



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

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REVISED FINAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interreg – IPA Bulgaria – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia IPA Cross-border Programme 2014 – 2020

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

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Executive Summary

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

The Interreg – IPA CBC Bulgaria – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme 2014 – 2020 is implemented under the European Union (EU) Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II), which is established by the Council Regulation (EC) No 1085/2006 and implemented according to Commission Regulation (EC) No 718/2007.

The overall objective of the IPA CBC Programme Bulgaria – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2014 – 2020 (the Programme) is to intensify cross-border cooperation between the people and institutions of the region in order to jointly address common challenges and exploit untapped potentials. The Programme has three thematic priorities: 1) Protecting the environment, promoting climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management; 2) Encouraging tourism and cultural and natural heritage; 3) Enhancing competitiveness, business environment and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, trade and investment.

The Programme is structured along three main priority axes - Environment (Priority axis 1), Tourism (Priority axis 2) and Competitiveness (Priority axis 3), with a fourth Priority axis dedicated to the Programme's management (Technical assistance). The total budget of the Programme for the period 20014-2020 is EUR 19.46mn, with Union support amounting to EUR 16.54mn.

The Programme is managed under the shared management mode. The Managing Authority (MA) for the Programme is the Bulgarian Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, having as counterpart the Macedonian Ministry of Local Self-government, the National Authority (NA). Joint secretariat (JS) is established with main office in Kyustendil and a branch office in Strumica.

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

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

Effectiveness and efficiency of the programme management system

The eligible activities under each PA as described in the Programme were incorporated in the eligible activities under the First and Second calls. The programme output indicators were directly used for project indicators. The application procedure of the First call of the Programme was well managed in terms of time frame, quality and usefulness of guidelines and support provided by the JS. The Guidelines for application under the Second call addressed some minor deficiencies identified under the First call – the assessment and complaint procedures were streamlined and more details were provided about



the measurement of the output indicators. The selection criteria under the Second call were adapted so that projects that contribute significantly to achievement of the target values of the output indicators were preferred.

The tools and processes used for reporting and monitoring of the implementation of the projects under the First call generally allow for proper and timely follow-up of the achievement of the output indicators. The work organization of the JS staff together with the detailed quarterly reporting of project progress using the online Beneficiaries portal supported the timely identification of issues with the implementation of projects. The beneficiaries assessed positively the support they received during the implementation phase of the Programme. The PIM and the trainings were evaluated as very helpful and sufficiently detailed and the work with the newly introduced Beneficiaries portal was facilitated by the timely support from experts. Additionally, the beneficiaries highlighted the verbal support they received from the JS staff on various issues and topics.

The overall conclusion is that the management system of the Programme is properly established, operates efficiently and effectively and supports the achievement of Programme's objective.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the Programme

The list of output indicators provide timely and complete picture of the implementation of the Programme as they encompass all possible activities and outputs for the respective specific objective. The Programme's progress toward achievement of the targets of the output and result indicators is uneven, based on data as of end-2018. The output indicators under PA1 are generally below target with the notable exception of three significantly overachieved indicators. No projects contracted under the First call contribute to the achievement of two output indicators in this priority. The level of achievement of the targets for the output indicators under PA2 is broadly good, although no projects contribute to the achievement of one output indicator. The projects contracted under PA3 contributed to significant overachievement of all output indicators of the axis. Two out of three RI under PA1 overachieved their target growth as of end-2018. One RI under PA2 is overachieved while the targets of the remaining two are achievable depending on the nature of the contracted projects under the Second call. One RI under PA3 is below target as of end-2018 and the other is overachieved.

Almost 60% of the total funding of the first three PA of the Programme was contracted under the First call. Most of them were directed to PA2 and PA1 projects. The verified expenses were 73.6% of the total contracted budgets as of end-2018 – 96.6% of the expenses in PA3 were verified, compared to 80.2% for PA1 and 59.6% in PA2. This level of verification is deemed sufficient considering the fact that a lot of projects were completed in the last quarter of the year.

The changed mechanism for selection of project proposals under the Second call has significant positive impact on the projected achievement of the output indicators of the Programme. Only three output indicators will be below target if the projects proposed for contracting in the Second call are implemented as planned. At the same time, it is expected that there will be sufficient savings that would allow contracting some of the projects in the list of reserves under the Second call in order all output indicators to meet their targets.

The identified possibilities for improvement relate to streamlining the methodology for measuring and calculation of the indicators and to changed distribution of financing among the PA taking into account possible complementarity between indicators. Most of those recommendations could be used during the new programming period post 2020. The changed distribution of funding among the PA could be implemented for the remaining period of the current Programme as it would support the achievement of all targets of the output indicators. A mixed approach, which combines strategic projects and grants schemes for the cross-border cooperation programme in the next programming period is suggested. It will ensure a closer link between the Programme results and the national priorities in the regional



development sector while at the same time preserving the people-to-people approach, one of the strongest and most sustainable impacts of the Programme over the years.

Relevance, consistency and complementarity of the objectives of the Programme

As a whole, the needs that were initially identified in the Programme are still relevant. The priorities of the Programme are still relevant in the context of the cross-border region. However, based on the scale of overachievement of the output indicators in PA3 Competitiveness and on information from the ex-ante evaluation of the Programme, it is recommended that the Programme should be more focused in the next programming period.

The observance of the horizontal principles is fully integrated in the management system of the Programme (application and implementation stages) and in the activities of the selected projects. Project proposals explicitly describe how the principles would be observed and the final project progress reports outline the practical implementation of the principles. The principles of sustainable development, equal opportunities and non-discrimination and equality between men and women are mirrored by a number of output and result indicators.

There is a high level of coherence between the goals of the Programme and the goals set in strategic documents at European, macro-regional, national and regional level. The activities carried out during the implementation of the Programme have high contribution towards the achievement of the priorities of the EU2020, Balkan-Mediterranean 2014-2020, and a number of national and regional strategic documents. The degree of contribution is directly linked to the achievement of the specific objectives of the Programme.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the Communication strategy

The communication activities carried out by the Programme authorities ranged from regular publications on the website of the Programme, the social media accounts, information days, partner search forums, training seminars for beneficiaries and staff, up-to-date instructions, guidelines, manuals, adherence to requirements for visibility and dissemination of results for contracted projects, and annual implementation reports and the corresponding Citizens Summaries. The relevance of the activities to the general and specific objectives of the Communication strategy is generally good. The visibility of the MA and the NA could be improved by adding links to the respective websites on the front page of the Programme's webpage.

The communication activities under the two calls were sufficiently tailored to the needs of the target groups of potential and actual beneficiaries and the general public. The information they provided to the groups and the means that information was delivered was adequately customized.

The webpage of the Programme, its Facebook page and the informal networking among potential beneficiaries are the main tools for rising the awareness of the Programme and attracting potential beneficiaries. The tools and channels were properly chosen evidenced by the high level of achievement of the target values of the communication indicators. The awareness could be further improved if the Facebook and the webpage of the Programme include short articles for every milestone of all projects in a way that ensures multiplying the effect of sharing.

The dissemination of project and programme results employs diverse methods that ensures that the coverage is significant. The effectiveness of the methods could be improved if several small changes are implemented. Those relate to slight re-arrangement of the website of the Programme to put greater emphasis on the contracted projects and more active usage of the websites of the projects to increase the sharing of project publications.