in the database. The number of subscribers to the website at the end of 2018 stood at 212, which accounted for 42% of the set value of indicator "Number of mailing list members" (target value 500).

104 e-newsletters were sent out (original target 40 by 2023), which accounted for 300% of the target value.

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[3]   Visits by different users
[4]   Workshops for applicants and workshops for the beneficiaries on reporting
[5]   This number dropped substantially in 2018 due to the GDPR requirements.

Altogether, four promotional events besides workshops were organised, featuring 750 participants (target value eight events with 600 participants). As for the indicator "Number of events performed", the success rate stands at 50%. The achievement of the indicator "Number of participants at events" is 125%.

The indicator and target value concerning created information materials amount to 1,000 issues according to the Communication Strategy. So far, two different information materials have been produced, with a total of 1.300 hard copies. Additionally, it is possible to download these publications from the programme website.

From the abovementioned figures and data it can be inferred that interim performance concerning the set communication indicators is more than just acceptable, since most indicators record over-achievement levels compared to their final target values for 2023.

Communication budget and spending

A budget of EUR 100,000 has been allocated for the 2015–2023 period for programme communication.

Spending of communication budget is monitored by the Head of JS and annually reported to the MC.

Table 18: Spending on the communication measures

Communication budget	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Planned	20.000	20.000	10.000	10.000	10.000	10.000	10.000	10.000	100.000
Spent	24.233,57	30.181,84	6.584,59	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	**0,00**	61.000,00

By the end of December 2018, an amount of EUR 61,000 EUR was spent on communication activities. The main costs included organisation of workshops and events and purchase of promotional materials.

Perception of the cooperation programme by target groups and the general public

First-hand information about how various target groups and the general public perceive the CP SI–HU is not available. A survey would be needed to acquire such information among members of the general public. This has not been done in the scope of programme implementation because the costs of such a survey would be disproportionate against the information acquired.

However, opinions regarding perception of the CP SI-HU among target groups were gathered.

In general, beneficiaries implement their projects successfully and in accordance with the project subsidy contract and applicable rules and regulations. This indicates they know well the requirements for implementing a project under the CP SI-HU regime. The high co-financing rate of the programme is very well accepted. On the other hand, the beneficiaries consider the administrative requirements of the programme demanding.

A sufficiently high number of members of programme target groups have received information about the programme and the requirements to submit project applications. Many of them believe the necessary efforts made for participating in the programme to be rather unfavourable compared to the financing provided under the programme, regardless of their improvement in comparison to the previous period.

Communication at the project level reaches a certain number of members of the general public. The beneficiaries and the programme partners believe they have a positive opinion regarding programme

support in their area, which is probably more due to their awareness of EU support initiatives in the region and less to the actual CP SI-HU.

Even though the programme and project communication might not have a measurable effect on the perception of this specific programme within the general public in the programme region, it contributes to a gradual improvement of knowledge and image among the (limited number of) people directly reached.

3. Evaluation, Conclusions and Recommendations

• EQ1: How effective and efficient are the programme structures?

The assessment is focused on the programme structures related to the implementation of the open call. The assessment was prepared on the following judgement criteria:

- procedures and working processes are established and respected.
- coordination and cooperation between programme bodies is established.

The programme structures related to the implementation of the open call have been effectively set up and operate in a professional manner.

The MA, JS and Info Points, NAs (SI and HU), FLC (SI and HU) and CA are effectively set up. Teams supported under Technical Assistance are deployed and only minor shortages were identified. Problems can arise if any staff member is absent for a longer period of time.

Most of the personnel of the MA, JS, Info Points and NAs was already employed in the previous programming period and continues to work on the programme in the current programming period. The programme structures have a lot of knowledge and experience and the level of institutional memory is high. The competence and experience of the personnel in programme implementation and management seem sound. The staff of the MA, JS, Info Points and NAs is well available to provide support and committed to build its work on the lessons learned from implementing procedures in the previous period. However, in order to secure effective implementation of the communication activities, it is important to assign one person to perform this specific task on a daily basis (activity manager).

The JS (together with Info Points) functions efficiently and effectively, with staff consisting of Slovenian and Hungarian members. The staff possesses solid knowledge of language and background of the regions, which ensures that both countries are well-represented.

The work of the Monitoring Committee was not analysed. However, the MC meetings are organised regularly (at least one a year) and open issues have thus far been resolved. Outstanding issues are also solved outside MC meetings, namely via written procedures. Both countries regularly organise preparatory meetings at national level, which is considered a good practice. Programme bodies have established a Bilateral Working Group where regular coordination takes place and open issues are addressed. In this respect, the cooperation between the bodies seems very effective.

In Slovenia as well as in Hungary FLC is centralised and united for different programmes with overlapping reporting periods which is the reason for occasional work overload causing bottlenecks at the first step of the reporting process. This results in delays which also affect the work of the JS that reviews and confirms the reports at project level, after FLC.

The quality of cooperation among programme partners is solid. Their communication is good and they work towards fast exchange of information, making sure that potential problems are solved quickly and in a constructive manner.

Surveyed beneficiaries who have experience with the 2007-2013 programming period assessed the quality of service provided by the programme bodies comparing it to the one from the previous period. In most cases, the improvement (significant or slight) was noted for the JS (65%), followed by the Info Points (61%) and the MA (48%). Improvement of the services of the Hungarian NA was recognised by 55% and of the Slovenian NA by 32% of respondents.

Overall, efficiency and effectiveness of programme structures is closely linked to procedures and processes in place, which are assessed in the next evaluation question.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended adding an Activity Manager to the JS staff with tasks relating to the implementation of the Communication Strategy.

- EQ2: How effective and efficient are the programme procedures and processes? Are there any bottlenecks identified in the programme procedures and how can they be removed?

Based on the experience with the previous programming period, the programme bodies give considerable attention to ensuring conditions for increasing the efficiency and facilitating the simplification of the programme delivery mechanisms related to the processing of the open call and implementation of the projects.

The assessment was prepared on the following judgement criteria:

- the programme bodies provide quality support to project applicants.
- the programme procedures are user friendly to applicants/beneficiaries.
- the procedures allow for selection of programme-relevant and feasible cross-border projects.
- the programme procedures are implemented efficiently.

The procedures related to the implementation of the open call are established and followed by the involved programme bodies. Separation of functions between the project support and project assessment within the staff of the JS and Info Point is ensured and respected. The assessment and selection procedures as well as related criteria were published and potential applicants were given information about them during workshops as well as via programme website.

The procedures related to processing of five rounds of applications submitted to the open call were carried out in a fairly efficient and effective manner. It is still rather early to assess the overall effects of procedures on the programme level.

The support to potential applicants is well accessible and the overall quality of the provided support is assessed as very good by the users. Experience in the processing of the five rounds of applications however revealed further needs for providing support.

Compared to the 2007-2013 period the introduced changes of the programme procedures and processes have to some extent made the programme less user-friendly for applicants; in particular, due to a stricter AB check procedure and greater complexity of the application forms coupled with deficiencies in the performance of the eMS.

The criteria for assessment of the quality of projects are in part too general.

The efficiency of the project assessment and selection process in terms of the time needed for the MC to make its decision is relatively good, although there are some potential negative effects on the increase

of the overall workload in each of the following deadline is due to repeated assessment procedures for the same project.

The overall programme procedures and processes are efficient and effective, but experience in relation to administrative and eligibility check of the applications (mistakes leading to rejection of what could be a good project) and providing good project application especially in the frame of PA2 show that different ways of assessment should be considered to avoid rejections of applications due to administrative mistakes and to receive good ready-to-go projects. On the other hand, closer cooperation between applicants and the JS in the project generation phase would be established. This could also mean shorter time for assessment.

A more detailed assessment of specific elements and procedures is presented below:

Application pack for development of project proposals, project development and application process

The MA, JS/Info points and NAs support the applicants with a wide range of tools, which were to a great extent coordinated between the three CBC programmes managed by Slovenia (SI-HU, SI-AT and SI-HR). The provided tools were found useful/very useful by the great majority of surveyed PPs (98% (CP), 90% (Implementation manual) to 80% (FAQs).

The project application pack published on the programme website comprises relevant information needed to develop a project proposal and to submit an application. The Implementation manual for beneficiaries is well structured into key contents/phases and offers appropriate guidance for applicants and beneficiaries.

The Application Form (AF), which is based on HIT tools and available in eMS, is quite detailed in some parts. Especially the preparation of the project budget requires some time since it needs to be broken down in much detail. There is considerable difference in the maximum ERDF contribution between the PA1 and PA2, whereas the requirements with regard to the level of details to be provided in the AF are the same. Detailed planning in the application phase can later effectively support the implementation and allows for effective monitoring of project achievements.

Aligning of the project with the requirements of CP is also a rather difficult task for applicants. Many applicants failed to understand the focus of the PA2 (capacity building, institutional cooperation) and applied with projects that tackled other key themes which were relevant for the sectors/thematic areas, however not the priority of the CP.

Programme structures in general provide sufficient and good support to the potential beneficiaries in the project idea development phase of development. Programme structures emphasise the importance of individual consultancy for beneficiaries stressing it is more important than workshops, which was also confirmed by beneficiaries.

The information support provided by programme bodies was well available (phone, e-mail, individual face-to-face meetings, workshops, site-visits and other events) and according to respondents effective. Attendance in the workshops for applicants was very good and the interest for the programme was high; however, the applicants seem not to have recognised the benefits of discussing content-related aspects of applications in the early stage of implementation of the open call with the programme bodies.

Experience from the first five rounds revealed further needs for support: improving the capacities of applicants to establish appropriate intervention logic compliant with the CP, improving the overall quality of project proposals and giving support in partner search to new potential applicants.

Application process in eMS

eMS system is used by all programme bodies, applicants and beneficiaries. It supports the majority of programme procedures.

The eMS system was and still is expected to be an effective and efficient solution for the overall programme management and implementation. The system is constantly improved. Besides the improvements of the eMS we believe that the competences of applicants for using the system will also strengthen and that greater attention will be given to the preparation of the application without formal mistakes, which contributes to enhancing the effectiveness of the AB check in the 2nd and the following rounds.

In the application phase, the JS and the MA remain at full disposal for any issues or questions that the applicants may have. Until the deadline, IT support is available to resolve potential problems regarding the eMS.

In the opinion of beneficiaries, the support from programme structures is very good, however the application form itself is rather complex.

According to the beneficiaries that commented the application form, dissatisfaction occurs notably due to bilingualism, the limited number of characters in text fields and the time it takes to complete the form.

Administrative and eligibility check - AB check procedure

Experience from the previous programming period showed that a number of applicants were asked for clarifications or invited to provide the missing documents during the AB check, which prolonged the procedure. The AB check procedure was therefore simplified compared to 2007-2013 and made shorter. More responsibility with regard to ensuring sufficient financial and operational capacity as well as with regard to management of investments was put on project partners. The exclusion of the clarification step made this procedure less user-friendly for those applicants who were rejected for minor formal mistakes that could have been resolved relatively quickly within the same procedure. Feedback on the project quality was thus also postponed to the next deadline (provided the applicant decided to reapply and the AB check was successful in the next round). In this respect, the procedure was considerably user-unfriendly for the applicants.

On the other hand, rejections due to formal mistakes increased the overall workload of the applicants and the JS at the overall programme level.

One of the bottlenecks identified by the JS in the application process is bilingualism. Applicants are required to submit the application in both the Slovenian and Hungarian language, including the executive summary in English, which represents a burden as it is time-consuming and costly. Application forms should be consulted by all structures and available in both languages, therefore bilingualism should be maintained. After the first four deadlines, a new paragraph was inserted considering administrative compliance and eligibility check within the 7th written procedure in April 2018 setting out that, in case of incorrectly entered fields (maximum of four fields) which are assessed against administrative criterion A4 (the application pack is compiled in the required language(s)), the LP is asked for amendments. The LP can supplement the Application Form within five calendar days after the request for amendments was sent via eMS system. If the project still fails to fulfil the administrative and eligibility criteria after the receipt of the amendments or after the period of five calendar days, the project is rejected. The project is not to be further assessed regarding the quality.

Applicants who reapply with the same project under the following deadline have to enter the project once more in the eMS, so that the JS has to perform the checks once again in full. From this point of view, a single AB check was more efficient in terms of processing a batch of received applications more

quickly, whereas for the entire programme the effect is not the same. Thus, only high level of administrative quality of submitted applications can positively affect overall efficiency at the programme level. Promising developments were shown in the 2nd round with 79% of the applications passing the AB check. Under the 5th deadline, the percentage jumped to 92%.

The administrative and eligibility check appears to be very formalistic with very little room for human error.

Assessment of project quality

Quality checks are performed by a small number of the JS staff. Each application is numerically assessed by two evaluators with their assessment and arguments/comments available in the eMS. This helps harmonise the approach to assessment, which reflects in relatively few discrepancies in majority of assessments. Results of assessments show that the quality of proposed projects has been steadily increasing with programme duration. In this respect, the postponement of projects by the MC, which gives an opportunity for the applicants to improve projects and enter data in the existing application and apply once more, is considered appropriate, although the project has to go through the whole assessment and selection cycle once again.

The sets of criteria for quality assessment cover the relevant aspects of a good cross-border project. IP specific criteria for 11b were not fully transparent for a potential applicant since certain overlaps of IP specific and strategic criteria made the assessment less clear in terms of the weight given to a specific element of assessment. These were identified during the first evaluation of the programme (recommendations) and later on clarified by the JS.

Project quality is mainly assessed in terms of the project contribution to programme objectives' expected results and outputs with some emphasis on the field specific content/idea of the project. The division of scores in the assessment grid strongly supports the strategic and result orientation of the programme; however, implementation capacity and feasibility play an important role in the actual achievement of strategic objectives. Although all relevant operational aspects are checked, their relative importance in the overall score is somewhat diminished with 22% compared to 61% of total points given to the strategic and IP specific criteria.

The JS staff cannot work full time on the assessment procedures because of other tasks and responsibilities assigned. Therefore, there is only little room for making the procedures shorter while maintaining the quality of service.

The assessment procedures were discussed at MC meetings (in the scope of discussions on rejection/ postponement/ approval of the applications) and a suggestion was made to involve external experts in the assessment step. Since different approaches to assessment have been tried under previous programmes (external assessors, external assessors in combination with the JS), the MA/JS believe that the use of internal assessors proved to be the best option compared to previous practices. The JS staff was involved in the programming process and boasts good knowledge of the programme objectives, contents and expected results.

Resolution of complaints

Complaints are only possible at the administrative and eligibility check stage.

According to the programme structures, there have been no problems in this respect. Until now, no complaints have been received. The system is transparent and evaluation of the effectiveness of that stage of the project management cycle is very good.

Project decision for ERDF funding

The period from receiving the MC decision to the signing of subsidy contracts varies in duration and depends on the conditions to be fulfilled by applicants, the readiness of project partners to start with the implementation and similar. In case of, for example, projects comprising road/cycle path constructions, and in accordance with the programme rules, when the applicants may submit investment documentation within six months from the MC decision on approval, the condition-fulfilment period significantly prolongs. Additionally, one of the reasons for late signing of the contracts can be holidays (the need to organize face-to-face meetings with beneficiaries prior to signing the contracts). As the JS is a small team, longer absence of one staff member can significantly slow down the process. As the persons who provide consultations to potential beneficiaries cannot be nominated as assessors, it is difficult to provide a replacement for the assessors who are absent for a longer period of time.

The length of period from the project submission to the signing of the subsidy contract was similar in all five deadlines but shortest in the 2nd round when the number of applications processed under the quality assessment increased by almost four times in comparison to the 1st round. Considering the existing delivery framework, where resources for the AB check and quality assessment are fixed and limited, the overall timeline until the MC decision mainly depends on the number of received and processed applications.

The possibility to submit the investment documentation for construction of road and cycle routes prolongs the time between the MC decision and the actual start of the project, but is nevertheless considered favourable by the applicants. If conditions are not met and subsidy contract not signed, this may significantly compromise the progress towards the achievement of programme objectives.

In comparison to the 2007-2013 programming period, the average time needed for the processing of applications decreased significantly, i.e. from 11.3 months[6] to 8.25 months (exceptions not included). Yet, almost one third of the survey respondents believe the assessment procedure is performed in an acceptable timeframe, and 22% think it takes absolutely too long.

By the set cut-off date, the programme has been effective in terms of ensuring enough deadlines in order to allow for a frequent inflow of applications and give a second chance to the postponed projects or projects rejected at the AB check to reapply in a relatively short period of time. In 2018 and the years to follow, announcement of deadlines will depend on the situation (e.g. expressed interest of applicants, available funds remaining).

Project implementation, reporting, and control

After the project approval, a contract manager is appointed to each project to monitor its progress and arrange possible project changes with the LP. The MA and JS (contract managers) adequately support the beneficiaries during project implementation, although they have many other duties to carry out. eMS is highlighted as a big asset to the projects as it enables a good overview of the project's content and dynamics.

The surveyed beneficiaries agreed that the programme offered clear and understandable guidelines on how to implement projects, e.g. through the Implementation Manual. The majority of the surveyed beneficiaries agreed that the Implementation Manual clearly explained which costs were eligible and which were not, as well as which methods for the verification of expenditures should be applied. Any change of rules on the eligibility of costs during the project implementation was considered as an inconvenience.

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[6] Evaluation of the Operational Programme Cross-border Cooperation Slovenia-Hungary 2007-2013.

Many PPs consider partner reports to be a rather significant administrative burden which requires too much effort.

The long checks of partner reports by Slovenian FLC are seen as a bottleneck, since the JS members review and approve the reports at the project level after FLC has done its work. Possible reasons for FLC needing more time to check the partner reports are:

- overlapping of reporting periods of several programmes
- lack of staff
- mistakes (made by beneficiaries) that prolong the checks
- simplified cost options not chosen by beneficiaries.

Nevertheless, the overall impression is that the programme is running smoothly, even though the team managing it is small and thus has considerable workload while its members have several different roles and tasks to carry out. Delay or other possible problems may arise when an individual (or a group of people) is absent for a longer period of time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following is recommended:

Ways to reduce burden on applicants are to be considered in the following perspective. It is proposed to shorten the application form, on the one hand merging some sub-sections in Project description section and on the other, putting more focus on the activities and project content in the Work plan section.

To reduce the administrative burden of reporting for PPs and decrease the amount of time needed for checking the reports for FLCs, more effort should be put into use of further simplified cost options already before the submission of project applications.

When peaks in workload are expected, additional temporary technical support should be provided to the FLC.

- ## EQ3: In how far was simplification and harmonisation of procedures achieved?

The programme uses several mechanisms which support harmonisation and alignment between the programmes (HIT tools, eMS, simplified cost options, acceleration of application and reporting procedures through eMS). CBC programmes managed by Slovenia have already been harmonised to a great extent.

Use of eMS and fewer accompanying documents mostly added to simplifying matters and reducing the overall administrative burden for the beneficiaries.

The JS/Info Points promote the use of simplified cost options at the workshops they carry out. The aim of simplified cost options is to reduce the amount of needed paperwork and to speed up the reporting, verification and control procedures. The use of simplified cost options is even more emphasised during individual consultations, where the JS/Info Points provide advice to and constructively discuss concrete project proposals with potential applicants.

The use of simplified cost options is mandatory for the administrative costs category. It is offered by the programme as the only possible way of claiming this type expenditure and thus contributes to simplification for both the beneficiaries and FLC controllers.

Project applicants only rarely decide for simplified cost options for staff costs, since cross-border projects have high personal intensity levels and simplified cost percentage is not sufficient. Based on PPs' approaches taken in the approved projects, the use of flat rate for staff costs shows more potential in projects under PA1 (6c), which usually have a higher budget and often include infrastructure development and works, purchase of equipment. However, this option has been used by a relatively low share of PPs (19%). The nature of projects under PA2 (11b), which are linked to institutional cooperation and capacity building, assumes even greater involvement of project partners' staff. Considering the smaller size of projects, flat rate options for staff costs are more difficult to apply under this PA; however, 2% of PPs nevertheless applied it.

Compared to the previous programing period, the AB check was also subject to simplification; yet the applicants found it rigorous and had difficulties passing this check in the first deadlines.

RECOMMENDATION

Promote and strongly encourage the beneficiaries to use the simplified cost options in the future.

- EQ4: How user friendly are programme procedures and forms? Are there any improvements necessary in the programme procedures?

Programme procedures, processes and forms are already described in detail under Q2 and are considered user-friendly by the majority of users.

All involved parties contribute constantly to the improvement of the programme procedures to ease the potential or present burden on programme structures as well on beneficiaries. Programme procedures are already being shortened in many ways (considering administrative, eligible and quality assessment).

The analysis of data and information gathered underlines the recurring issue of poor translations and/or rejection of the applications in the AB check for reasons of not complying with the bilingualism requirements (not to the same extent under all deadlines).

The programme bodies should further monitor the quality of projects. If appropriate, the option to introduce a two-step application procedure (concept, full applications) in the next programming period should be considered. Also, simplified applications especially for the projects of smaller size should be envisaged.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Use digital signatures of documents already in the application phase to avoid the printing, scanning and uploading steps.

The relevant authorities should consider whether it would be acceptable to submit the project applications only in one language, i.e. English (executive summary in Slovenian and Hungarian languages) in order to avoid any misunderstanding due to poor translation and/or rejections out of bilingualism reasons in the AB check.

- EQ5: How effective and efficient is the programme implementation, also in the context of programme 2021-2027?

Performance (2018)

The programme is characterised by a relatively long programming period and subsequent late start of implementation. Although the milestones were set relatively low, the achievement of targets seemed more problematic for the PA2, where after two rounds only one project was being implemented (Evaluation 2017[7]). The problem of understanding PA2 corresponding to the TO 11 is not an open issue anymore. While it attracted attention throughout previous years and important measures were taken to address the issue, the same problem still resurfaces from time to time, but is not as extensive. Nevertheless, thanks to the measures taken (focused workshops and individual consultations), the projects received in 2018 were already of a much better quality. Both in 2017 and 2018 focused workshops were prepared on TO 11. In the frame of these workshops, the participants learned how to prepare quality projects especially under PA2 (how to develop a proper intervention logic, get to know best practices under PA2). An interesting open discussion was carried out in the frame of a round table on themes such as cooperation, institutional capacity, target orientation, project quality from the perspective of the CP Interreg V-A Slovenia-Hungary. At the same time, potential applicants under PA2 were invited to individual consultations throughout 2018.

The programme has achieved all milestones (2018) set in performance framework. Some indicators, both output and financial, were reached by the end of 2018; not all of them were reported by the end of that year but only at the beginning of 2019 when the rest of the indicators achieved had been reported and approved/certified.

- ## EQ6: What are the characteristics of the partnerships? Do they reflect the expectations of the programme?

In terms of their legal status, the majority of Lead Partners (as well as project partners) are regional or local public authorities (8 out of 20), followed by non-profit organisations, NGOs (7) and other. There are three SMEs participating as partners in the programme.

In terms of geographical distribution of Slovenian beneficiaries, there are 27 beneficiaries located in the Pomurska region and only eight in the Podravska region, while Hungarian beneficiaries are more evenly spread across counties Vas and Zala with 19 and 21 partners, respectively.

Half of the running projects have a Lead Partner located in Slovenia, and the other half in Hungary. One Slovenian beneficiary acts as Lead Partner in two projects.

According to the beneficiaries, partnerships were not very difficult to form and the majority of project partners or project leaders knew at least some of the other partners beforehand. The beneficiaries found it most hard to find a suitable match, a partner in a particular field of expertise, or an institution with similar needs in developing a project idea. They also spent quite some time finding a qualified institution in terms of project management, personnel and financial capacity. 16% of survey participants stated having problems establishing a new cross-border partnership. Successful communication was hindered by the language barrier as the JS noted and partners on the ground confirmed. Trust, previous experience and time play an important role in forming partnerships and developing quality projects.

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[7] Evaluation of the Operational Programme Cross-border Cooperation Slovenia-Hungary 2007-2013.

- ## EQ7: What is the progress in implementation of Communication Strategy and achievement of the set objectives?

The implementation of the Communication Strategy is making steady progress towards the set objectives in accordance with the target values of the Communication Strategy indicators. The programme authorities effectively established communication tools for the purpose of both internal and external communication. Access to the programme information and funding opportunities and results of the assessment and selection processes are made available to the public. Up till now, the general public was addressed to a lesser extent.

The programme website, i.e. the main communication tool, is structured in a meaningful way and regularly updated with news. At present, the published contents mainly target potential applicants and beneficiaries, which complies with the implementation phase foreseen in the Communication Strategy – promoting funding opportunities.

The website succeeded in reaching its target audience, which is evident from the website statistics and LP survey; however, the website seems to be more recognisable among and used by Slovenian than Hungarian users. In terms of comparing the achievement figures against the targets set in the Communication Strategy, data show that web traffic exceeded the targets for 2023 by seven times, but only in one year. Other target levels for indicators in the Communication Strategy are more realistic and the progress is being made steadily.

Communication activities focusing particularly on the general public have so far have been less intense and concentrated mainly on one event. The Facebook account shows considerable room for attracting followers and increasing the interaction between the programme and target audiences.

So far, programme communication has covered all the envisaged communication activities and employed almost the entire range of communication tools. Programme communication has used the entire set of envisaged and available communication tools in a concerted manner. The programme dedicated website is the basic source of all programme-related information. This site contains information on all programme-relevant aspects as well as information about the activities and outputs of other communication tools. It is regularly updated and administered in-house by the JS and Info Points. The accuracy and availability of programme-related information on the website is very much appreciated both by the programme partners and the beneficiaries.

Workshops are also considered an important source of information about the programme, funding opportunities and requirements.

The annual events held on European Cooperation Day are very highly rated as an appropriate communication tool for informing particularly the members of the general public about the programme.

The progress towards achieving the target values of the defined output indicators is well underway and in some indicators ahead of the plan by December 2018. This shows effective communication activities of the programme. The question regarding the relevance of the chosen indicators is highlighted by the following indicators: "Awareness about EU-funded cross-border projects" and "Recognisability of the CP SI-HU" where survey has been used as a measuring method. The methodology set is partly inappropriate, since the survey is published and performed publicly and builds on anonymity; it is nearly impossible to expect that the survey will be filled in by the same people many times.

Communication spending is higher than planned at the moment. Higher expenditures on communication activities incurred in the first few years, which are in line with the plan in the eMS, can be attributed to the needs related to the programme start phase. Unfortunately, lack of the funds

earmarked for the implementation of communication activities hinders the use communication tools to a wider extent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Assign one person to be responsible for carrying out communication activities (communication manager) instead of having the Head of JS as the activity manager.

Continue to use the wide range of communication activities and communication tools.

Consider leaving out the two indicators measuring general awareness or reconsider the methodology used when preparing the programme for the following programing period.

Maintain the website as the central, relevant and attractive communication tool serving as the backbone for programme communication.

Continue to organise events, such as European Cooperation Day, to increase the visibility of the programme and projects and their results, as there has been a very good response in previous initiatives.

Continue to apply the manner of spending and monitoring of expenditures for programme communication in place.

Consider planning a higher amount of TA funds for communication activities in the period beyond 2020.

- ## EQ8: What is the progress of the programme towards the targets of specific objectives?
  - Most of the approved projects are midway through the project implementation (four will finish in the end of July 2019, for one approved project the subsidy contract was signed in June). Therefore, the likely progress towards the targets of specific objectives is assessed on the basis of the projects' contribution to the targets by the cut-off date.
  - With as many as 92.42% of the programme ERDF funds committed to the approved projects, these are likely to contribute effectively towards the achievement of the output indicators. The progress is in particular promising under PA1. The progress towards the achievement of the specific objectives of PA2 is moderate in terms of the number of approved projects and sectors addressed so far.

In terms of geographical coverage, the programme achievements are likely to be more visible in the Pomurska region and Vas and Zala counties.

PA1: ATTRACTIVE REGION

PA 1 - Specific objective 1.1: To increase attractiveness through the diversification and cross-border integration of the sustainable touristic offer in the programme area, based on the protection of the elements of cultural and natural heritage and development of products and services in the less developed rural areas linking them to touristic magnets.

100% of ERDF funding allocated to PA1 was committed to twelve projects which aim at linking natural and cultural heritage of the area to create different tourism offer, products and services that should (through creation of packages) attract more visitors to the programme area.

Table 19: PA1 - Expected contribution of approved projects to the programme output indicators

ID	PA 1 - Output Indicator	Measurement unit	Milestone (2018)	Planned within 17 contracted projects (2018)	Achieved within 17 contracted projects (to end of 2018)	Planned within 20 contracted projects from all 5 deadlines	Target value (2023)
CO009	Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attractions *(EU)*	visits/year	800	44.325	12.653	44.325	10.000
6c.2	Number of people participating in interpretation and educational events related to the cultural and natural heritage *(P)*	number	0	4.261	868	6.261	2.000
6c.3	Number of joint cross-border touristic products / services newly developed *(P)*	number	0	95	12	96	12
6c.4	Length of cycle tracks and footpaths	km	0,00	28,14	0,92	32,14	8,00

Source: JS and own calculation

The figures on the contribution of these projects to the achievement of programme output indicator targets show that the programme is progressing very well (table 14). By now it is clear that some targets were set too modest at the programming stage.

The highest increase is expected with regard to the number of joint cross-border tourism products. 96 joint cross-border products and services are to be developed by twelve projects currently implemented. If they are implemented effectively, the target figure will be multiplied by eight. However, the CP nor the Implementation manual for beneficiaries provide any common definition of what is meant to be a joint cross-border product, which gives rise to different interpretations of the term by the beneficiaries.

Relatively ambitious are also the beneficiaries' predictions about the expected annual increase in the number of visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attractions. The beneficiaries proposed their own methodologies setting out how visits will be measured or assessed.

The outputs indicator 6C.4 (length of cycle tracks and footpaths) has the potential to surpass the planned programming values, since expected targets already match the 2023 target value multiplied by four.

The actual achievements and contribution to the programme specific objectives will be possible to assess at later stages when project outcomes become visible.

Expected result: To achieve higher level of development of sustainable forms of tourism in the remote, rural regions of the programme area, while building on the experience and attractiveness of the important tourism centres located here.

The CP foresees to measure one programme specific result indicator, i.e. 'Number of overnight stays'. Gross value for the result indicator is easy to get from the official statistics, whereas determining the net effects of the programme will be more challenging. PA1 projects plan investments that will increase accommodation capacities in the area or offer tourism products for tourists that can use accommodation capacities in the vicinity. As projects, in general, focus on attracting visitors to the

programme area, a methodology for assessing the contribution to the generation of overnight stays is hard to develop and contribution hard to assess.

Considering the funds available for the PA1 in the programme, the target for this result indicator (5% increase or 263,460 overnight stays by 2023) seems overambitious.

Results to be achieved under this PA are expected to be wider. They could e.g. comprise increased awareness of people included in interpretation events, increased income of tourist providers, new job opportunities in less developed areas, improved visibility of destination and its cultural and natural heritage, increased cooperation between tourism magnets and rural hinterland etc. These cannot be captured by one proposed indicator only.

PA2: COOPERATIVE REGION

PA 2 - **Specific objective 2.1:** To increase the capacity for cooperation in order to reach a higher level of maturity in cross-border relations.

Eight approved projects, to which around 50% of ERDF funds available for this PA was allocated, is expected to triple the targets set for the output indicator measuring the number of institutions and organisations involved in cross-border initiatives (11.1), which may indicate that the target figures were set low in the programming phase.

Table 20: PA2 - Expected contribution of approved projects to the programme output indicators

ID	PA 2 - Output Indicator	Measurement unit	Milestone (2018)	Planned within 17 contracted projects (2018)	Achieved within 17 contracted projects (to end of 2018)	Planned within 20 contracted projects from all 5 deadlines	Target value (2023)
11.1	Number of institutions/organizations involved in CB-initiatives	number	12	291	337	311	100
11.2	Number of joint professional agreements and protocols	number	3	16	4	17	20

Source: JS and own calculation

An important factor to observed when assessing the actual outcomes of the projects is the intensity and quality of involvement and interactions between the relevant institutions. The progress in the implementation of this priority affects mainly the output indicator 11.2 which measures the number of joint professional agreements and protocols. With half of the funds still available, the target is expected to be reached within the next (6th) deadline.

The priority targets a relatively wide spectrum of different sectors where the institutional cooperation is supposed to increase (environment, social services, employment, spatial planning, public transports, civil protection and risk, cultural cooperation). The received applications showed there was some potential for cooperation; however, the quality of proposed projects is increasing slowly and PA2 is progressing with every next deadline.

> **Result indicator**: The level of cross-border cooperation at institutional level in the programme area; 20% increase on the scale by 2023 (survey, baseline 3.05 in 2015)

It is expected that the projects will achieve other results besides helping increase cross-border cooperation at institutional level (e.g. increase in the competences of people within cooperating institutions, improvement in the quality of services for the users, new cross-border services or models of cooperation, …), which may not be captured by the survey alone.

PA3: TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

> **Specific objective**: Contribution to the efficient implementation of the Cooperation Programme

The programme implementation started with a considerable delay, in turn, most of the projects are only now halfway through the implementation. Four projects are in the last stage and supposed to finish by the end of July this year. The team financed by the TA funds is fully assigned to the programme and operates with a rather high level of intensity. The project events seem to be progressing very well and will surpass the planned target values.

Table 21: TA - Expected contribution of approved projects to the programme output indicators

ID		PA 2 - Output Indicator	Measurement unit	Target value (2023)	Cumulative value					
					2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	% of target
S	3.1	Number of successfully implemented projects*	number	36	0	7	8	9	27	75
F					0	0	0	0	0	0
S	3.2	Number of programme events	number	14	0	1	5	9	14	100
F					0	1	5	9	14	100
S	3.3	Full time equivalent positions financed by the Technical Assistance for the implementation of the Cooperation Programme		9	0	9	9	9	9	100
F			number		0	3,5	9,14	9,14	9,75	108

Source: Own calculation; *indicator 3.1 includes PA1, PA2 and TA projects; **S – selected operations (forecast provided by beneficiaries, F – fully implemented operations (actual achievement)

- ## EQ9: How is the programme adopted by the target groups, especially by relevant stakeholders and by the general public?

There are no reliable first-hand data available regarding the perception of the CP SI–HU among the target groups and the general public. In comparison to (potential) beneficiaries and programme partners, the general public is most difficult to reach.

However, the participation of target groups in the CP SI–HU shows that, according to the programme partners, the target audiences are aware of the existence of CP SI–HU. They perceive it as an attractive, but administratively quite demanding source of financing of their cooperation initiatives.

Not many members of the general public in the region are aware of this specific cooperation programme and the support it provides. However, the people who are in one way or another in contact with the actual programme and the project activities have a positive opinion about it, so that the programme and project communication contributes to getting the citizens better informed regarding EU support in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Continue to use the mix of communication activities both at the programme and project level, and even intensify communication, particularly in the remainder of the programming period, on/with supported projects and on specific project outcomes.

Assign one additional person to be responsible for continuous work on communication activities. To fill one FTE, one person could manage activities connected with several cooperation programmes.