

**Mid-term Evaluation of the
Cooperation Programme Interreg V-A
Slovakia - Austria**

Final Report



Interreg
Slovakia-Austria

European Regional Development Fund



EUROPEAN UNION

Together without borders

29 September 2020

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Abbreviations

AT	Austria
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
EU	European Union
EUSDR	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
FLC	First Level Control
HP	Horizontal priorities
IP	Investment Priority
IT	Information Technology
ITMS	IT Monitoring System
JS	Joint Secretariat
LIFE	Financial Instrument for Environment (L'Instrument Financier pour l'Environment)
MA	Managing Authority
MC	Monitoring Committee
PA	Priority Axes
RECOM	Regional Cooperation Management
R&D	Research and Development
SK	Slovak Republic
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
SMR	Summary Monitoring Report
SO	Specific Objective
TF	Task Force
ToR	Terms of Reference

Executive Summary

The aim of the mid-term evaluation of the Cooperation Programme Interreg V-A Slovakia-Austria 2014 – 2020 was to assess the programme outputs, its impact on the programme territory and need for a revision of the programme, while examining possibilities for reducing the administrative burden. The cut-off date of the report is 31 December 2019. The Final Report covers three evaluation tasks specified in the Terms of Reference.

A non-experimental evaluation design was applied to answer three separate sets of descriptive questions representing individual tasks of the assignment. Both, quantitative and qualitative methodological tools and instruments were applied to gather and analyse data. To increase the validity and reliability of the evaluation findings, triangulation of data sources as well as triangulation of tools were applied. The data collection was largely carried out in parallel by the Slovak and Austrian part of the evaluation team.

Due to delay at the initial phase of implementation, the first projects started implementation in summer 2018. Therefore, it is not possible to answer some of the evaluation questions in terms of impact or their contribution to horizontal principles and selected European strategic documents. Equally, due to the timing of the assignment, some of the measures recommended for the administration and management processes come late to improve the current Programme implementation but can be implemented in the next Programme. One of the limitations concerned the restrictions related to COVID-19 pandemic and limited availability of stakeholders however, it did not have any significant influence on the timely submission of outputs.

The intervention logic is content-wise coherent and reflects the needs and numerous challenges of the regions, the current structural set up, however, shows substantial space for improvement in terms of causality and indicators' setting at both, outputs as well as results levels.

As concerns the focus of the Programme, the originally identified needs remain still relevant and the recent statistical figures confirm a persistent need for support in the selected priority areas. The findings indicate that the needs to be addressed in the next programming period would not practically differ from the current ones and a few additional priority areas were identified. However, there might be a slight change in the proportion of allocated resources to individual priorities that need to be agreed by the regions. By the end of 2019 about three quarters of the financial sources for priority axes 1, 2 and 4 have been contracted. This was not the case of priority axis 3 dealing with transport infrastructure, which, by its nature, requires considerable time to prepare projects. Therefore, a more strategic approach will be needed in a future to increase the absorption capacity in this area.

The challenges identified for the Programme have been closely linked to the management and administration processes. The transfer of the Managing Authority from Austria to Slovakia caused numerous difficulties due to significant differences in the legal frameworks applied for the administration of EU funded interventions in both countries. The central and unified management of the Slovak operational programmes could not cover specific features of the cross-border programmes, the national monitoring system (ITMS2014+) was not prepared to work in German version and public procurement processes represent a continuous challenge for all projects funded from public sources. All these factors slow down the Programme implementation. Moreover, the initial high turnover of staff in the management position influenced by political changes in Slovakia did not help the smooth start of the Programme. The management and administration processes were thus complicated and time

consuming. The bilingual preparation of the project documents was identified by the beneficiaries as one of the bottlenecks.

Although, some of the problems have been resolved, the unresolved issues indicate the need to change and simplify the management system of the Programme in the future. The interviewed respondents unanimously agreed that administrative burden within the Programme is high, which is discouraging future applicants and it shrinks the number of potential applicants and creates small and closed circle of partners.

To communicate the results of the Programme which provides support in four so different areas is a very challenging task; therefore, the need to communicate special topics, address particular target groups and use more current forms of communication was identified. It was repeatedly expressed that the small projects fund is a tool with significant contribution to the visibility of the cross-border programmes.

Following the findings and the conclusions drawn from the evaluation, it is recommended to assist the potential applicants and prepare example of a completed application, publish a short check list of all necessary annexes and documents, elaborate a “dictionary” providing clear definitions of the basic terms, and examples of (non)eligible expenses, ensure the automatic announcement of changes/updates of documents, submit a solemn declaration instead of the Partnership Agreement at the application stage, continue in provision of adequate training for the applicants and take into account the technical qualification of the applications to avoid a risk of losing the interest of applicants.

In the current implementation phase, it is recommended to provide the changed guidelines with the track changes, if necessary, apply for reallocation of funds (and revised Programme indicators) and ensure the personnel continuity to retain historical memory and know-how to speed up the Programme implementation.

For the next programming period there would be a need to pay special attention to the Programme intervention logic and proper determination of relevant output and result indicators including their baseline and target values, and to preparatory work of any large-scale investment project. The Small Project Fund should be considered as well as support of areas that are currently excluded due to legislative restrictions. The future role of the Programme has to be clarified and at the same time decision should be made on future desired composition of the future partnerships (experienced or new partners). The Programme should not be included under the central management system of the national ESIF and a unified community management system for all cross-border programmes supported from EU sources or other alternative could be considered. The official communication within the Programme could be simplified and new monitoring system should enable fully electronic administration of the Programme. The communication activities should focus on new contemporary approach with a professional support during the whole programming period.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and objective

This submitted document represents the Final Report of the external mid-term evaluation of the Cooperation Programme Interreg V-A Slovakia-Austria 2014 – 2020 (herein after referred to as the Programme). The aim of the evaluation was *to assess the programme outputs, its impact on the programme territory and need for a revision of the Programme, while examining possibilities for reducing the administrative burden*. Based on the findings, the evaluation provides recommendations comprising measures to improve Programme implementation during the current programming period as well as suggestions concerning the design of a future programme for the next programming period. The cut-off date of the report is 31 December 2019¹.

The Final Report covers three evaluation tasks set out in the Terms of Reference in order to provide the complete picture about the Programme in one document. This summary report includes also some updates of the responses to the evaluation questions of Task 1 and 2, provided during the interviews with various Programme stakeholders. To distinguish the individual tasks of the evaluation assignment the parts concerning Tasks 1, 2 and 3 are separated in the Findings chapter, while the Conclusions and Recommendations chapter summarises the overall results to provide the full picture of the Programme.

The Programme is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) as the cross-border cooperation programme under the objective of the European Territorial Cooperation. The Programme is a specific instrument for territorial development with the aim to contribute to the further integration and sustainable development of the border area Slovakia – Austria. It allows regional and local authorities and other players of regional relevance in the eligible area to exchange practices and ideas on the way public policies work, and thereby finds solutions to improve their strategies and ways how to deliver services for the citizens.

The ERDF allocation of the Programme is about 76 mil. € (89.3 mil. € including co-financing) and it is divided into five priority axes:

1. Contributing to a smart cross-border region (Investment Priority (IP) 1B)
2. Fostering natural and cultural heritage and biodiversity (IP 6C, 6D)
3. Supporting sustainable transport solutions (IP 7B)
4. Strengthening cross-border governance and institutional cooperation (IP 11)
5. Technical Assistance.

The overall objective of the Programme is not specified as the general purpose of cooperation programmes is to tackle common challenges identified jointly in the concerned border regions. Needs are related to the issues such as: how to improve institutional frameworks for cooperation, how to improve the quality of policies and their delivery and how to deliver solutions through concrete investments and smart pilot actions. The cooperation programme thus aims specifically at achieving the objectives determined by the investment priorities within the determined priority axes.

¹ Set in the Terms of Reference

1.2 Evaluation questions

The third evaluation task of this assignment, which is the part of the Final Report, was carried out with the aim to evaluate the Programme outcomes and to provide a tentative view on longer-term impacts. The list of evaluation questions was set out as follows:

1. Are processes of programme monitoring and data collection clearly described and appropriately set up?
2. Are indicators and monitoring tools appropriate, clear and sufficiently reliable and valid?
3. Is the ratio between the target value of output indicators and financial allocation for specific objectives set up appropriately?
4. Were the milestones and intermediate targets within the performance framework set up appropriately and realistically?
5. Were planned values for indicators designed in accordance with the real needs of the programme area? What are the suggestions for the next programming period?
6. How likely and to what extent could interventions contribute to the fulfilment of specific objectives?
7. What could be the impact of interventions in each of the priority axis?
8. What could be the impact of the implementation of the activities in terms of gender equality and non-discrimination?
9. What could be the impact of the projects that were implemented in Natura 2000 areas?
10. What could be the impact of the programme in connection with the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy?
11. What could be the impact of the projects on the programme area from the perspective of sustainable development?
12. What risks or opportunities emerged from the implementation of the programme period 2014-2020?
13. How likely would the positive results of the projects continue after external funding ends?

This third and final evaluation report will sum up the overall progress of the Programme and provide the main findings, conclusions and recommendations. The evaluation questions of Task 1 and 2 are attached in the Annex 2.

2. Methodology

2.1 Tools for the data collection and data analysis

A non-experimental evaluation design was applied to answer the purely descriptive evaluation questions. Three separate sets of questions were determined for the individual tasks of the evaluation assignment. Both, quantitative and qualitative methodological tools and instruments were applied to gather and analyse data in order to provide the most accurate and objective judgements. Quantitative tools based on available statistical data were crucial for the analysis of development needs in the area of economic, social and territorial development. Quantitative data were further gathered and analysed mainly to assess the financial status of the Programme as well as to answer questions in relation to project partners, project applications, Programme indicators, etc. Qualitative tools assisted to collect information for deeper understanding of the Programme development, operation of administrative processes/procedures and identification of main obstacles in the Programme implementation.

The desk review process initiated at the preparatory stage has been continued during the assignment. Materials provided by the Managing Authority (MA) and Joint Secretariat (JS) comprised the most relevant Programme documents, reports, manuals and more detailed project information, data obtained from the monitoring system and other information. Most of the instruments used for the data collection during the Task 1 and 2 were qualitative tools. Questionnaires, telephone interviews, semi-structured in-depth interviews and group interviews were applied to complement data collection. To increase the validity and reliability of the evaluation findings, triangulation of data sources as well as triangulation of tools were applied. The data collection instruments were largely used in parallel by the evaluation teams on both, the Slovak and Austrian side.

Task 1 was based on the desk review. Besides the Programme documents, information and data from Eurostat and from the Statistical Office of Slovakia were collected to capture the socio-economic development in the Programme area. The main analytical tool for processing the collected data and information was comparative analysis. Additional information was collected from primary sources. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with 23 people from different stakeholder groups - Task Force (TF) members, Joint Secretariat (JS) staff, Managing Authority (MA) staff, Monitoring Committee members and beneficiaries. These interviews focused on Programme management, administration processes and implementation progress to capture strength and weaknesses of the Programme administration, development needs and expected trends in the area of economic, social and territorial development. Access was also made available to some data from the same cooperation programme implemented during the previous programming period 2007 – 2013.

To capture the views of the unsuccessful applicants as well as beneficiaries/grant recipients, a brief introductory questionnaire was prepared and distributed to 21 Slovak Lead Partners during Task 2. Answers were given by 15 respondents, including the applicants who did not succeed. The identical set of questions was used during the initial telephone interviews with project beneficiaries (successful applicants) in Austria, where 12 people declared their availability for an interview and subsequently provided responses. Although the content did not differ, a slightly different methodological approach in the two countries was selected for several reasons. This was mainly due to more experience and thus higher activity of the Austrian applicants (the ratio was about 5AT:3SK applications) and also due to cultural differences determining the way how to approach beneficiaries and to conduct interviews.

In order to gain a more detailed understanding of the Programme implementation processes, the individual semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in December 2019 – March 2020. Overall, the evaluation team carried out interviews with 36 Lead Partner representatives² of the project beneficiaries. The main attention was given on the administrative processes – individual steps starting from planning, through application, contracting up to the implementation of the projects within the Programme. The originally planned focus group discussion with the Task Force could not take place due to the situation caused by the world pandemic. It was therefore agreed to carry out online group interview with the MA to clarify the outstanding issues. The Slovak MA and JS staff provided their views and clarification on several issues raised by the beneficiaries. The Austrian group interview with Task Force (TF) and JS members was conducted slightly later, which allowed the meeting to be held in person³. Input on issues raised by the beneficiaries and preliminary assessments by the evaluators was provided on that occasion.

Task 3 was largely based on the study of the Programme documents, namely in relation to the performance framework/indicators. The interviews conducted during Task 1 and 2 provided information base to assess the likelihood of the achievement of objectives and sustainability of interventions. Additional views and opinions were collected from both, Slovak and Austrian management structures.

2.2 Limitations

The evaluation had several limitations. One of the essential facts, which significantly limited the possibility to provide answers to some of the evaluation questions, was the timing of the assignment, namely the state of Programme implementation at the cut-off date of the evaluation. The first Call for Proposals was launched in December 2016, but the first contract was signed only in July 2018 and a significant number of the running projects started only at that time. It was therefore unlikely to assess any effects (results, impacts) of the Programme. Most of the available data and information could, to some extent, cover the level of outputs and provide an overview of the administration/management processes and probability of further progress of the implementation. However, the overview of the processes as part of the evaluation, was only completed shortly before the end of the programming period. Therefore, it is rather late to introduce most of the recommended changes; though they might be implemented in the next Programme.

The data collection process for Task 2 of this report was partly influenced by the restrictions given due to the COVID-19 pandemic and limited availability of stakeholders but it did not have any significant influence on the timing of the outputs' delivery and quality of data collected as mitigation strategies such as phone interviews and videoconferences were applied.

2.3 Sources of data/information

As mentioned above, primary data were collected through interviews, while for the comparative purposes the collected information was confronted with the information in the programming documents and guidelines, where possible. The evaluation team reviewed the web pages of the institutions

² Out of that 13 Austrian representatives and representatives of 12 Slovak led projects. The interviews on the Austrian side were conducted as telephone interviews.

³ not feasible during the COVID-19 lockdown

implementing the projects and minutes of the Monitoring Committee meetings served as the basis to answer questions concerning the ratio of applications returned for completion and other related issues (see Annex 1).

3. Findings

Task 1: Revisiting the programme strategy

3.1 Current needs of the Programme area

The original design of the Programme was based on the discussions with the members of the Programming Group and took into consideration results of the evaluation and information from three basic sources:

- (i) the preparatory work of the Regional Cooperation Management (RECOM) project, which was subsequently funded from the Programme sources and represented the cooperation network of the Programme region;
- (ii) Central European Region CENTROPE 2013+ strategy, which was the result of consultation processes in the cross-border four-country region (Slovakia, Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic) with a focus on further strategic support of research and innovation, together with the strengthening of human capital, spatial integration as well as culture and tourism; and
- (iii) the EU Strategy for the Danube region (EUSDR), which is a macro-regional strategy of cooperation jointly developed by the European Commission and the Danube Region countries and stakeholders, in order to address common challenges together and to create synergies and coordination between existing policies and initiatives taking place across the Danube Region.

Currently the EUSDR is still valid. Since the introduction of "Wien denkt Zukunft", the importance of the CENTROPE 2013+ strategy has decreased, though it is still active.

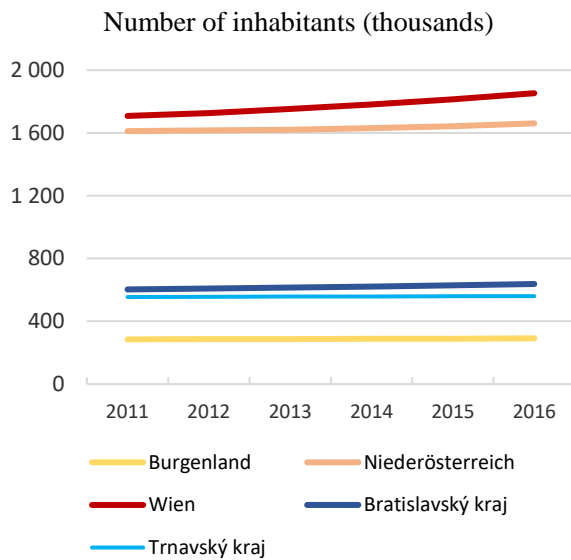
Map 1: The programme area

Source: Metis



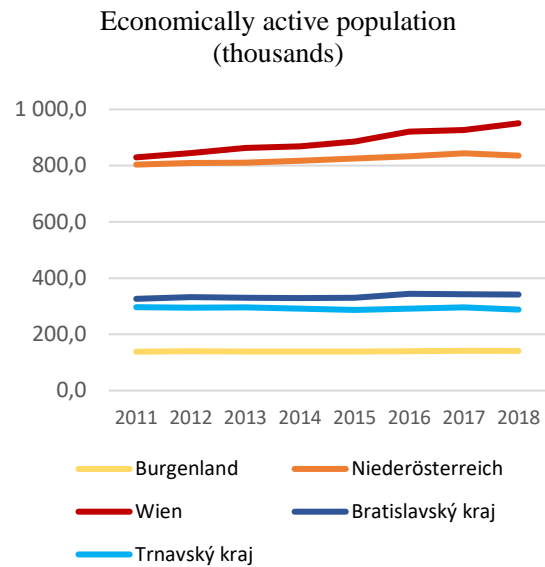
The Programme area covers five regions⁴ (Map 1): Austrian Länder - Wien⁵, Niederösterreich² (comprising Mostviertel-Eisenwurzen, Niederösterreich-Süd, Sankt Pölten, Waldviertel, Weinviertel, Wiener Umland/ Nordteil, Wiener Umland/ Südteil²) and Burgenland (Nordburgenland and Mittelburgenland⁶) and Slovak – Bratislava² and Trnava² regions (Bratislavský kraj a Trnavský kraj).

Graph 1



Source: Eurostat

Graph 2



Source: Eurostat

The overall population in the concerned cross-border area counted some 4,7 mil inhabitants in 2011 and grew to over 5 mil citizens in 2016 (Graph 1). The number of inhabitants living in this area has been slightly increasing with the most significant increase in Vienna. Vienna's population increased in the same period from 1,76 mil to 1,85 mil, Bratislava grew more slowly from 410 500 to 429 500 (in 2018). In general, these trends reflect to some extent the overall demographic development, estimating 10 % reduction of the Slovak population (though it is not valid for Bratislava) and 10 % growth of the Austrian population by 2050. Equally, the number of the economically active population remains at about the same level and/or shows an increasing trend for Vienna and Niederösterreich (Graph 2).

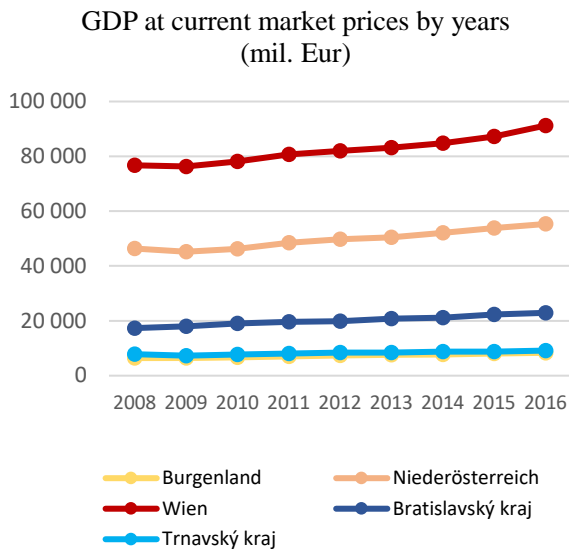
In economic terms the Programme area comprises core areas of both Slovak and Austrian economies, which are well developed and with growing GDP (Graph 3). The GDP per capita in Bratislava and Vienna (Graph 4) are by far exceeding the EU-28 average, which limits the access to European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) sources in these regions. As visible from Graph 4, this indicator does not provide the most objective indication of regional economic power since the actual economic situation in the Bratislava region, in comparison to Vienna, has not been reflected by the reported statistical data. Nevertheless, the Bratislava region outperforms the other Slovak regions in most of the applied economic indicators (investment, salaries, etc.).

⁴ In case the statistical data were not reported at the level of NUTS 3 regions, which mainly concerns the Trnava region, the missing information was replaced by data at higher level NUTS 2 regions (Západoslovenský kraj – Western Slovakia region).

⁵ NUTS 2 level

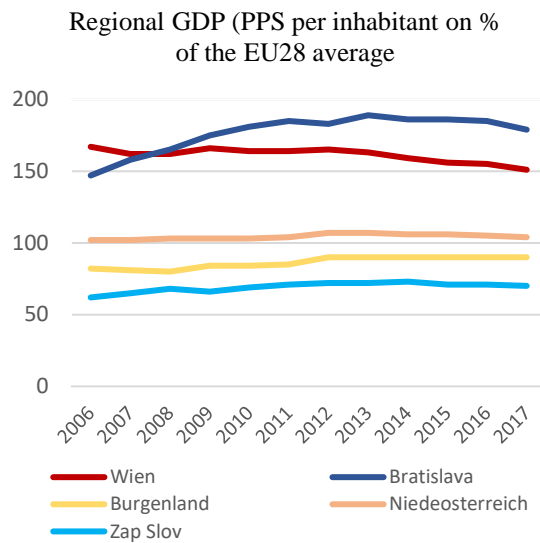
⁶ NUTS 3 level

Graph 3



Source: Eurostat

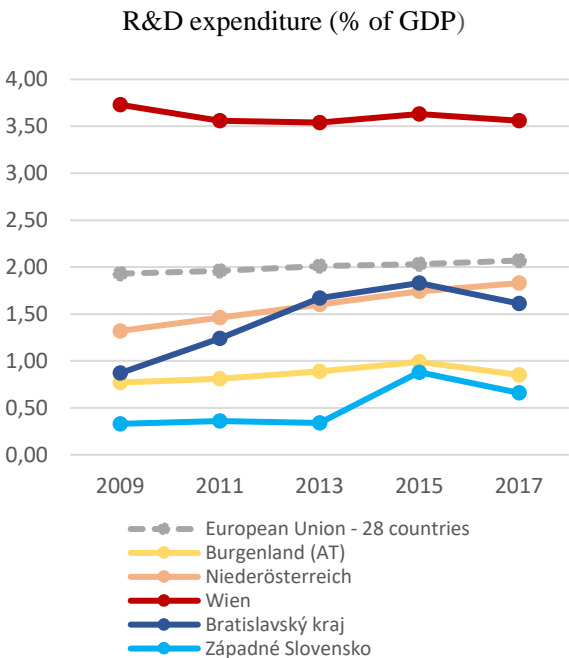
Graph 4



Source: Eurostat

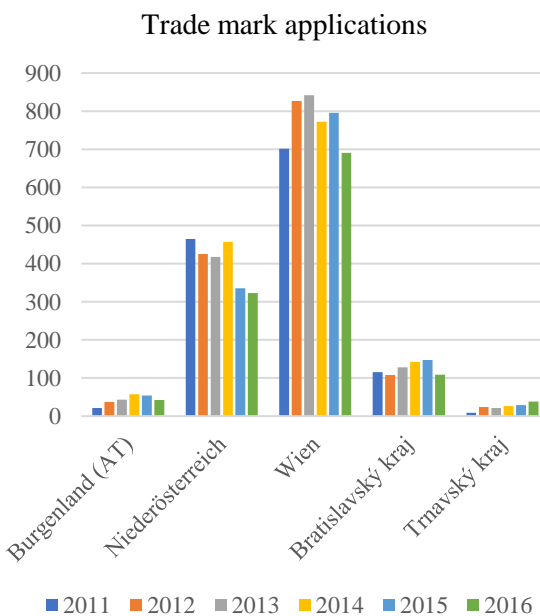
As mentioned in the country report, the sharp decline in public Research and Development (R&D) funding in Slovakia from 2015 on, is the result of the end of 2007 – 2013 EU programming period (Graph 5). Slovakia is obviously highly dependent on EU funding for R&D while private investment is rather weak. The over-reliance of the Slovak R&D system on ESIF raises questions about the sustainability and adequacy of the national R&D funding. According to the European Commission the use of critical EU funding for research and innovation is still considered as inefficient.⁷

Graph 5



Source: Eurostat

Graph 6



Source: Eurostat

⁷ EC, Country report Slovakia 2019

As outlined above, EU funding remains still crucial for R&D in Slovakia and besides the investment needs there is also a persistent weakness in translating funding into high-quality scientific output and international collaboration. The unfavourable development is for example documented through data on trademarks applications (Graph 6) and is also evident from scoring in the EU Innovation Scoreboard (Table 1). The gap between Austria and Slovakia remains at about the same level as 9 years ago. The Bratislava region, unlike the rest of the country, is a growth pole and a “strong” innovator with good transport connections and easy access to ancillary services. However, there is still unused potential for developing cross-sectoral collaboration in R&D and innovation through clusters and networking, fostering knowledge transfer between academia and businesses.

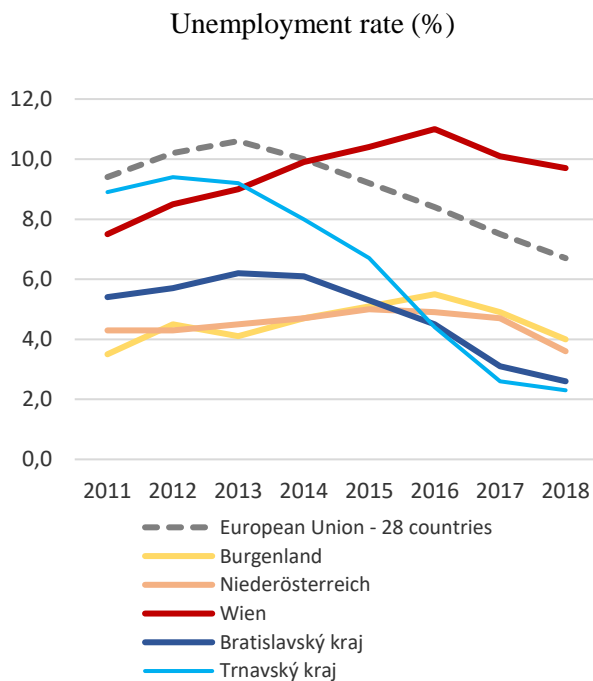
Table 1 EU Innovation Score Board – positioning of Austria and Slovakia

Innovation Union Scoreboard	2010		2019	
	score	ranking	score	ranking
Austria – strong innovator	113	7.	125	11.
Slovakia – moderate innovator	63	23.	69	24.

Source: European Commission

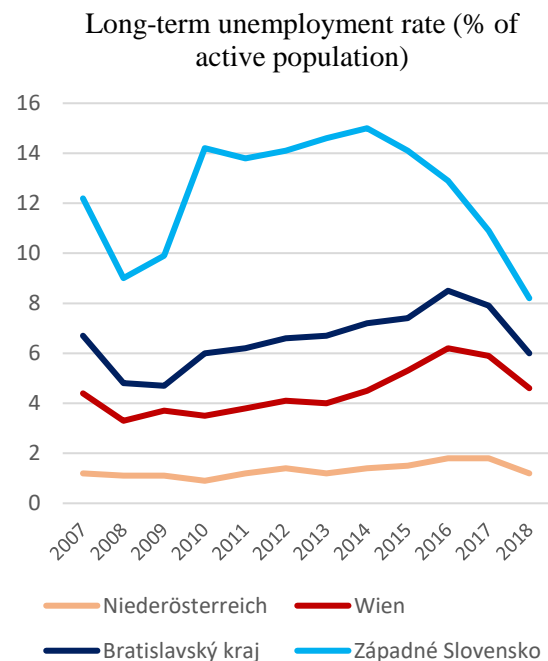
The most significant change in the Programme area concerns the unemployment rate. Labour market conditions in Slovakia have been improving. The unemployment rate has declined continuously since 2013 and the western part of Slovakia currently reached a historical minimum of about 2,5 % (Graph 7). The tightening of the labour market increases labour shortages and raises wages. The decreasing share of an available economically active population is already causing some shortage of labour force in the Slovak regions. The number of vacancies is increasing mainly in the public sector. Nevertheless, long-term unemployment still remains high (Graph 8).

Graph 7



Source: Eurostat

Graph 8



Source: Eurostat

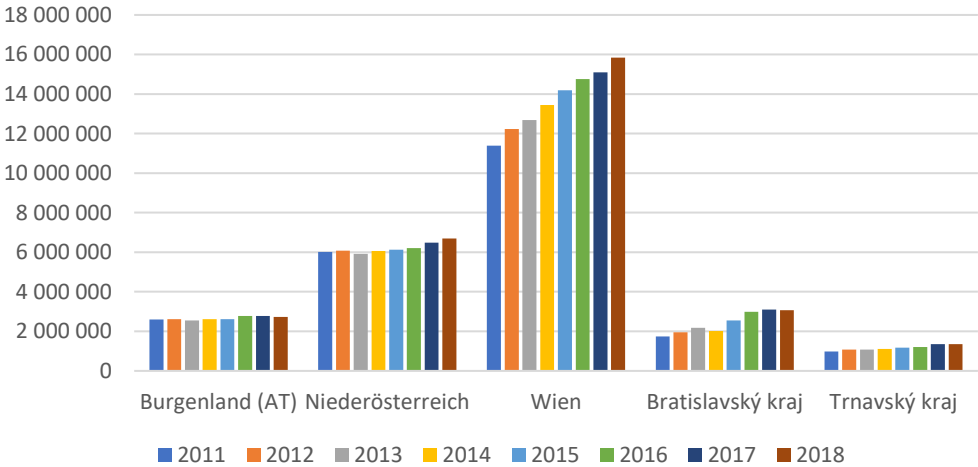
Although, the labour market issues are not directly addressed by the cross-border interventions under review, they are closely linked to other problems. These difficulties on the Slovak side are further emphasised because of insufficient life-long learning and very limited access of labour force with migration background to employment. The current trends indicate that 33 % of all jobs in Slovakia are highly automatable and another 31 % are at risk of substantial change. Besides that, education and training are not well aligned with labour market needs. Skills mismatches are a significant barrier to growth and the need of reskilling and upskilling is likely to be one of the top priorities soon. These issues along with the observed demographic trends (increasingly aging population) represent challenges that need to be tackled in the close future.

In the area of education, the most significant change is the adoption of the Slovak national strategy. The National Reform Programme for Education and Upbringing was approved in 2018. This action plan of the reform programme was expected to assist the lack of facilities providing early childhood education and care (especially in Bratislava). It should also increase the number of professional staff at schools, promote the use of digital technologies and pay special attention to inclusive education. The quality of tertiary education is improving but the share of graduates from technical universities is still below EU average; in addition, about 22 % of the graduates leave the country.

As concerns the cultural heritage, EU funding within the national operation programmes provides very limited support for this type of activities. Some sources are provided from the Slovak state budget and/or European Economic Area grants. Since 2011 to 2018 the situation concerning construction and technical condition of monuments on the Slovak side remains unchanged - about 20 % are disturbed and 5 % in a desolate state. Cross-border programmes are perceived somehow as the main source of funding for large-scale investment for cultural heritage. This is closely and directly linked with the tourism (Graph 9). The most attractive place in the region is clearly Vienna with a high concentration of attractive places and infrastructure for tourists. However, due to the close distance and very convenient travel connections, Bratislava is also able to benefit. In the main, the location of the border region provides interesting possibilities for attracting more tourists.

Graph 9

Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments



Source: Eurostat, Statistical Office of the SR

The area of nature conservation is of key importance for a thorough conservation and restoration of biodiversity, hence the need for the full implementation of the EU Birds Directive and the EU Habitats Directive, together with the nature protection, all aiming to achieve a favourable condition of all habitats and species of European and national interest. The compliance with Directives and Laws is a decisive prerequisite to avert further biodiversity loss and an essential prerequisite for the restoration of biodiversity also in the bordering area between Slovakia and Austria – namely in the areas along the Morava and Danube rivers.

According to latest reviews, interventions in the area of nature protection are still a high priority. To achieve the EU target to halt the deterioration in the status of all species and habitats covered by EU nature legislation and achieve a significant and measurable improvement in their status in Slovakia, the conservation status of 30 habitats and 49 species must be improved, while at the same time at least maintaining the conservation status of 30 habitats and 52 species; in addition, the conservation status of at least 64 bird species must be improved. Efforts need to be directed to the preparation of management plans for protected areas and species, with special emphasis on defining appropriate management and long-term financing. Natura 2000 sites are assisted by the EU funded LIFE programme and by complementary EUSDR activities. However, effective international and cross-border cooperation is seen as a significant contributor to the achievement of the targets of the Updated National Strategy⁸ at global and EU levels as well as at the level of public bodies, regional and local institutions dealing with the protection of biodiversity and natural resources. The EU green infrastructure strategy promotes the incorporation of green infrastructure into related plans and programmes. The restoration and conservation measures should interlink natural habitats and wildlife corridors, reduce barriers and improve management and nature protection in compliance with sustainable tourism. The most common interventions in the border area are related to the environmental protection and flood risk management.⁹

Overall, in most cases, the socio-economic indicators relating to the year 2011 (planning stage of the Programme) and the most recent available data did not show any significant change. There was only some slight increase in the number of inhabitants and GDP, but the majority of the statistical data maintained the same level. The most significant change was the decrease in the unemployment rate of the Slovak regions until the world pandemic. Nevertheless, the high unemployment rate of low-qualified people was still to be tackled, in particular on the Slovak side of the border. Besides the basic statistical indicators, the change of needs can be also influenced by other factors (mostly external ones), which are directly influencing the implementation of cross-border interventions. These are described in the challenges and opportunities part of this report.

The commitment figures could also provide an indication if the Programme really supports the relevant priorities. Based on the current data, the only PA with low interest and no contracted project so far, is the PA 3 focused on transport. This situation, however, does not reflect the changed needs of the regions. The former cross-border programme 2007 - 2013 prepared the necessary documentation for the currently planned projects. This included the adjustment of the bridge in Moravský Svätý Ján – Hohenau, which is not accessible in case the water level exceeds certain limit. However, due to the environmental conditions related to the migration paths of frogs, that appeared in the late stages of the project' preparation, the proposed solution was very expensive and thus not suitable for funding. Equally,

⁸ Updated National Strategy for the Protection of Biodiversity to 2020, 2014, Ministry of Environment SR

⁹ The EU Environmental Implementation Review 2019, Country Report - Slovakia

suggested railway project would be too expensive for support within the Programme and in the case of the planned bridge Záhorská Ves - Angern the political influence resulted in a local referendum on Austrian side that refused the project ready for implementation; the temporarily operating ferry thus was not replaced by a solid bridge. No other factors have been identified and the risk that such a long-term preparatory effort would be refused by local people has not been expected. In terms of needs the project remains still relevant. What could have been a bit neglected is, however, the promotion of the values of cross-border cooperation. The idea behind the Programme is just opposite and support is provided to open the border, encourage the mutual exchange of culture, knowledge, experience and to learn from each other. This potential is largely lost when the building of bridges is refused. Moreover, it also raises the question how successful the communication policy of cross-border support was, if its main message has not been fully delivered despite the fact that programmes have been deployed already for decades.

The final judgement of relevance is also provided through the comparison of priorities in the strategic documents: the relevant regional priorities are appropriately reflected in the overall Programme strategy. This topic is covered in the succeeding part of the report.

3.2 Programme challenges and opportunities

There is a number of key points that represent challenges and opportunities and are to be included by the partner countries in their cross-border partnership. The first and the most important one is the regionalised decision-making process, in order to realise the potential of economy of scale, manage negative externalities effects, and decrease transportation costs as part of transaction costs in the economic activity. Due to the interconnectivity and collaboration, any increase of economic activity on one side of the border can lead to an increase of the same activity on the other side of the border based on the cross-border flows. Continuous changes in the economic framework and processes at different levels affect the cross-border region and as a consequence impose flexibility in the approach of the cross-border partnership. Complexities of the border region have to be reflected when shaping the economic strategies.¹⁰

Overall, research studies show that territorial development of the cross-border areas differ widely, depending above all on the location – i.e. where in Europe they are situated. A location at state borders is not as significant to development as their overall location in Europe. For example, the demographic and economic development of areas situated in Central Europe has been more favourable compared to those situated in peripheral parts of Europe. Territorial development of the region thus follows the development of similarly located regions. Further, state borders divide region into differently performing national parts. Therefore, borders continue to play a major role in development of the region and the national level maintains to be the determining factor for the development of individual regions. This is also evident at the level of cross-border commuting, which remains low compared to commuting between regions within the same country. The border conditions seem to be more relevant at the regional than at the national level. For example, while the position of the overall cross-border areas in the national or European context is clearly relevant, the settlements patterns at the district or municipal levels seem often to be indifferent to the border. Some experts have recently started to question the possibility and need for a spatially balanced pattern of territorial development. They state that “uneven development is

¹⁰ Slusarciuc, M. 2013. Partnership and Cooperation Models in Cross-Border Areas, Acta Universitatis Danubius, Vol. 9 (4), p. 267-280

an integral component of economies and while some regions will exceed national growth rates and targets, other will not". Economy and development should not be limiting, however, the value and principle underlying these concepts need to be considered.¹¹

A specific feature of the Programme area under review is that it is to a large extent also the metropolitan region of two capitals - Vienna and Bratislava. The two cities are the administrative and economic centres for two countries – Austria and Slovakia - and together form the most closely located pair of capitals in Europe while Bratislava is the only capital neighbouring with two countries. This offers a good context for the development of cooperation between two countries and significantly influences the relationship between different actors in the region. The cooperation in general, framed in the Vienna – Bratislava region, focuses on five main opportunities: Firstly, the region wants to become a development pole of European significance, based on the concentration of specific human, scientific, cultural, technological and institutional potentials as well as on adequate transportation and communication interconnections to other development poles in Europe. Secondly, efforts are being made for becoming a residential, economic, and cultural centre for the upper and middle Danube line. Thirdly, the region aims to become one of the development centres in Central Europe, which has gained importance after the accession of the four Visegrad countries. The fourth issue is to become an economic, cultural and information gateway to Austria and Slovakia and last but not less important, there is the common effort to strengthen functional ties between the two capital cities and their less favoured suburban surroundings on the territory of the Slovakia, Austria and also Hungary that is in close neighbourhood. The accomplishment of these issues can make it a model area for a cross-border cooperation and for a special frame for common interest of two neighbourhood countries.¹²

Such an approach means involvement of important stakeholders in the process of careful integration of relevant development strategies and common goals specification. The participatory approach applied during the Programme planning obviously considered the most essential regional strategic documents as they all refer to the problems/ needs described in the Programme justification. The selected specific objectives/ investment priorities were incorporated in the regional development strategies, i.e. all areas of Programme support represent also the development interests of the regions involved on both sides of the borders.

The experience with Programme implementation raised several management challenges such as:

- different and often incompatible legislation systems on both sides of the border, which can pose serious obstacles for the cooperation activities,
- different administrative and competence division of powers closely related to the decision-making and financial/ budgetary issues,
- differences in the (economic) development level, resulting in a difficult definition of common objectives,
- cultural differences related to the issues mentioned above with consequences on the ability to create well-functioning and mutually supportive partnerships,

¹¹ Kaisto, V. (2016). *Cross-Border Areas Facing Europe's Crises: Problems in Measuring Territorial Development with Statistical Data and Analyses*. Year Book Cross-Border Review. European Institute of Cross-Border Studies – CESC Budapest, p. 65

¹² *ibid*

- language barriers since due to the historical heritage there are no minorities living in the respective countries on the other side of the border and lack of English language knowledge on the Slovak side,
- availability of local capacities to participate/ implement and/ or lead the projects resulting in a very limited participation of small municipalities.

All of the challenges need to be addressed to ensure smooth implementation of cross-border interventions. The individual points are thus further described in details in the following related parts of the report.

3.3 Financial sources and administrative framework

To understand the overall context of the Programme it is necessary to describe its development from the programming stage. The Managing Authority (MA) of the Programme has been located at the Austrian side since the very beginning of the cross-border cooperation Slovakia - Austria. The Programme was approved by the Commission Services in July 2015 while its designation was finally granted in August 2018. In 2013 it was agreed that the MA of the Programme would be transferred to Slovakia. Expecting that this may cause some difficulties, both Slovak and Austrian partners were assured that no substantial change in the administrative procedures of the Programme would take place. This assumption, however, proved to be far from reality.

Initial problems, related to the creation of the MA in Slovakia and all the necessary processes and procedures, mainly concerned high staff turnover in the management position of the Programme, influenced by political changes following the Slovak parliamentary elections in 2016. Within two years from the transfer the Slovak management position responsible for the Programme had been occupied by five different Directors General and seven Directors of Department. This situation resulted in difficulties with daily management and administration and caused a factual re-start of the Programme with two years of delay. This gap is yet visible, though the effort on both sides of the border to catch up, has been evident.

Additional difficulties in managing and administrating the Programme were caused by significant differences in the legislative frameworks in general and more specifically, concerning the legislation on EU funding given in the two countries. These problems caused difficulties for both, projects implemented by the beneficiaries as well as for the management and administration of the Programme as such. The Slovak Act on ESIF¹³, which is applicable to all EU funded Programmes running in Slovakia, has not been properly adapted to the cross-border operations. The original arrangements also assumed that all financial operations and other data are uploaded and managed in the centralised IT monitoring system (ITMS 2014+, further referred as ITMS), which was initially available only in Slovak language. The direct connection of the ITMS with the Slovak State treasury, enabling the transfer of payments, was the main reason why no other monitoring system could be considered.

¹³ Zákon č. 292/2014 Z.z. o príspevku poskytovanom z európskych štrukturálnych a investičných fondov a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov (Act no. 292/2014 on the contribution provided by the European Structural and Investment Funds)

The Slovak side has been also managing the cross-border cooperation programme with the Czech Republic and the ITMS was used without substantial difficulties.¹⁴ However, the cooperation with Austria showed some very different features. The cross-border cooperation on the Czech border had no language barrier, and legal frameworks and governance systems were very similar, moreover the cultural and historical backgrounds of the two countries were practically identical. The Austria – Slovakia cooperation differed in all these aspects and differences became more evident after the MA transfer when the Slovak strictly-regulated and not fully adapted management system was applied. The translation of the ITMS was the initial step to enable the use of the system for the Austrian applicants. The whole process as such was rather demanding in terms of time and human resources and most of the issues were eventually more difficult than initially expected. Further complications were connected with the login to the system for the Austrian applicants as it assumes that the applicants use Slovak identification cards for this purpose. This had to be eventually carried out through the MA. Other complications concerned the confirmations required from health and social insurance agencies and/ or tax office, which can be verified by the MA from registries in Slovakia (provided that they are granted access). All this worked differently in Austria where in most cases it is much easier as the beneficiaries provide sworn statements declaring no debts towards the designated bodies/ institutions.

This should explain the current situation of the Programme, especially the still prevailing low disbursement rate (Annex 4, Tab. 13, 14). Judging efficiency and effectiveness would be thus too premature, therefore the best way to assess the distribution of funds to specific objectives (SOs) can be provided on the base of a comparative analysis with the same cooperation Programme implemented in the previous programming period 2007 - 2013. Both programmes provided support in roughly identical areas with the exception of social and health issues as well as energy, which are not supported within the current programming period. Health and social services have significantly different legislation and competencies arrangements, which caused many restrictions and made cross-border cooperation rather complicated. These topics thus were not directly included as separate support measures. Moreover, support for the health sector was not specifically mentioned in the list of investment priorities.

The priority axis (PA) 1 *Contributing to a smart cross-border region* originally assumed to support 9 operations delivering jointly developed major products and services. This was to address the needs to develop the cross-border innovation system, including the strengthening of links between the productive sector, R&D and education sector. The education activities in the cross-border context were seen as a pre-condition to safeguard competitiveness in the long run.

At the cut-off date of the report, 7 projects were contracted in the total value of some 72 % of the PA 1 allocation, while the overall PA 1 allocation represents 25,9 % of the Programme's ERDF funding (Tab. 2, Tab. 3). R&D and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) support within the former Programme created about the same proportion of the total budget (22,7 %) and implemented 29 projects; but the average size of the project in the previous Programme was much lower (4 times, Annex 4, Tab. 10, 11). The current size of the projects reflects several factors. First of all, some of the initial partnerships have been maintained and after the "testing" period some of them were strengthened, sustained and continued with new projects. Secondly, the project partners became more experienced and thirdly, it is also due to the important specific feature of the region with the two capitals. Both Vienna and Bratislava are regions

¹⁴ The cross-border Programme with the Czech Republic is also managed from Slovakia – MA has the same location

with a very high concentration of strong, often public R&D institutions with sufficient in-house project capacities and knowledge of language. R&D projects are therefore truly corresponding to the needs of the highly developed region. Although Bratislava is lagging behind in many of the R&D indicators, the cross-border cooperation yields a very good opportunity to start international cooperation for excellent research teams on both sides. Relevance of this support is also confirmed by the demonstrated high interest of the applicants, so far 20 project applications have been submitted.

PA 2 *Fostering natural and cultural heritage and biodiversity* planned 24 operations and allocated 36,7 % of the Programme allocation for this purpose. The needs identified at the programming stage were referring to strengthening common approaches to better develop promising sites, theme paths and joint products guided by a shared policy framework in the areas of ecotourism, cycling, agritourism, vine culture, antique Roman culture, etc. Accordingly, a better cross-border coordination of cultural and natural heritage development plans and initiatives was planned. The cross-border cooperation was considered an evident precondition for effective approaches to preservation and management in particular when it comes to large-scale bio-corridors such as the Alpine-Carpathian corridor or the wetlands along the border river March-Morava and Danube.

From the 19 submitted project applications 13 projects have been contracted, which means that slightly over 74 % of all PA 2 sources were committed. This allocation is twice as big as in the former programme. This can be attributed to the needs of the two main highly developed regions as well as to the high importance of environmental measures due to the global climate change mitigation measures. In general, the most wanted cross-border cooperation measures are those supporting projects on natural and cultural heritage and/ or tourism. Usually, these projects are run at the local level by small municipalities as partners. These needs are in Slovakia also determined by very limited support of such interventions from other sources, e.g. other ESIF measures. In the current Programme, the local level at the Slovak side is represented by small cities with the sufficient financial and human capacities to prepare and implement a project as well as to communicate in foreign language. The traditional involvement of small municipalities is missing. Despite the assistance, which has been provided from the Programme sources and enabled to cover translation and interpretation costs during the preparatory stages of the projects, the interest, especially on the Slovak side, has been minimal.

The PA 3 *Supporting sustainable transport solutions* was allocated with 12,7 % of the Programme sources and planned for 7 projects including soft activities as well as investments. The original intention was to focus on sustainable forms of transport that would reduce air and noise pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption. It should support sustainable multimodal mobility in cities, city-regions and rural areas including improvement of public transport services, mobility management, better integration of the different modes, more attractiveness of walking and cycling and improvement of the efficiency of urban logistics. Multimodal hubs were to be promoted to contribute to the reduction of emissions and energy efficient freight transport to tackle the dynamic growth of cross border freight traffic. As mentioned in the Programme, the investments in border crossings along the river March/Morava were eventually not foreseen as the planned projects were either very expensive (planned adjustment of the bridge in Moravský Svätý Ján – Hohenau an der March) or they were refused by the population of the concerned municipalities in a local referendum (Záhorská Ves – Angern).

By the cut-off date of the report, no project has been contracted in this PA, although four project applications were submitted with one project approved by the MC. It is expected that some of the

projects will be re-submitted. The Programme document mentioned, that preparatory steps for infrastructure investment to be implemented within the current Programme had been agreed and financed in the period 2007 – 2013. As stated above, projects were prepared but will not be implemented. Instead, the project for constructing the bridge as part of the cycle-path crossing the border between Vysoká na Morave - Marchegg, which was not originally envisaged is under the preparation. Due to the changes in plans new projects had to be prepared. The preparatory stage of such investments projects is however time consuming and expensive, which is clearly limiting the absorption capacity in this area. Comparing to the previous programming period and taking into account the refusal of citizens, the PA allocation had to be reduced nearly by 50 %. The interest of potential applicants and preparatory project activities should thus now indicate if the allocation ratio needs another reduction in the near future.

The allocation of PA 4 *Strengthening cross-border governance and institutional cooperation* entails 18,7 % of the Programme budget. The estimated number of projects was 13. So far 11 project applications were submitted and 7 projects are contracted. The main purpose of this PA was to improve institutional coordination and strategic planning through development of common planning processes and databases, enhance institutional cooperation in areas with major societal challenges and build up more effective frameworks to support small scale projects. It was also expected that common frameworks and education and qualification should be improved (intercultural learning, basic language training, better school achievements of pupils and higher quality in early childhood) but only a few projects were submitted.

Table 2 Overview of the former and current SK – AT Programmes

	Programming period	Research and development	Natural & cultural heritage and biodiv.	Transport	Institutional cooperation
Number of projects	2007 - 2013	29	22	9	13
	2014 - 2020	7	13	0	7
ERDF budget paid contracted (Eur)	2007 - 2013	13 611 098	11 037 497	12 805 708	5 146 686
	2014 - 2020	14 206 372	20 678 476	0	10 317 820
% of OP allocation	2007 - 2013	22,7	18,3	21,7	8,5
	2014 - 2020	25,9	36,7	12,7	18,7
Average size of the project (Eur)	2007 - 2013	469 348	501 704	1 422 856	395 899
	2014 - 2020	2 029 482	1 590 652	0	1 473 974

Source: MA, for further details see (Annex 4, Table 6, 7 and 8)

The proportion of the current Programme allocation dedicated to institutional cooperation is more than double compared to the former Programme. Nevertheless, the potential of the Programme to support cross-border cooperation projects undertaken by relevant partnerships of regional players is underlined by the presence of central government bodies located in the region. Their purpose is to focus on the identification, analysis, dissemination and transfer of good practices and policy experiences with a view of realizing regional and local policy aims. This should result in fostering the exchange of experience and sharing of practices as well as preparation of action plans for integrating and deploying good practices within regional policies.

Table 3 Contracting by PA/ SO¹⁵

PA	Specific Objective (SO)	No of projects	Contracted	
			value in Eur	% of PA allocation
1	1.1 Strengthen collaboration in the innovation system	4	11 001 601,14	75,5
	1.2 Improve higher education and lifelong learning to provide competent and skilled work force	3	3 204 771,56	62,6
	Total PA 1	7	14 206 371,70	72,2
2	2.1 Foster natural and cultural heritage valorisation	7	11 822 810,33	61,9
	2.2 Foster restoration and management of ecological corridors	6	8 855 665,50	101,4
	Total PA 2	13	20 678 475,83	74,3
3	3.1 Support environmentally friendly transport solutions	0	0,00	0,0
	Total PA 3	0	0,00	0,0
4	4.1 Strengthen the institutional cooperation	6	6 685 469,19	73,2
	4.2 Strengthen the cooperation between educational institutions	1	3 632 350,97	71,9
	Total PA 4	7	10 317 820,16	72,8
5	5.1 Technical Assistance	5	4 298 292,63	94,4
	Total PA 5	5	4 298 292,63	94,4
Overall Total		32	49 500 960,32	65,2

Source: MA

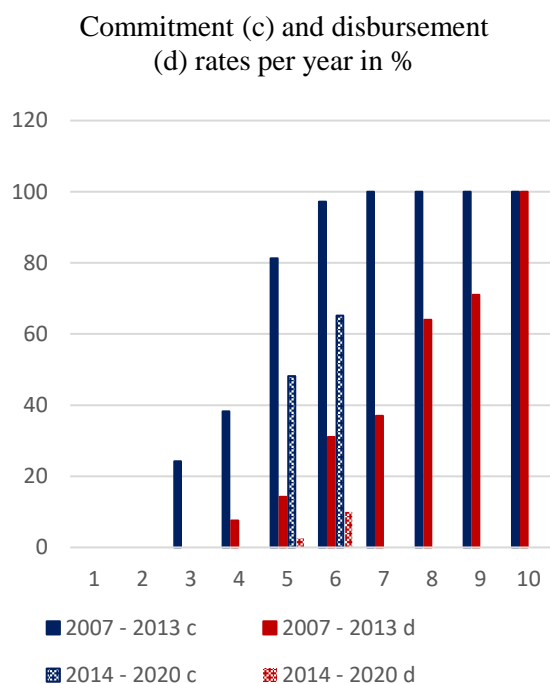
A part, which is obviously missing, although initially planned in this PA, is the support for small scale projects. This would most likely enable the cooperation of small municipalities as such scheme is usually much easier to prepare, administer and manage. It would provide small scale people-to-people projects, which are often initiating cross-border events; traditionally, they use to be very popular, efficient, effective and bring value for money. It is understood that to run the Small Project Fund it is usually necessary to establish an Intermediary Body. Sorting all other issues as outlined above, there was however hardly any space for arranging this Fund by the MA; especially when it was expected (and by now confirmed) that the absorption rate of the regional and national bodies is sufficient to use the available sources. To have a lively cooperation of small municipalities across the border, nevertheless such Fund may have helped and could have been an important addition to the Programme.

As concerns the overall Programme, progress concerning the commitment rate is now obvious. The explanation was provided above and can be seen in the delays at initial stages of the Programme, caused mainly by personal changes in managerial positions, leading to a situation where the actual implementation started only some two years later than planned. This delay is still visible but the time gap is slowly and steadily shrinking. So far, the overall contracted funds reached about the same value as in the previous programming period (Tab. 4, Graph 10, 11). The only exception is the PA 3 where

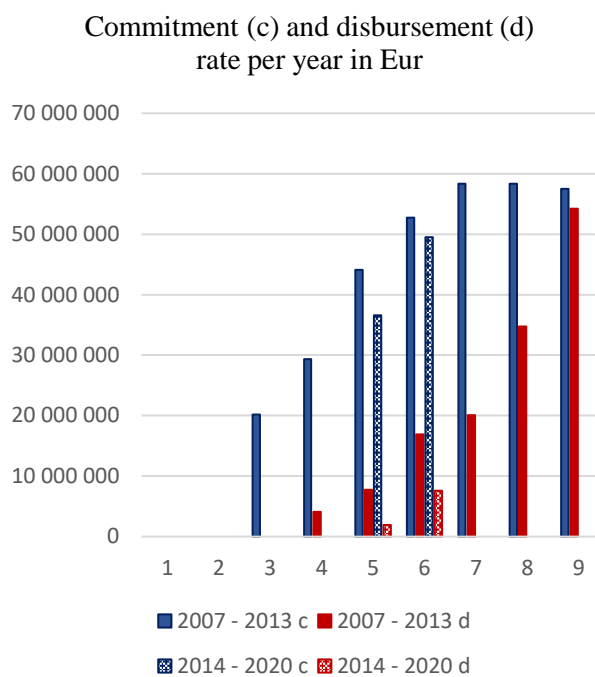
¹⁵ contracted values do not include four additional projects, which were approved by the Monitoring Committee by the cut-off date of the Programme

the originally prepared projects had to be replaced and the new project preparation has been progressing slowly as investment projects always need more time for the preparation.

Graph 10

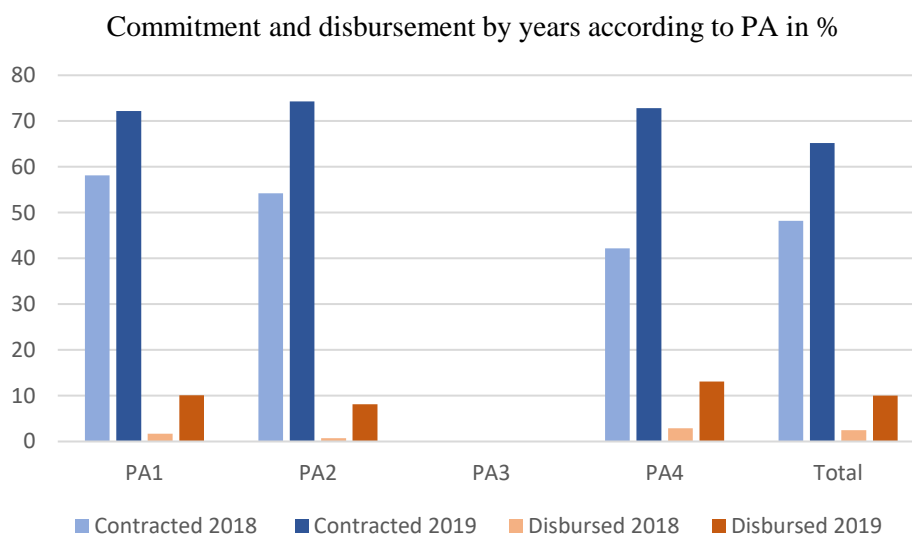


Graph 11



Source: MA; Remark: current commitment does not include four additional approved projects

Graph 12



Although the Programme is divided into four separate areas of support (research and innovation; cultural and natural heritage; transport; institutional cooperation) in line with the EC Directive, these areas are often overlapping within the individual projects. For example, school cooperation in language education may include also some environmental topics, etc. Institutional cooperation is practically always part of the project activities due to the obligatory partnership principle, but it may be further supported as a

separate measure because the cooperation could also concern areas, that are not specified within the supported measures. The provided data and information also suggest a strong effort to divide project resources to equal halves for partners on both sides of the border. This effort might be rather limiting and sometimes artificial.

3.4 Programme structure

The Programme document provides a clear description of individual PAs and their SOs.¹⁶ The description includes a typical structure comprising objectives, results to be achieved, corresponding indicators (including the measurement unit, baseline value, target value, source of data and frequency of reporting), types of actions, examples for actions, main target groups and types of beneficiaries. Also, the structure of target groups and beneficiaries is typical for cross-border programmes. It is predominantly focused on the institutions and organisations established by the regional and local governments. Moreover, as the eligible region includes Bratislava and Vienna - capitals with a high concentration of national government bodies, these bodies and their institutions are also included as eligible beneficiaries. The other part of eligible bodies consists of non-governmental institutions that are playing an important role mainly in the area of natural and cultural heritage, tourism and environmental protection. A similar role is given to private research institutions in the R&D interventions. Based on the projects contracted so far it is evident that practically all categories of eligible beneficiaries have been represented among the project partners. The only category that has not been involved up to now is the European grouping of territorial cooperation (Tab. 4).

Table 4 Categories of beneficiaries participating in the contracted projects

PA 1 Beneficiaries	SO 1.1	SO 1.2
Regional authorities and their organisations		
National authorities and their organisations		✓
Networks, clusters and associations		✓
Research and development institutions	✓	✓
Universities	✓	✓
Secondary education institutions		✓
Training and vocational training institutions		✓
Business		✓
European grouping of territorial cooperation		
PA 2 Beneficiaries	SO 2.1	SO 2.2
Local and regional authorities and their organisations	✓	✓
National authorities and their organisations	✓	
Non-governmental organisations	✓	✓
Environmental organisations	✓	✓
Research institutions (including Universities and res. facilities)		✓
European grouping of territorial cooperation		
PA 4 Beneficiaries	SO 4.1	SO 4.2
Local and regional authorities and their organisations	✓	✓
National authorities and their organisations	✓	
Non-governmental organisations	✓	✓
Educational institutions (kindergartens, primary schools)		
Other supporting institutions (e.g. school inspection)		✓
European grouping of territorial cooperation		

Source: MA

¹⁶ Description of outcomes is included in the section on intervention logic

Based on a comparison with other cross-border programmes¹⁷, several differences are obvious and concern mainly language barrier, cultural differences and the unbalanced development status prevailing on both sides of the border. The Austrian partners are evidently more active. As explained during the interviews, language knowledge is crucial to create a functional partnership. The communication language of the projects is English. While most of the Austrian partners, even in the regions, can speak English, the Slovak regions often lack an English-speaking administration. This deficit is even more evident for small local governments, which explains their very low participation in the Programme. The knowledge of German and/ or Slovak by the partner on the other side is not very common. This is significantly different when comparing e.g. the Czech border with no language barrier or the Hungarian border with a large minority speaking Hungarian. Moreover, both Czech and Hungarian borders used to be historically part of the Eastern block and their development in many areas was initially at about the same level.

Very similar to the language knowledge is the situation concerning the local capacities to prepare and manage projects where the small local governments suffer and often rely heavily on external consultancy companies. The differences in the governance and administrative division of the two countries are also crucial. The Austrian regions (Länder) are politically much stronger, more independent from the central state and with more decision-making powers, while the Slovak regions have far less decision-making powers and are centrally managed in many areas. Their financing mechanisms are also significantly different. The needs and/ or issues the project partners from regional administrations can directly manage and decide, thus differ a lot as well as their individual competencies.

In addition, cooperation interventions have to take into account sometimes the very different level of basic infrastructure and therefore diverse needs of the partners. While Austrian partners usually have the necessary infrastructure in place but might need some follow-up activities, the Slovak side is often missing the basic elements. This is one of the main challenges for a partnership when it comes to harmonising needs, satisfying all partners and achieving truly common objectives. Very crucial for a functional partnership has been the issue of mutual understanding (trust), which is a long-term process and requires also the balancing of cultural differences and the pro-active facilitation of a better understanding of partners needs and preferences at both, personal and institutional levels.

A special feature of the Programme is the absence of any Slovak private institution¹⁸ in the position of the project lead partner (Tab. 5). It is likely to find the explanation in the competing national ESIF programmes. The potential applicants do not need to have partners and project management is carried out in local language, which avoids difficulties in an application process that is anyway more than demanding. Nevertheless, this issue would require further attention in order to clarify if it is more about interest, capacities (human, financial), easier access to other sources or if some other factor plays a significant role. The official legal status of the companies in both countries may also be confusing as many of so called “private” Austrian institutions are in fact (semi-private) organizations working in the public interest, which is most likely a non-governmental organisation at the Slovak side of the border.

¹⁷ mainly with the Czech Republic or Hungary

¹⁸ As reported in excel files KEEP Partners dated 10/2019; private partners are all organisations/ institutions except public administration bodies (civic associations and NGOs are listed as private partners); this applies to both categories, leading and standard partners.

Table 5 Overview of public/ private representation

Lead Partner				Standard Partner			
Public		Private		Public		Private	
19		5		53		17	
SK	AT	SK	AT	SK	AT	SK	AT
10	9	0	5	26	27	8	9

Source: MA

As regards the various Programme activities, the programming document describes identical activities under two headlines: types of actions and examples for actions. Both, types and examples of actions, are practically identical. The scale of activities is sufficiently wide and in line with the determined specific objectives. So far, not all of the activities specifically mentioned in the programming document have been included in the contracted projects.

3.5 Future needs

As the introductory part of the findings suggests, there have been no crucial changes in the socio-economic development of the Programme region, that would require a substantial change in the scope of the Programme delivery.

In 2018, Slovakia signed European declarations to strengthen the cross-border cooperation in Europe in the fields of artificial intelligence, blockchain and innovation radar. These technologies and trends can potentially offer new growth opportunities. The Bratislava region is a growth pole and a “strong” innovator according to the European Innovation Scoreboard. Heavy foreign investment in this region, good transport connections and easy access to ancillary services contribute to its high productivity levels, which are considerably above the EU average. Notwithstanding Bratislava’s swift economic growth, there is still some unused potential for developing cross-sectoral collaboration in research, development and innovation through clusters and networking, fostering knowledge transfer between academia and businesses. Shortcomings also exist in public transport, social services, waste management, air quality and a variety of associated investment needs are evident in these areas. These offer good opportunities for seeking inspiration with Vienna and cooperation with Austrian partners to solve common problems and exchange experience.

The city of Vienna is still to be seen the largest agglomeration in the programming area – about three times larger than Bratislava. Thus, it builds an anchor point for several services in the area (airport, cultural heritage, tourism). The link and idea of a “twin city” with Bratislava has become a fact throughout the previous and ongoing programming period. Therefore, a coordination function of cross-border cooperation will be still required. This phenomenon has also clear implications on the region between the two cities/ centres – transport infrastructure, services of general economic interest provision of settlement areas – as the two agglomerations show a clear tendency to “grow” together. The future need derived from this fact is a cross-border spatial planning strategy. This implies not only land use regulation across borders, but also reserve areas and green zones to be mutually protected and accepted.

The cross-border cooperation programming area has high growth potential (primarily induced by the two agglomerations Vienna and Bratislava). The future need will be to foster and use this momentum

by increased cooperation across borders in the fields of science and technology, and through economic cooperation (e.g. by using synergies of service and manufacturing on both sides of the border) and improvement of connectivity across borders.

The basic areas assisted by the Programme require further investments. Any future Programme is likely to be structured along the same lines as the current Programme but it may need to take into considerations the main challenges. For all regions it will most likely include more stronger the climate change topic. At the Slovak part it will likely concern the demographic trends indicating that the population of Slovakia is getting older, which will require interventions related to the healthy aging as well as related social and health services. The next challenge is the expected change of the labour market. It is estimated that 33 % of all jobs in Slovakia are highly automatable and another 31 % are at risk of substantial change in how they are carried out.¹⁹ In the context of promoting innovation, a relevant area not explicitly targeted at the moment are start-ups and their respective cooperation across the border. Furthermore, while not identified from the challenges, some interviewees saw a lack of opportunities for tourism cooperation, which they would like to see expanded in the future.

One issue, which has to be taken into account is the need for overcoming intra-regional disparities within the cross-border programming area. Especially on the Austrian side of the border - remote, rural areas are lagging behind and are facing decreasing population (brain drain of young people and demographic challenges due to ageing). This implies that future concentration of the programme orientation shall not be entirely focused on the agglomeration effects and growth poles of Vienna and Bratislava, but include in any programme activities stronger emphasis on balanced territorial development within the area: this may be accomplished by strengthening the second tier cities in the area (e.g. Eisenstadt, St. Pölten) but also by supporting services of general economic interest in the more rural areas outside the development corridor of the Danube. By this strategy there will be the additional benefit of diminishing the territorial/land use pressure from the naturally sensitive areas along the rivers Danube and March.

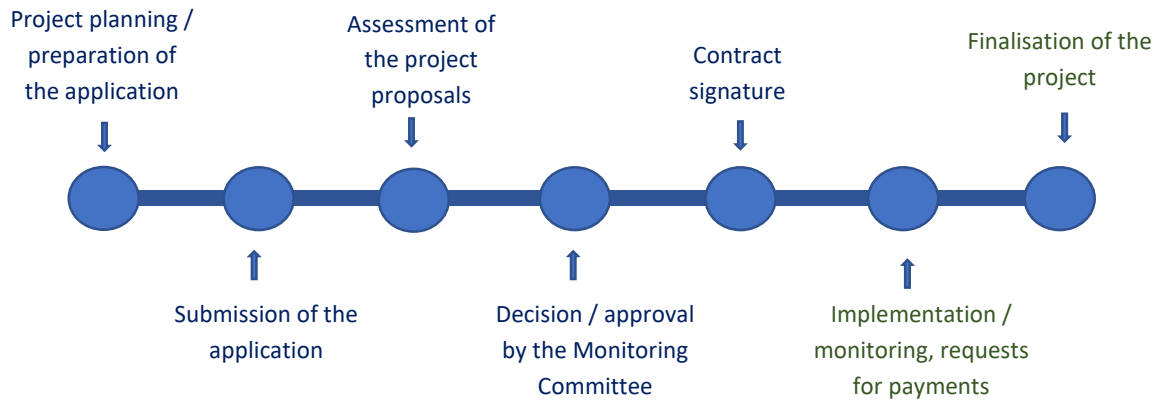
The statistical data indicate possible future development trends. The interviewed beneficiaries agreed that the Programme priorities are sufficiently specific and flexible to set the framework and provide space for modification in a case of need. Too detailed specification might be a limiting factor. There were also opinions that the Programme should be more focused on the core areas, such as infrastructure, as this provides tangible and visible results appreciated by general public. In general, the current priorities were mostly considered sufficient. Support of tourism is considered important development factors in the border areas and it is expected to continue in the next programming period; sustainable transport solutions should cover cyclo-transport ideally combined with cyclo-tourism as an organic part of tourism. The cross-cutting nature of the topics should be maintained. The suggested priorities for the future support included also renewable energy and climate change issues; less common topics comprised digitalisation, contemporary art and culture. The beneficiaries also mentioned the necessity of more flexible approach in order to react to the new urgent needs and challenges of region. They would appreciate an option of “ad hoc” Calls. A Small Fund Facility has been repeatedly mentioned as a tool for common sport or cultural activities popular in smaller villages.

¹⁹ OECD Regulatory Policy Outlook 2018, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://www.oecd.org/governance/oecd-regulatory-policy-outlook-2018-9789264303072-en.htm>

Task 2: Investigating options to reduce administrative burden

The structure of the report in respect to Task 2 follows the standard administration and management process and its individual steps and time sequence, as displayed in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1 Programme implementation steps



In general, the overall implementation process of the Programme faced several challenges, many of which are typical for the management system of the ESIF in Slovakia. In this particular case, the initial unexpected transfer of the MA from Austria to Slovakia led to complications, as the Slovak side was not sufficiently prepared to take over the management role despite the fact that the transfer of MA function was discussed and agreed by both parties. Therefore, it took some time to build and stabilize the capacities and to start the Programme. Applying Slovak national guidelines and procedures did not prove to be suitable and did not fit well with the special features of the Programme. It was therefore needed to develop all the necessary materials from the scratch and to balance the specific needs of the Programme and the strict frames of the national legislation, which altogether proved to be challenging. Facing the above-mentioned problems, the MA tried to introduce corrective measures and asked for several exceptions in the ESIF legal framework. Following discussions with the Central Coordination Body, official letters explaining the situation were sent to the Deputy Prime Minister's Office, managing ESIF in Slovakia.

3.6 Project planning



The inventory of projects clearly indicated that most beneficiaries²⁰ on both sides of the border had some previous experience with EU funded projects.²¹ On several occasions it was a direct experience from the Slovak-Austrian Programme or other INTERREG programmes and/ or experience gained from other EU funded programmes (ESIF, Horizon, LIFE, etc.). This experience was obviously very useful as the individual process steps in some of the

²⁰ Beneficiaries in this report are all successful applicants/ grant recipients.

²¹ There was only one Slovak lead partner project without previous experience with the EU funded interventions – see Annex 2 Results of the questionnaires - Slovak applicants/beneficiaries. All Austrian lead partners had some previous experience in EU-funded interventions.

programmes are very similar (especially between INTERREG programmes, but also within other ESIF). However, even project partners which only had experience with Horizon projects (a structure of which differs considerably from ESIF) reported their experience as useful to some extent. As confirmed by beneficiaries, without previous experience it would have been much more difficult to prepare good project applications.²² As a positive consequence, eligibility rules and other conditions for the projects were thus understood and clear, although they were different. This was confirmed by both, Slovak and Austrian applicants²³.

Austrian applicants in particular had to face the change of the MA location, which was especially criticized by respondents with experience from the previous programme. Some respondents pointed out that they had been expecting to be able to continue with the same general structures as in the previous period. However, the change of the MA location and new administrative, legal and structural requirements resulted in considerable challenges for the preparation of their project. For example, changes in the Programme management created some difficulties with the eligibility for those who applied before. Some expenses that would have been eligible in Austria could not be claimed in Slovakia, thus some applications had to be changed in the last minute. For many applicants, a system they were already familiar with and which ran in accordance with the results of a cross-border discussion and local customs was according to the applicants discontinued rather surprisingly. As explained in the previous Interim report this discontinuation brought many changes in the Programme management and administration and applicants had to respect the legal framework and rules/ requirements of Slovakia. Moreover, this change started a long-term process accompanied by frequent personnel changes in the Slovak Programme management during its initial phase. This resulted in delays in the Programme initiation and late preparation of the necessary administrative documents, guidelines, forms, IT monitoring system, etc. As a consequence, also the start of the Programme took longer time and it was not perceived as a smooth process by the applicants.

As expressed by project applicants, the administrative burden at the application stage was considered high with too much focus on the administrative side and too little on the technical content. Respondents with respective experience compared the application procedure with other (cross-border cooperation) programmes and noted several differences. Among other factors, they mentioned that the application form was not well structured and that the mandatory limited number of characters did not always enable to explain some essential technical issues properly. Beneficiaries also stressed the requirement to fill in a high number of forms and to respond to too many repetitive questions, where the same answers had to be given several times, which was found redundant. The project description had to be provided in such a form that it was not possible to clearly determine which partner is responsible for individual activities. The obligation to submit a partnership agreement (namely for large partnerships and big institutions) appeared to be very time-consuming in most cases. The management meetings at the highest level in these institutions are not so frequent therefore the approval and signature of the agreement takes a long time. The bilingual option of communication was problematic namely for the English-speaking partnerships. A common proposal and any other documents prepared in English had to be translated into both languages (Slovak and German) and vice-versa. The unnecessary translation influenced the quality of the text, it was time-consuming and costly. Another difficulty for the applicants, especially for those

²² Only 2 Slovak respondents expressed the view that previous experience was not helpful because the conditions were so different (see Annex 2).

²³ Applicants in this report are all those who submitted their application within the Programme, regardless if they succeed or not.

who were not well experienced in EU funded programmes, was the occasional update of the forms for the submission of applications. Those who were not aware that such changes had occurred, could have been working with incorrect forms; some interviewees also responded that such changes had not been always communicated.

Besides language issues, beneficiaries also referred to other difficulties, e.g. missing formula in the budget part, eligibility of activities, unclear and complex calculation methods for personnel costs, but also some difficulties to understand the chosen terminology at all (in both the Slovak and the German version), e.g. it was not entirely clear what is meant or what is the definition of "output" or "target" and/or how to distinguish promotion materials from publication materials. At the beginning, applicants were also missing any tangible guidelines. These were provided later when the management problems of the Programme were settled. Due to these difficulties, for some of the applicants it was possible to consult their problems only when completing the application. The guide provided to the applicants was found rather complicated, intricate and for persons without experience with EU funded interventions not simple and easy to understand. Besides that, guidelines were often changed/ updated and it was not always clear which part of it was subject to change.²⁴

All problems mentioned above required extensive and intensive clarification. This meant for both Joint Secretariat (JS) offices in Bratislava and Vienna to be in daily personal, telephone or email contact with their applicants/ beneficiaries. The JS responded to numerous issues, assisted with the explanation of rules, provided navigation for the work with the ITMS and organised workshops for potential applicants as well as for ITMS users. All beneficiaries confirmed that the communication with the JS was excellent and support from its staff has been highly appreciated, despite at times showing a lack of staff. As re-confirmed also during the interviews, advice provided during the preparatory stage and detailed information on important and critical points in the applications were considered very helpful.²⁵ In comparison with some other programmes, it was even perceived by applicants as unusually client-oriented, helpful and the interviewed beneficiaries repeatedly emphasized that the JS employees have focused on immediate problem solving.

The preparatory process in general, however, was not perceived as easy. It was found time consuming and some projects needed about two years to prepare their application whilst the JS offices were at that stage overwhelmed with providing urgently needed assistance to the applicants. Some beneficiaries mentioned that the information provided by different staff members was sometimes contradictory. This could be explained by high staff turnover at the Slovak side at the beginning but also by the rather unusual set up of the JS. The Vienna City Office volunteered to locate the JS office in its premises and its staff was employed by the City of Vienna. Thus, only the technical work of the Vienna JS staff is managed from Bratislava.

²⁴ Since February 2019 all updates contain track changes. By that time there were 5 versions of the Guidelines for applicants, 4 versions of the Rules on eligible expenditures, 3 versions of the Methodology for selection of operations, 1 version of ITMS manual, 5 versions of Guidelines for beneficiaries and 4 versions of the Public procurement guidelines.

²⁵ 13 Slovak applicants (out of 15) stated that they received the required information when preparing the application and 14 of them appreciated support of the programme staff (see Annex 2). This was subsequently confirmed by all beneficiaries during interviews. Only one of the applicants was not satisfied with the support provided, but in this case, the self-governing region was contacted instead of JS. On the Austrian side, 11 respondents considered the support of the authorities was at least helpful and most of them specifically mentioned the JS particularly as being very supportive. On the other hand, 2 respondents did not feel well supported but rather felt that the staff was requesting more than was necessary from them.

During the preparatory stage of their projects, practically all project teams visited either the JS in Vienna or in Bratislava and/or both offices. The interviewed Slovak beneficiaries mentioned that it was recommended to discuss their proposals with the respective regional offices (self-governing regional offices in Trnava and Bratislava), while in Austria the main contact point was the regional office. The reason was to discuss support for the project and to make sure that the proposed project would fit with the regional needs. It was also necessary to ensure that no other interventions of the same nature were already running or, in case similar projects were proposed, to ensure their coordination and/ or the merging of similar proposals into one. This aspect of the preparatory phase seems to have played an important role for further success of the application. The procedures applied under previous cooperation programmes allowed the Slovak regional offices to participate more actively in the assessment of proposals. At present their involvement is reduced to the final decision making at the level of the Monitoring Committee. This does not allow them to become more familiar with the project, at least not to the same extent as in the past, when the regional offices were in the role of info point.

3.7 Submitting applications



The initial project applications were submitted in paper form, therefore the beneficiaries who started their projects earlier (by the end of 2018), had no experience with uploading applications in the ITMS. Starting with the fourth round of applications the use of the ITMS was made obligatory for all applicants, although the system was not fully prepared for the Programme. Almost all applicants had to be trained to gain the necessary skills for using the IT system and for uploading the applications. The number of participants at the workshops confirms that they were useful, with some beneficiaries stating that without such measures they would not have been able to submit an application. The figures from the questionnaire (see Annex 3) indicate certain preferences but are biased due to the high proportion of the applicants from the initial rounds when the applications were not submitted via ITMS. Registration to the system was accessible for the Slovak applicants but it provided an obstacle for Austrian applicants as their registration and access was more difficult (including e.g. translation issues) to achieve. The MA had to register these applicants or assist and report their registration to ensure access and use of the system.

Applicants mentioned that in case of double submission (both in printed version and through ITMS) the application form did not correspond with the questions in the ITMS. This was demanding and time-consuming for the applicants as they had to rewrite information already prepared to fit the different sections. The ITMS was not provided in a fully-fledged German version, therefore there were some additional problems related to the difficulties to understand (e.g. inaccurate translation or error messages) which were still displayed in Slovak language, making applicants unable to identify which error they had made and where they would have to apply corrections. Some of the beneficiaries consider the ITMS as a very complicated tool with an insufficient technical basis since it crashed very often. This could also mean that the application was not properly submitted. Furthermore, an application required numerous annexes, which were uploaded but there was no confirmation provided and the system even did not show the document. Therefore, the MA sometimes asked for documents that the applicants had considered as already uploaded. On several occasions it happened that the applicant institution was already registered in the ITMS as they had another ESIF project running. In case the name of the

institution had changed in the meantime, the system uploaded the old information which could not be changed. The name of the applicant on the form thus did not correspond with the name saved in the system.

Efforts to simplify the administrative requirements led to the reduction of various confirmations in paper form, which has been very much appreciated by all the stakeholders (beneficiaries as well as MA staff). The change of legislation²⁶ in Slovakia led to a lower number of various certificates required from the state offices and these are available in electronic form. The MA was thus expected to check the national registers to validate declared conditions of the applicants on the Slovak side. However, the MA's access to the registers was not arranged and legal requirements created contradictions. On one side the MA had the obligation to check the registers but on the other side it had no access permission. These difficulties also caused unnecessary delays and at the same time increased the workload of the MA.

The investment activities within the projects requiring a building permit must be provided by the Slovak applicants before the contract signature and by the Austrian beneficiaries within a year from the contract signature. To arrange this permit in Slovakia is usually a time-consuming process. The right timing is not easy to estimate because in case the project application does not succeed it may be useless effort, which costs time and money; in case it would have been required after the project approval it might take too long to implement the project on time.

3.8 Assessment of the project proposals



Project application have been assessed by JS staff in Bratislava and Vienna (one person from each office). This process included both administrative compliance as well as technical assessment. Then the assessments were discussed by both JS staff members. The final version was submitted for the approval of the Monitoring Committee (MC), where it was approved or not. Originally, only narrative assessments were provided, but in an effort to increase the transparency of the process, a scoring system was introduced, following structured guidelines. The minimum threshold of score was set at 40 %, which is relatively low and therefore none of the submitted project application has scored below this limit. The projects are assessed not only from the technical and content side, but also from a financial side and in terms of correspondence with regional strategies. Additionally, an external expert (mainly to assess the technical side of the application) was involved. This was optional for the Austrian part but based on an ESIF rules valid in Slovakia it was made obligatory for the Slovak part of the projects.²⁷

As mentioned above, during the previous programming period, the involved regions on the Slovak side played a more important role in the selection process. On the Austrian side of the programme, the regional offices are still the entities responsible for the Programme, thus in general involved to a larger extent. While the JS is the main contact point, applicants are also advised to contact regional offices

²⁶ Act No. 177/2018 Coll. on certain measures to reduce administrative burden using public administration IT systems (Anti-bureaucratic Act), valid from September 2018.

²⁷ Some of the interviewed beneficiaries objected the use of external assessors, as being not sufficiently familiar with regional development and not paying attention to the impact and sustainability of the assessed projects.

during the application process. This enables them to discuss the relevance of the project for the region, but also discuss general issues with the application (i.e. content, technical) and to improve the chances of being selected as beneficiary. In the same time, this improves the regional offices knowledge about the proposals submitted. Apart from individual advice, the regions are also involved in conducting e.g. information events and courses for applicants. The regional offices on the Slovak side previously performed the role of info point, where every project had been discussed with the regional staff and they provided advice about the eligibility rules and instructed applicants how to prepare the applications. The current Programme has the regional representation at the level of decision-making body - the Monitoring Committee (MC). They are now expected to decide and approve the projects based on the summary and assessment prepared by the JS. However, this is not fully taken into account. This eventually results in long-term discussions during the MC meetings. To avoid the lengthy discussions, the regional offices are now more informed and the potential applicants are advised to discuss their proposals with their respective regional offices. The Slovak regional offices considered organisation of common workshops with JS to balance and clarify their views on various aspects of the Programme.

The Slovak regional offices are responsible for regional development and therefore they judge the projects from the perspective of relevance for the development of their region. The JS approach is more Programme focused, with the main emphasis on the cross-border feature. Moreover, it is quite common, that the regional offices are submitting their own project proposals or they are the member of some project partnerships, which could be an issue in case they are involved in the project appraisal process.

3.9 Decision of the Monitoring Committee on the project selection



The MC provides the ultimate decision on the selection of project proposals, which will be supported within the Programme. The scoring provided by the JS does not have a particular important role but is just one among other factors, including the regional distribution of projects and resources, which seem to have a larger influence. Most likely, the less rigorous process thus contributed to the fact that some of the interviewed beneficiaries considered this process non-transparent, mainly in relation to the justification of project rejection. The final decision has been much more influenced by the support provided by the members of the MC, especially by the justification of regional needs. The regional representatives occasionally face also decisions concerning the applications submitted by their own offices. In such a case they did not participate in the decision-making. The MC, however, considers this arrangement as sufficient to avoid any conflict of interest and explained this also with the fact that MC members are employees of other departments of regional offices than those who have applied for funding.

The newly established MC faced some circumstances, which were not originally foreseen. There were a few situations, which required prompt reaction and the most optimal solutions for all members were sought. For example, the statute of the MC did not assume the situation where consensus cannot not be reached and some MC members abstain. The statute had to be adjusted and contains an unusual dual decision-making mechanism of the Committee; it enables three options - voting for, against and abstain for the Slovak members of the MC, and consensus agreement for the Austrian part of the body. These small issues had to be sorted as quickly as possible so that Programme implementation could finally

proceed. There is no possibility of decision “put-on-hold” (Rückstellung) as it is common sense in bilateral programmes in Austria.

Based on the minutes of the MC it can be stated that decision-making regarding project selection has not been an easy task. There is an indication that meetings served the purpose of re-assessing the projects, questioned the assessments carried out by JS, or took these into account only marginally. As indicated above, interviewees got the impression that the decisive factors for project selection do not focus on the technical quality of the project. The role of MC appears thus very ambiguous for applicants. The Programme is small and the same stakeholders (institutions) are actively involved in its programming phase but often appear in the MC and also among the applicants (in partnership, in some cases as Lead partners). As mentioned in the Rules of Procedure:

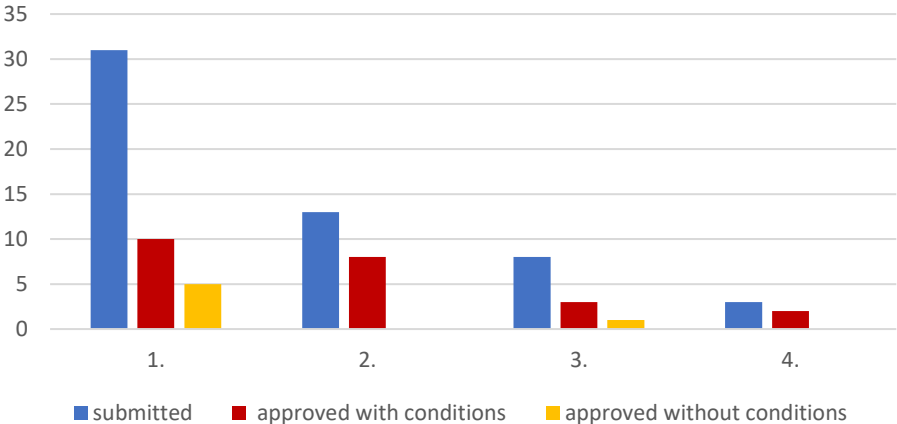
“ ...the MC shall select operations for co-financing according to the approved criteria for selecting the operations taking into account the recommendations prepared by the Joint Secretariat. The MC decides on the projects submitted in each Investment Priority based on ranking list as result of qualitative assessment performed by the JS.”

The information provided by the JS thus should be the main basis to make a qualified decision.

The MC can decide whether project should be approved, approved with conditions, i.e. returned for completion, or rejected. The difficulty of the decision process is demonstrated by the fact that the majority of the applications has been approved conditionally, i.e. conditions laid down by the MC had to be met within a given timeframe (for details see Annex 5). If this is the case, the project is approved in principle, otherwise the MC can formulate the reasons for refusal. This procedure differs from the standard ESIF approach and conditions for approval are understood as ex-post comments/ conditions of the MC, which reflects the special nature of the Programme and intends to capture as many potentially beneficial projects as possible.

By the cut-off date of the report, the MC took the final decision in four rounds of project selection. The overall success rate of the projects reached 43 %. The majority of projects was approved with conditions: in the 2nd and 4th round all of the projects, in the 1st round 66 %, in the 3rd round 75 %, overall 80 % (Graph 13).

Graph 13 No. of project applications by rounds



In the 1st round three applications were rejected but the applicants had the possibility to revise the project and re-submit again²⁸. One of the projects in the 3rd round had a discontinued proceeding to clarify issues of plot ownership (see Annex 5).

Most often, the reasons for conditional approval are related to the budget: its revision in various aspects, request for more detailed information, unit prices, exclusion of non-eligible expenditures or consistency of activities and budget items, etc. Other reasons concern sustainability, clarification of responsibilities and information campaign among relevant stakeholders in the eligible regions²⁹. Some applicants had to clarify state aid issues. There were also requests regarding partnership, e.g. to include certain institutions into the project or vice-versa the request was made to exclude one of the partners from the partnership and to launch the tender where the “former partner” could bid as an external supplier (further information in Annex 5).

Besides the conditions formulated by the MC, additional ones were prepared by the JS. These were based on the qualitative assessment of project budgets. As of the 3rd MC meeting, it was agreed that the JS would judge and prepare information if and how the conditions set out by the MC and JS were finally met.

3.10 Contract signature

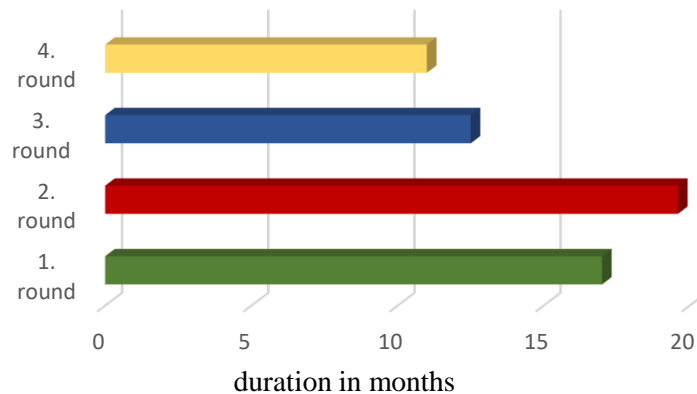
One of the most frequent comments of interviewees was related to the duration from submitting the application to contract signature. The overall time in the 1st round was 16 - 23 months, 2nd round 17 - 22, 3rd round 11 - 14 and 4th round about 11 months (Fig. 2, see Annex 6). Compared to the beginning the required period has been reduced but is still long. As a consequence, many of the originally planned expenses/ budget items are not up-to-date which, in some cases, is significantly impeding the implementation of the project. Investment activities (construction) in the projects are also jeopardised as most of them cannot be implemented in the winter season.

The resulting necessary budget revisions often require additional changes, approvals and sometimes can also lead to the cancellation of some of originally planned activities. This time gap is the result of several factors. First of all, the first contracts could not be signed before the Programme’s designation, which took place very late (summer 2018) and the MC meetings are only taking place twice a year, thus increasing the time needed for decision-making. The time needed for preparation of MC meeting minutes and for comments were reduced from 42 days to 28 days (preparation of minutes and comments). For the next round the time of the contract preparation should not exceed 6 months. A further important factor is the ability of successful applicants to promptly react on comments and to adjust the proposal accordingly and/ or submit additional explanations in a speedy way.

²⁸ In case the project is rejected and then re-submitted, it has to be submitted under the new reference number, although the content of the project remains the same.

²⁹ Source: minutes of MC

Fig. 2 Average time from the submission of proposals to the contract signature by rounds



3.11 Implementation phase



The implementation phase of the Programme started late, the reasons for which are many folds and indicated in previous sections of this report. After some two years from the official start of the new programming period the situation finally and considerably improved and Programme implementation is currently running without major difficulties. Initially, JS/MA staff turnover was high and some of the employees were not sufficiently experienced with the rather special circumstances and requirements of a cross-border-cooperation programme.

The changes of the implementation guidelines have been taking place quite often and new versions were published on the Programme website, however, not always clearly communicated to the beneficiaries (see footnote 20, p. 25). The beneficiaries were informed who is their project/financial manager and how to contact them if necessary. Occasionally, with the staff change on the Slovak side some changes occurred and then it took a while to find out who is the new contact person.

During the implementation phase of the projects the communication with the Programme's staff worked very well and provided professional support, which has been appreciated by the beneficiaries. Many of the beneficiaries referred to personal commitment, willingness of the staff and their effort to find the best solution. The vast majority of the beneficiaries preferred the way of communication providing immediate reaction and advice how to proceed. Two forms of communication prevailed: telephone offering immediate answers and emails providing clear proof (in written form) what has been advised/agreed. The second element was especially important for those interviewees which mentioned having previously received contradictory information at different points in time or from different persons at the programme staff. About half of the Slovak beneficiaries preferred personal consultation

as it enabled better in-depth clarification.³⁰ Overall, most beneficiaries seem to prefer a process where they do not only work following guidelines, but where they are also actively supported by the JS. Especially the opportunity to have “pre-checks” on forms and documents submitted was mentioned as particularly important for them.

In general, there is a prevailing perception of both, Slovak and Austrian interviewees, that the management of EU funded interventions in Slovakia pays too much attention to administrative issues while the content is neglected. Moreover, there is no linkage between content and expenses. The MA has been consulting all financial issues with the Slovak Ministry of Finance (Certification Authority, Audit Authority) as this body is strictly focused on financial audits. This leads to a situation where even small expenditures are being thoroughly inspected, making the control mechanism very inefficient (expensive and with little effect). Interviewees complained about the disproportionate effort necessary for audits, where no distinction between small and large expenditures is made and the same scrutiny is applied to all of them. On the other side, bigger expenses automatically mean the application of public procurement procedures, which is not easy to manage either.

The rules-guided approach became more visible not only after the transfer of the MA from Austria to Slovakia but especially following the decision of central management of ESIF on the Slovak side. The overall management and administration are strictly framed by the unified national legislation (Act on ESIF), which is not suitable for this type of programme. The original legislation had to be, at least partially, adjusted where objective reasons could be justified and a few exceptions in relation to the Programme were accepted. Central management means more complicated administrative processes which however are not fully applicable to Austrian applicants. The MA lacked access to registers (social, health insurance), electronic communication could use only Slovak electronic signatures. Austrian electronic signatures were not accepted by the ITMS, which is otherwise common for EU funded initiatives. This was also one of the reasons why some documents still have to be delivered in both electronic format and as printed version with the original signature. Besides that, the lists of declared expenditures, which is part of the First Level Control (FLC), is provided in an excel form not downloadable to ITMS, which does not contain the FLC process specific to cross-border programmes. Complicated administration, including public procurement and unclear issues concerning the state aid – mainly the low maximum limit, has very likely a negative effect on the involvement of the Slovak private businesses in the Programme.

The interviewed stakeholders³¹ identified several bottlenecks in the process of the project implementation: it is the submission of the requests for payment including the reporting obligations (delivery of monitoring reports), the use of ITMS and public procurement processes.

3.11.1 Request for payment

In relation to payment, some of the interviewed beneficiaries mentioned the lack of a pre-financing possibility. This was especially (but not only) the case for cultural institutions, which have very limited budget and where co-financing sources usually have to be provided by the relevant ministry. Research

³⁰ 15 Slovak respondents were asked the question on the preferred form of communication (with multiple choices): 10 of them preferred phone, 10 have chosen e-mail, only 2 mentioned seminars and 5 of them preferred direct personal consultation (see Annex 3). Results provided through the questionnaire survey were confirmed by subsequent interviews.

³¹ Beneficiaries as well as the MA staff and members of the MC.

institutions in some cases face similar problems. The FLC for cross-border programmes is carried out separately; FLC in Austria is the responsibility of regional offices, in Slovakia it is carried out by one of the Departments from the Section of Cross-border Cooperation Programmes of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development SR (MA). Reimbursement of costs takes time, usually about 3 months. The experience of beneficiaries with both, FLC and approval of requests differs but, in most cases, there is an effort to manage it within the given time limit. However, occasionally it might happen that different advice is provided by FLC and JS, which leads to the confusion.

Financial reporting is considered by both, Slovak and Austrian beneficiaries, as too detailed and very rigid. In particular, if the approval procedure of the project takes 1-2 years it cannot be expected that the originally calculated budget remains still valid. Flat rates are used for budgeting of administrative expenses and the limits for expert fee rates were considered helpful. However, on the Slovak side the international experts are paid from institutional budgets or by sponsors because the given financial limits would not allow to pay their fees. Aspects of the very detailed reporting include for instance:

- timesheets of all the involved project staff;
- refreshment where participants book their places on the activity but eventually do not appear, the lunch is then paid but not eligible (only mentioned on the Slovak side);
- billing of fuel expenses; the average price is set out in the middle of each month and it influences the conversion factor for the calculation of expenses; in consequence, the applied approach is too complicated.

Especially in the last case, or travel expenses in general, some beneficiaries mentioned that it is financially more viable not to report those expenses at all, because the time and thus personnel cost spent to claim the reimbursement exceeds the incurred expenses in many cases. One Austrian interviewee for example stated he will abstain from trying to get travel expenses reimbursed if he submits a project in the next period.

Lack of flexibility is also perceived as a problem by the beneficiaries. Any project modifications (change procedures³²) within the projects were found administratively demanding and taking too long time. However, the requests for change are sometimes not coordinated by the beneficiaries/project partners and come from individual partners of the same project separately. In some cases, they come too often.

The type of the applied administrative procedure depends on the type and size of change, if this is not correctly understood and processed by the beneficiaries, unnecessary delays occur. The billing system is more convenient for the infrastructure/ investment projects rather than for creative or scientific projects. Soft projects deal more often with hundreds of invoices for small amounts but the administrative procedure for their processing is exactly the same. The requests for payment have to be aligned with the internal rules and procedures of beneficiaries' organisations. Their local staff is not trained and there is a risk of non-eligible expenses.

The monitoring reports are perceived by beneficiaries as appropriate although it was mentioned that reporting every 6 months is too often. However, to speed up disbursement, the MA introduced 3 months period to closely monitor the implementation progress.

³² Slovak term zmenové konanie

3.11.2 ITMS

The IT monitoring system was generally considered by interviewees as an obstacle rather than a useful tool. The initial effort, to use some other monitoring system - more suitable for cross-border cooperation, was discontinued due to the prevailing national management of ESIF in Slovakia. Besides the unified legal framework, all EU supported interventions have the obligation to use central IT monitoring system with the access to the state treasury to manage the payments. Nevertheless, this IT system was developed for the national operational programmes and did not consider the special needs of cross-border programmes. First of all, only the Slovak language version of ITMS was available. By accident it did not cause difficulties for the other cross-border programme managed by Slovakia because it is with the Czech Republic. However, with the Slovak–Austrian cooperation the defects became apparent.

Internal debates about the use of a different system took some time until a final decision was made by programme partners. The Central Coordination Body made the commitment to adapt the ITMS and was responsible for the adjustment of the system and the preparation of a German version was started. As it was not originally intended to plan so, translation of the software proved to be not so easy. The MA was asked to help with the translation of words or phrases and this was uploaded to the system. However, the Slovak syntax with German words did not make sense. In the meantime, the software development contract had expired and the German version of the ITMS was still not properly finalised. Therefore, some parts, such as errors reports, still appear in the Slovak language only, which creates considerable problems for Austrian users as they are in many cases unable to identify the errors correctly. This resulted in overburdening the staff of JS in Vienna providing assistance on the phone.

The software is obviously not very user-friendly and a large proportion of the beneficiaries has substantial difficulties to use it. When asked about the IT system only 4 Slovak users out of 15 respondents considered it user-friendly. However, all of them have been working with the system for a long time. None of the Austrian interviewees considered the system user-friendly – on the contrary, almost all interviewees mentioned it as particularly difficult to use. Those who could draw comparisons to other programmes considered it the most problematic IT system. Based on the interviews, the main weaknesses of the ITMS can be summarised as follows:

- The guideline is not much helpful and does not provide examples, navigation in the system does not indicate the errors until you reach the end of the section, which means that the whole process needs to be repeated from the start again, corrections are almost impossible;
- to complete some partial process, too many steps have to be done whilst missing the logical sequence;
- the request for payment is difficult to manage either with or without the guideline, it is not clear, which part is displayed on the screen, it is difficult to upload expenditures and link them with the request;
- there is also some confusion concerning terminology (in the Slovak language) as it is not consistent, e.g. various terms are used for the same type of the report;
- the uploaded data are not automatically transferred but have to be inserted again;
- in case the indicator target is exceeded, it is impossible to upload this information;
- the name of the responsible person must be a statutory representative of the institution (in case of the Ministry it is Minister), this causes problems when entering data and also when there is a change of person in a given post;

- the system is not properly translated into German;
- key principles of cross-border programmes such as the Lead Partner principle described above are not recognised by the system.

Almost all beneficiaries complained about illogical sequences of steps and an illogical way of structuring information. According to them the IT system used for community programmes is much more user-friendly, intuitive, provides simple explanations in one or two sentences and description of steps is very simple, which is not the case for the ITMS. Particularly the EMS system by Interact as well as the FFG-IT system (Forschungsförderungsgesellschaft, an Austrian research fund) have been mentioned as best practice examples, although the latter, of course, is not developed for cross-border programmes.

Beneficiaries repeatedly mentioned a fact that deserves some attention: the project partner account allows access to all implemented projects of the respective organisation; these organisations often comprise more units and personal data (including fees) of people working on other projects are shared and visible for all project partners, which raises doubts in respect to proper data protection.

3.11.3 Public procurement

Public procurement represents a continuous challenge for all ESIF and other public finance sources in Slovakia. Public procurement can substantially influence the whole project success: it is often complicated, time consuming, influencing personnel costs as well as the implementation of all subsequent activities. According to beneficiaries, the current methodological guide is complicated; whilst the legal framework for low value acquisitions is quite simple, the related administrative procedures are surprisingly demanding. Below-threshold contracts (public procurement procedure with low budget ceiling) can also cause problems: the contacted providers often do not reply because the financial values are not worth the effort, whilst at the same time, the FLC insists on providing at least three offers. As a consequence, the complexity of the processes very often does not correspond to the invested effort and the amount. A few specific examples can be mentioned:

- Content of the projects requires specific knowledge or know-how and usually there are very few good quality experts at the market. However, the public procurement processes do not enable to contract a specific expert - it is almost impossible to invite highly ranked international experts (due to the maximum fee limit).
- The public procurement does not allow direct translation from German into English. This is necessary in case of international publications but the translation has to be procured from German into Slovak and then from Slovak into English. It is obvious that this is more time-demanding, more expensive, leads to work overload of the project staff and subsequently it results in decreased quality of outputs.
- Programme 's ambition is to boost scientific cooperation across the borders; however, the Slovak public procurement legislation causes serious difficulties. Special case is the purchase of chemical substances. To achieve reliable and valid results these substances have to be purchased from the same producer, otherwise it does not enable to achieve proper results. This condition has to be included in the technical specification, which is perceived as restriction of the competition.
- The initial price quotes for the unique laboratory equipment in one of the projects were provided during the preparatory stage in 2017. Although the special machines for laboratories are often provided by the only company (equally, for some IT services or special expertise the only supplier is available), it was required to purchase all the equipment from one supplier. The tender was

prepared and it has been ex ante controlled three times by the Public Procurement Office, but the public procurement process is not completed yet. This causes problem with co-financing, which has to be kept as special budget line and has to be transfer from one year to the next one. It also extends the project implementation as the equipment is inevitable for further activities. The length of the process will very likely affect the eventual price.

In many cases, procurement must be performed as a part of the overall procurement of the parent organisation and its financial limits; this could decisively affect the method of procurement and must be also harmonised in time. In general, the public procurement process is so difficult that many of the projects hire experts or external companies to manage it. This applies for any ESIF interventions as the former experience with EU funded projects showed numerous financial corrections for the beneficiaries due to the incorrect public procurement processes. Despite several levels of control, some misconduct can be identified and ultimate responsibility rests with the beneficiary. It is important to add that the issue of public procurement is relevant in relation to the Slovak partners and activities taking place in Slovakia. The prevailing opinion is that despite of the great willingness and support of the MA, the Slovak legal system does not enable smooth Programme implementation. The Austrian beneficiaries did not consider public procurement problematic at all from their perspective, however, were also aware of problems with the Slovak legal system in that regard. Where possible, the public procurement was thus entrusted to the Austrian partners and carried out in Austria.

Task 3: Evaluating Programme outcomes and tentative view on longer-term impacts

The final task of this evaluation deals with three evaluation criteria: effectiveness, impact and sustainability of the Programme. The main emphasis is given to the process of monitoring, achievement of objectives and sustainability of interventions while the visibility and perception of the Programme by the public is also partly addressed. The expected focus on partnership and cooperation mentioned by the Terms of Reference has been already covered within the previous tasks.

3.12 Programme Monitoring

The monitoring process is described in the guidelines. Once the project is approved and starts the implementation it has to be monitored. The monitoring of projects is basically carried out through the submission of monitoring reports but occasionally projects can be subject to a monitoring visit, in most cases such a visit follows the project completion. All of the project partners have the obligation to provide the monitoring report at least once a year. Recently, the frequency of Monitoring Reports was increased to a three months period. The Monitoring Report at the level of partner together with the list of declared expenses has to be submitted to the First Level Control (FLC). The list of declared expenses has to include all necessary annexes (invoices, time sheets, photographs, etc.). If approved by the FLC, it is uploaded to the ITMS. Such a report thus provides clear and comprehensible information on the project activities and their outputs, including fulfilment of the pre-determined set of indicators and financial data. To prepare the Summary Monitoring Report (SMR) at the level of project all project partners have to provide their Monitoring Reports. The SMRs are submitted as interim reports during implementation; the final SMR is prepared at the end of the project. The ex-post SMR is prepared mainly

for the investment projects on an annual basis for the period of 5 years after the project completion. All of the Monitoring Reports include information on the indicators. The monitoring process and tools in the form of Monitoring Reports submitted via ITMS work well.

Some of the beneficiaries considered the preparation of two Monitoring Reports in a year too frequent, as in their view it greatly diminishes efficiency since they have to spend too much time on administrative tasks. However, the MA's reporting obligations need to work with data reflecting the latest status of the Programme. Reporting with a lower frequency would not provide sufficient up-to-date data to follow the Programme's implementation progress. The financial data coming together with the Monitoring Reports as well as Performance Framework with the set of indicators are reported within the determined deadlines and serve as the monitoring tool for overall Programme performance. Unmet targets and deadlines are the base for possible decommitment; therefore, the MA shortens the monitoring periods in order to report the most up-to-date information. The indicators are automatically uploaded to the ITMS and aggregated at the Programme level, although, this part of the system has not been working perfectly well and the mistakes are still being sorted.

3.13 Indicators

Under the given circumstances, the logical link between output and result indicators is hardly traceable. Moreover, many of the identified results lack corresponding indicators or some of the specified and monitored result indicators do not measure the relevant effects of the Programme. For example, the result indicators for the PAs with several implemented projects have not been achieved, while the result indicator for the PA without any contracted project, exceeded the target value. The result indicators selected thus do not capture the actual short-term effect of the Programme, but rather depict developments dependent on factors outside of the Programme.

Some of the interviewed beneficiaries noted differences in the current projects' applications. As mentioned, the descriptive essays from former programming periods have been substituted by the project intervention logic. This is certainly a positive step, which introduces structure and logic into the planned interventions. Intervention logic at the Programme level was set to reflect identified needs, however, a more detailed description of the theory of change is missing. At the superficial level - based on the Programme description in the programming document, there were several weaknesses identified, which could have been sorted. For example, one of the main rules of the intervention logic says that number of output indicators should always be bigger than the number of results indicators. This has not been fully respected in the Programme structure. Moreover, outputs and results should be monitored and measured through their respective indicators. The Programme set out practically identical output indicators for all measures, i.e. number of jointly developed major products & services, number of organisations / institutions and number of participants in joint trainings are with small adjustments set out for each SO (except priority axis 5 on technical assistance). These output indicators are not sufficiently specific; for example, it is not clear what can be considered "a product" in different interventions and why there are two categories (products and services) measured together by one indicator. It is understood that the selected set of common output indicators defined by the European Territorial Cooperation Regulation has to be monitored. However, to reflect the specific nature of the interventions within the individual Programme, PAs equipped with a special set of corresponding indicators could improve the ability to measure the Programme's success.

To be more explicit (for better understanding refer to Annex 9):

- SO 1.1 mentioned the *establishment of a research facility to improve the integrated river management along the Danube river* as result, though it is an output and no result indicator was assigned to measure this achievement,
- SO 1.2 states two results but only one indicator,
- equally SO 2.1 has two results but only one indicator and this indicator refers to number of cyclist and pedestrians measured at the bridge, which was built within the previous programme,
- SO 2.2 has four outputs and four results but one result indicator only, linked to the second result. Moreover, no outputs are related to last two results,
- the measure concerning transports suggests for SO 3 three results and three outputs, but no output is related to the last two results; the indicator linked to the first result, will most likely have no link to the Programme as it measures other effects than those of the Programme – the value of the indicator currently exceeds the target while no project was contracted and implemented,
- SO 4.1 counts three outputs but four results, where the first and third results are outputs and the fourth one refers to small-scale projects, not implemented within the Programme,
- SO 4.2 refers to links between pre-primary and primary education but the indicator measures cooperation of key actors, which is much wider group of stakeholders.

While it is clear that one result indicator will not be sufficient in the case of several intended results, it has to be mentioned, that the EC guidelines³³ advise to keep the number of result indicators per specific objective low, thus one or two result indicators could be used.

The mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators, however is set up well. Survey-based indicators in principle, are the only ones able to really capture the cooperation concepts supported by the Programme, as quantitative data on such issues is scarce at best. The intervals for conducting surveys are defined in line with the requirements of Programme evaluation as well.

The above described set of indicators does not enable to estimate a “ratio” between target value of output indicators and financial allocation for the respective SO. The “identical” output indicators for different SOs might suggest the use of some ratio but as evident from Table 6, there is no correlation. The allocated resources do not correspond with the determined targets (e.g. 14,5 mil € allocation for SO 1.1 envisaged 125 participants in training schemes, while 5,1 mil € allocation for SO 1.2 set the target 500 participants). Equally, contracted funds have no link to the values of indicators in the contracted projects (e.g. 11 mil € for SO 1.1 includes contracted projects with the overall value 245 trained participants while 3,2 mil € contracted for SO 1.2 contains value 4 250 trained participants). For further details see Annex 8, Tab.22. This disproportion is natural as each SO includes projects with a certain type of prevailing activities together with several other activities. The same indicator thus cannot reflect implementation progress of different types of projects in all priority axes.

³³ DG REGIO (2014): Guidance document on Monitoring and Evaluation for European Cohesion Fund and European Regional Development Fund.

Tab. 6 Target values of the indicator for all SO

SO	Allocation	Contracted	No of participants in joint training schemes		
			Target	Contracted	Achieved
1.1	14 563 142	11 001 601	125	245	100
1.2	5 120 000	3 204 771	500	4 250	169
2.1	19 090 001	11 822 810	400	1 055	61
2.2	8 729 999	8 855 666	194	11 440	2 432
3	9 655 000	0	175	0	0
4.1	9 130 978	6 685 469	200	2 457	126
4.2	5 050 001	3 632 351	625	0	0

The achievement of indicators included in the Performance Framework was reported at the end of 2018. At that time the financial indicator's milestones did not achieve their planned values due to the delayed implementation of the Programme. All of the main reasons have been already explained above (transfer of the MA from Austria to Slovakia, necessity to prepare German version of ITMS with adjustments reflecting special needs of the Programme, time required for contract signatures etc.). The financial indicators did not reach the 2018 milestones at the end of 2019 either, but the commitment rate of the Programme made progress (see Annex 7, Table 19). The number of projects in all priority axes exceeded the 2018 targets. The only exception is PA 3 without any contracted and committed sources the reasons again are explained above. As half of the Performance Framework targets was achieved in 2018, it did not have any financial consequences for the Programme. Provided that the Programme implementation would not be two years delayed, the targets set out in the Performance Framework could have been realistic.

3.14 Achievement of specific objectives

The achievement of the Programme's SOs cannot be currently assessed because by the cut-off date of the report only two projects were about to finish. Nevertheless, it is likely to expect that the SOs of the Programme will be largely achieved. Despite that, based on the findings above referring to the results indicators, the achievement of the SOs through the currently specified indicators, will not enable easy justification once the Programme is completed.

- SO 1.1 set out as *to strengthen the collaboration of key actors in the regional innovation system in order to enhance knowledge transfer, capacity building and the establishment of common frameworks, common research and innovation activities and joint research facilities* is expected to be achieved to some extent. There have been four projects running to support cooperation among scientists on both sides of the border with an aim to enhance transfer of knowledge and to develop joint research facilities. Given the different starting point of the regions in terms of innovation capacity, "levelling up" of regions lagging behind in those capacities is a key aspect and likely to be continued. The measurement of results enabling a more accurate judgement, which could for example include common research papers, is missing. Some 25 % of the allocation is still available for additional projects.
- A similar statement is valid for the SO 1.2 set out as *to improve the capacity of the cross-border educational system to provide human resources knowledge and skills demanded by the regional innovation system*. There are three projects running and almost 38 % of the allocated sources remain to be contracted. The cooperation at the level of universities is being developed; future cooperation with the economic stakeholders has to be assessed later. The intensity of

cooperation measured through the questionnaire, summarising various projects at the level of several PAs of the Programme, might not be the best indication of various types of cooperation among different institutions and/or target groups.

- The achievement of SOs 2.1 and 2.2 follows the same pattern. The first SO 2.1 which should *strengthen common approaches to valorise the natural and cultural heritage in a sustainable way in order to further develop the programme area as an attractive tourism destination*. Once completed, the results of seven implemented projects should most likely attract more tourists but the increase of tourists in various places cannot be captured through the number of cyclist and pedestrians crossing one bridge over Morava river. About 38 % of the allocation is not contracted yet. SO 2.2 stated as *strengthening of the cross-border integration of functional ecological networks and green infrastructures in order to preserve biodiversity and to contribute to the stability of ecosystems* is also likely to be met. Currently implemented six projects cover the full allocation, but the absent causality among the objective, results and indicators does not enable to measure the actual achievements.
- At the end of 2019 no project was contracted within PA 3 with the SO referring to the *improvement of joint planning, coordination and practical solutions for an environmentally-friendly, low-carbon and safer transport network and services in the programme area*. The results referring to the public cross-border transport and goods traffic measured through the capacity does not comply with the planned interventions. Therefore, even the best possible future projects might have difficulties to justify future achievement of this aim.
- Despite the fact that six projects are contracted and running (one of them should be already completed), nearly 57 % of allocated resources are still at hand for the interventions within SO 4.1 aiming to *strengthen the institutional cooperation in the cross-border area through mobilizing stakeholders and building the capacities for planning and acting in the framework of multi-level governance*. The probability to achieve the SO is high and could be possibly measured through the specified indicators. However, based on the currently contracted projects not all of the identified results can be reached as there have been no interventions dealing with social inclusion, poverty or emergency situations yet. The final SO 4.2 focused on *strengthening of the links between institutions providing pre-primary and primary education (kindergartens and primary schools) to jointly develop and implement educational programmes* is likely to materialise despite the fact that there is only project under implementation. This project expects to absorb 72 % of the allocation for this specific objective and is fully devoted to cooperation of kindergartens and primary schools at both sides of the border.

3.15 Impact

The issue of assessing the impact is strongly limited by the early stage of implementation. It can be expected to observe some impact of the Programme in 3 - 5 years and only at that stage a contribution of the implemented projects to observed effects could be discussed. As the scope of the Programme interventions is rather wide in terms of number of issues to be tackled as well as rather modest in terms of the funding (mainly compared to the Slovak national ESIF programmes) the contribution of the Programme might not be so evident and visible respectively measurable with quantitative indicators.

Nevertheless, the synergy effects of various sources (regional, national, ESIF) should multiply and highlight the eventual impacts. The impact at this stage can be only mentioned as planned or envisaged:

- Research and innovation interventions within the PA 1 should benefit from the obligatory partnership of the Slovak and Austrian research institutions. The potential impact in this area is mainly the networking with other institutions from the partners' co-workers enabling wide cooperation and knowledge transfer among researchers also outside the project. This leads to better quality of research and practical application of its results in the social and economic life of society. Activities such as creation or maintenance of networks especially by research institutions is likely to continue without programme funding at least to some extent. In the research sector, some beneficiaries mentioned that the cooperation project was the initial "push" towards cooperation, but cooperation does not depend solely on Interreg funding. Some impact is also expected due to the links to be established between schools and employers, which could also introduce some life-long learning activities as well as to promote technical education. Future benefits can be expected in relation to the (cross-border) employment.
- The main impact of the interventions within PA 2 is related to the mitigation of climate change effects and environmental protection of nature in the border areas with special emphasis on the border rivers Danube and March. Synergy effects with other activities are likely, as e.g. projects actively contribute to stepping stones necessary for larger wildlife corridors; they contribute to the protection goals of protected areas. The supported cultural heritage projects focused on culture together with existing commercial initiatives can join the forces and attract more tourists to promote the region, its culture and/or local products. Projects undertaken connect cultural awareness to touristic use thus creating synergy effects as well. However, no significant effects of this kind can be identified at present.
- The transport measures planned within PA 3 may potentially contribute to environmentally friendly and low-carbon transport in the form of bridge for pedestrians and cycling, which is expected to start soon. The eventual impact thus could decrease transport pollution, support tourism due to better access across border, but may also provide some employment opportunities.
- The institutional cooperation among various organisations (including kindergartens and elementary schools) may bring long-term effects in various areas. The main benefit should be in the form of mutual cooperation of the institutions across border bringing common solution of the problems in the border areas.

3.16 Contributions to horizontal principles, the EU selected strategic documents and sustainable development

All interventions within the Programme have to respect horizontal principles, i.e. equality between men and women, non-discrimination and sustainable development. These conditions are explained to potential applicants and had to be reflected in the applications. Each Call for projects undergoes the assessment process ensuring that the Call is fully compliant with the horizontal principles (HP). During the selection process, each project application is also judged from the perspective of the compliance with HP. Unless the proposed project is fully in line with the HP, it cannot be approved. In the

implementation phase the projects are monitored and regular Monitoring reports include a special part to describe compliance with HP as well as the achievement of HP indicators.

Some of the output indicators set out at the project level should also measure the achievement of these principles. However, the assignment of these indicators to the horizontal principles is not following a stringent logic. This is partly caused by the above mentioned set up of the indicators. Moreover, the same indicator has a completely different HP affiliation in different measures/ SO. For example: the output indicator *number of jointly developed major products and services ...* has the affiliation to all HP as the indicator of output for SO 1.1 and 4.1, it has gender affiliation for SO 1.2, sustainability affiliation for SO 3 and 4.2 and no HP affiliation for SO 2.1 and 2.2 (see Annex 8, Table 21). Overall, 17 out of 26 output indicators for PA 1 - 4 are assigned to some HP. This affiliation may be therefore considered artificial and does not serve any specific purpose. The assessment of the project applications ensures that the projects are compliant with the HP but the monitoring of HP indicators in the given setting is artificial, redundant and cannot provide any added value. The use of the determined indicators cannot prove the contribution of the projects to the achievements of absent targets with no links to any SOs.

Originally, 37 % of the Programme allocation (PA 2) was specifically planned to support the sustainable development principle. The Ministry of Environment SR, respective the Austrian federal Ministries and non-governmental environmental institution are regular members of the MC, which provides final approval of the selected projects. This should be another decision-making level to ensure that the sustainable development principle is taken into account. Besides that, the projects are implemented in partnership with national and regional environmental institutions and/or with the strategic support of the national/ federal ministries. The implemented projects are thus focused on the promotion of tourism, cultural heritage, nature conservation and biodiversity.

Natura 2000 consisting of Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation, provides a common EU framework to safeguard natural assets and serves as the main European instrument to achieve the biodiversity objectives. The Austrian programme area comprises 56 sites with an area of around 5,600 km² and the Slovak side covers 98 sites with an area of around 1,755 km² protected under Natura 2000. The latest systematic assessment of the conservation status of Europe's most vulnerable habitats in 2018 revealed that only a small proportion of the habitats and species of Community interest are in a favourable conservation status. More specific results for the programme area indicate that around 18 % of the habitats and 15% of the species in Austria are in a favourable conservation status, 3% respectively 2% are in an unknown state and 79% of habitats respectively 82% of species are in a poor or bad conservation status. In Slovakia 38 % of habitats and 23 % of species are in a good preservation status, 2 % in an unknown state and the remaining proportion is in the unfavourable state of protection. Therefore, the main focus of several projects within the priority axis 2 is relevant and could bring some positive contribution as it is addressing biodiversity protection and restoration in Natura 2000 areas around borders.

The target set out in the Europe 2020 strategy (see Table 7) are to certain extent also addressed by the Programme interventions. A contribution to these indicators can be expected in the R&D expenditures through the support of the projects within SO 1.1 and tertiary education within SO 1.2. The rest of indicators is not directly addressed by the currently implemented projects.

Tab. 7 Europe 2020 SK and AT national indicators

No	HEADLINE INDICATORS	Unit	Target 2020	
			SK	AT
Education, Research and innovation				
1	Early leavers from education and training (aged 18 – 24)	%	6	9
2	Tertiary educational attainment (aged 30 – 34)	%	40	38
3	Gross domestic expenditure on R&D	% GDP	1,2	3,76
Employment and social inclusion				
4	Employment rate age group 20 - 64	%	72	77
5	People at risk of poverty or social exclusion	%	17,2	-235 000*
Environmental sustainability				
6	Greenhouse gas emissions (compared to 2005)	%	-13	-16
7	Share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption	%	14	34
8	Primary energy consumption	Mtoe	16,4	31,5

Mtoe – million tonnes of oil equivalent, * number of people

Taking into account the current state of the Programme implementation a specific impact in terms of horizontal priorities, in relation to Natura 2000 and Europe 2020 strategy, can hardly be estimated. However, it can be expected that the implemented projects may somehow contribute to the relevant indicators set out in the National Reform Programme (as indicated in Annex 10, Tab. 23). In any case, the impact effects must be considered realistically and because of the limited interventions and financial resources, will not in themselves bring about significant improvements.

3.17 Sustainability of interventions

As regards the benefits of the interventions after project completion, not much can be said due to the timing of the evaluation as already explained. However, the sustainability of the Programme as such, can be judged from several perspectives. The cross-border perspective should primarily focus on the creation of the long-term and well-functioning cross-border partnerships. The current composition of the partners suggests that there is a community of “old” partnerships established. The existing network is growing and some partners are replaced by the new ones, while completely new project partnerships are rare. The additional contribution is the networking effect brought by the partnerships. This is especially visible in the research projects where the research conferences and events widen the cooperation networks among scientists outside the projects. Furthermore, contact established e.g. between individual departments of research institutions through the programme can be considered an entry point for future cooperation between those departments as well as between other departments of the same institutions.

From the financial perspective, some of the projects face difficulties in relation to the applied rules. If the project generates some income this is understood as a profit and the EU co-financing rate is decreased. On the other side the future generation of income (e.g. in the form of entrance fee in case of historical or cultural monuments, or transport fee for seniors) cannot be considered profit as it often just covers maintenance or operating costs and enables to sustain the benefits of the projects.

As regards the sustainability of individual projects it is in most cases very likely ensured as the projects are run by the public institutions. The projects are for example supposed to reconstruct historical buildings and create a new community area maintained by the municipality, establish a training centre

for students that can be also used by other schools or companies. It is also expected to install a newly equipped research workplace, that could provide services for scientific as well as private institutions on both sides of the border. The special equipment thus can provide analyses for wide surroundings. This type of equipment is often very specific and expensive therefore it is economic to use its full capacity and carry out the measurements practically non-stop. Good example of sustainability is demonstrated by some follow-up projects. The projects implemented in the previous programming period produced results, e.g. results of research of movement physiology and diagnostic functions, which are used as specific methods of movement interventions in rehabilitation in the currently implemented project. The results of the joint research are fully used in the current project, while these results can also be used in general practice outside of the Programme.

The sustainability is also ensured through the commitment of the strategic partners to keep the created jobs, or created space for local communities (folk art, bakers, fruit growers or guilds as a hub for future activities). A special case is the project, which develops special software for designers and semi-professionals and created the library of collected samples of various types of materials, including completely new forms. Some of them have been displayed at the permanent exhibition of MAK Vienna³⁴ or have a high potential for industrial processing (e.g. turbine recycling, toothbrushes). The sustainability, in this particular case, thus goes beyond original expectations. The results of design project can be transformed into industrial use and environmental protection.

3.18 Visibility and perception of the Programme

Most of the respondents on the Slovak side, but also on the Austrian side were of the opinion that the Programme is not very visible for the citizens of the region. Some of them expressed the view that a real added value of the Programme as well as the value of the cross-border cooperation is not tangible. According to the respondents, the Programme and its actions are particularly visible to a special “group”, namely those institutions and companies that have been involved in INTERREG either in the Slovakia-Austria Programme or in another Programme in the past, but not very visible outside of this group.

This limited perception of the Programme has according to respondents several reasons: the obligatory visibility of supported interventions on the web pages or in the printed version of fliers/leaflets is not very effective because it is not attractive for the public. It was repeatedly expressed that the Small Projects Fund is a tool with significant contribution to the visibility of the cross-border programmes. The small projects are very popular and visible among the population of the cross-border regions (such as common sport or cultural events, fairs, etc.). Unfortunately, this opportunity to gain wider publicity through a Small Projects Fund was not used in the current programming period.

Nevertheless, all of the interviewed beneficiaries appreciated the availability of EU sources addressing some specific problems outside of the mainstream support. Perception of the Programme among the beneficiaries it is substantially influenced by the reimbursement of the request for payments. This is especially true for the Slovak beneficiaries. The Austrian beneficiaries usually face more favourable financial conditions and delays in reimbursement do not mean a critical financial situation for them.

³⁴ MAK Vienna - prestigious museum and space of experimentation for applied arts and the interface of design, architecture and contemporary art. Its core competence lies in a contemporary exploration of these fields aimed at revealing new perspectives and elucidating discourse at the edges of the traditions. The MAK focuses on securing an adequate recognition and positioning of applied arts.

This is especially the case for universities and governmental or semi-governmental institutions, where their liquidity is less dependent on a project- based income in the short term.

4. Conclusions/Recommendations

The responses to the evaluation questions reflect various parts from the Findings section of the report. To make sure that all of the questions are properly answered, the structure of this section follows the topics subject to individual questions set out for Task 1, 2 and 3 of the Terms of Reference. Some of the questions are thus grouped under one coherent topic. Task 1 and 3 is largely structured according to the questions while Task 2 follows the sequence of the processes.

4.1 Programme strategy

The basic policy framework characteristics in the Programme have not encountered any substantial change since the programming stage. Based on the findings confirmed through statistical indicators, financial data of the Programme, the comparative analyses of the strategic documents at the regional and Programme level and the responses provided by interviewees we can conclude that the originally identified needs remain still relevant. The overall strategy, choice of thematic objectives and objectives of the Programme correspond well with the current needs of the Programme area and the recent statistical figures confirm a persistent need for support in the selected priority areas. The given absorption rate also confirms relevance of the identified needs. A part of the approved projects is being implemented; with the exception of PA 3, about three quarters of the PA 1, 2 and 4 financial sources have been contracted. The interest of applicants has been adequate and if administrative proceedings are further improved, the remaining time should be sufficient to manage a full absorption of the allocated funds in a reasonable way.

Only PA 3 on transport shows a rather slow progress. This can be explained by changes, which took place at the time when the Programme was supposed to be started and some additional factors. The previous programme included preparatory projects, which were supposed to be implemented in the current programming period but these appeared to be very expensive and thus were not suitable for funding. Another project provided technical documentation for the bridge Záhorská Ves – Angern, which should replace the current ferry. This solution was refused in a local referendum. Needs have not changed, but the situation has been influenced by external political factors, a risk that was not considered and expected at the time of project preparation. This shows how important it is to constantly promote and communicate the objectives of cross-border cooperation and its benefits to the wider population. Such effort would not only ensure efficiently the invested effort and money but would also help the local population in the border region to understand the added value and in consequence could bring more economic benefits to the region.

The risk connected with the delay in the preparation of the new project could have been assumed if the Programme management worked on the risk mitigation from the time of the Programme approval. However, this was not possible due to the reasons explained above, so the new project preparatory activities replacing the originally planned projects started late. Therefore, the pre-selected project on the bridge construction Vysoká na Morave – Marchegg still needed time and once the ownership issues were sorted it got the green light. The progress with the potential “transport” projects’ preparation in the near future should thus suggest how likely is the possibility to contract the available budget. Despite this experience, the funding of the preparatory activities for the big investment projects during one programming period and their subsequent implementation in the next programming period is a good model and could be considered obligatory for the future. The current experience with the bridge project

re-confirms the need for such a practise. Moreover, the preparatory activities should enable more appropriate division of allocated resources at the planning stage of the Programme. At least half of the allocation in the transport priority axis should cover the prepared projects (with completed preparatory documents and permits).

Overall, the support of projects within the individual PAs is not strictly thematically divided. Some of the projects include components that could be easily assigned to other priority axes. The prevailing project activities usually decide under which PA the project is placed. The thematic focus with some flexibility is highly appreciated and is especially important for more sophisticated projects with bigger budgets. While the project activities address identified needs and objectives, their placement within the PA is not an issue. The PA dealing with the institutional cooperation is sufficiently wide to cover any other type of reasonable cooperation, which is not covered within the individual thematic PAs. Therefore, even health or other interventions, excluded due to the difficulties with the legislative framework, can be feasible if the projects are inspired by good examples from other countries.

4.1.1 Future priorities

The findings indicate that the needs to be addressed in the next programming period would not practically differ from the current ones thus it is likely to expect that the future Programme structure will be alike. There might be a slight change in the proportion of allocated resources to individual priorities that will have to be agreed by the regions. Especially the support for transport interventions is likely to be reduced as the main investment projects, which have been considered are/ will be completed and in the case of large-scale investments that could be considered their budget is far exceeding possibilities of the Programme. Therefore, the main focus of activities is expected to follow a largely similar structure as the current one.

The interviewed beneficiaries confirmed the balance of the Programme priorities and found them sufficiently specific and flexible. Comparing with the current set a few new priorities were suggested, which could be considered at the planning stage. This included renewable energy and climate change issues, digitalisation, contemporary art and culture as well as river- and water related projects. From the current perspective, especially in the light of recent (and still ongoing) pandemic it is likely to expect that some originally less important priorities might be more acute (such as unemployment). At the same time the standard approach to resolve these problems will probably change as well and new, more innovative ideas will be applied. The transformation process will accelerate, and wider use of digital technologies and skills is expected.

4.2 Programme management

The challenges identified for the Programme have been closely linked to the management and administration of the Programme and its projects. Following the transfer of the MA from Austria to Slovakia the adoption of the national management system caused numerous difficulties. These have been largely caused by significant differences in the legislation frameworks of both countries. The central management and application of the Act on ESIF (adopted in 2014) for all national EU funded programmes has not considered specific features of the cross-border programmes and the need to adapt the ITMS (at least partially) also contributed to the delays in the Programme implementation. Although, most of the problems have been temporarily resolved, the numerous modifications, exemptions and

other unresolved issues suggest to consider a different management system for the Programme in the future. The necessity to resolve the login into the ITMS for the potential applicants as well as the necessity to provide accompanying documents for project applications and for the signing of contracts is apparent.

4.3 Partnerships

Different cultural and historical backgrounds, combined with limited capacities, sometimes underlined by the lack of language skills, resulted in different expectations, approaches and relationships when establishing the individual partnerships. Project preparation in true partnership remains undoubtedly a challenge and currently leads to very low involvement of small municipalities. The findings show that those projects that are currently implemented are interventions of larger scale, focused on topics with wider impact on society. Yet, it is expected that cross-border cooperation is also about partnerships at the immediate local level. Previous experience as well as other cross-border programmes suggest that a Small Project Funds supporting small but effective interventions with good visibility in border region have been very effective. These small-scale projects are popular, very beneficial and deliver immediate significant cross-border effects and visibility. Although it was originally planned to support such small-scale projects within the Programme, it did not take place. Moreover, the evaluation report of the previous programme recommended to *invest on capacity building especially on the Slovak side, paying attention on the provision of content support and alignment with regional and local priorities*. Therefore, it might be helpful to consider the inclusion of an appropriate mechanism to support involvement and partnerships of small municipalities in the next programme.

Most of the established partnerships show slow but steady development. Some of them have been initiated more than 10 years ago, and these already proved their sustainability. The core partners remain and attract some others creating new partnerships. On one side it proves the sustainability of formerly created partnerships with experienced beneficiaries, however, on the other side it somehow limits the number of new partners. In combination with the perceived “difficulty” for new applicants with no prior experience in cross-border cooperation in general or the SK-AT Programme in particular this can be highly discouraging for new partners. This can be taken into account in the next programming where the decision should be made if the intention of the Programme shall be to strengthen well established long-term partnerships or priority shall be given to newly created partnerships and/ or the mix of these two options.

4.4 Programme intervention logic

The Programme logic in general, reflects the special features of the cross-border region and fosters the main opportunities identified by the Programme stakeholders. The implemented projects are highly sophisticated addressing important scientific, technological, innovation and institutional potentials, societal, cultural and education issues as well as environmental problems. There is still sufficient space to address transportation interconnections in the current period. While the Programme logic is content-wise coherent and reflects the needs and numerous challenges of the region, the current structural set up of the intervention logic shows substantial space for improvement. It is understood that some of the targets for results indicators have not been achieved yet. This is first of all related to the delay in Programme implementation. The intensity of cooperation is likely to increase once the projects implementation is running. Nevertheless, the correct identification of results and their respective

indicators can work much better when judging the overall performance of the Programme. This can also serve as a good benchmarking tool to set up indicators for the next programme at both, output as well as result levels. It should enable to estimate a target that would be more realistic and where the actually achieved figures would not show sometimes huge discrepancies in exceeding or not achieving the planned targets. This should be avoided in the new programme.

It should be understood that the specified Programme objectives cannot be changed but there is always sufficient space available to adjust, change or modify both, outputs and results indicators. Taking into account the current stage of the Programme implementation it is too late for any substantial changes, however, if the ex-post evaluation is considered, there will be a need to introduce a complementary set of indicators following the proper reconstruction of the Programme intervention logic. The indicators must have a baseline and target values. These values may be estimated proportionally in relation to the budget based on unit prices or benchmarking methods are suitable to estimate the target values. The most precise estimate is provided based on the experience from the previous or similar programmes.

4.5 Programme financial resources

The distribution of the Programme's financial resources corresponds with the identified needs. The comparative analysis of the former and current cross-border Programmes Slovakia – Austria confirms that the basic areas of support largely remain the same; their financial allocations are modified in line with the achieved progress and in accordance with the development needs. While the financial allocation for the research and innovation area remains at the same level, the supported projects are significantly bigger. Support given to natural and cultural heritage and biodiversity has doubled, which reflects mainly the urgent needs concerning environmental measures in the border areas. The transport measures allocation reached only half of the proportion from the previous programme since the implementation of the prepared projects turned out to be unrealistic. The newly prepared project Vysomarch has confirmed that the preparatory work is demanding in terms of time. Depending on the current state of the project proposals a decision should be made soon if the allocation is likely to be contracted and thus will be kept. The financial proportion of the Programme's final part dedicated to the institutional cooperation is also more than double compared to the previous support. It is expected to support mainly soft interventions in education; however, there is also possibility to consider any other cooperation with the public institutions. This allows to consider also cooperation areas, which originally were not found feasible for support due to legislative restrictions (health, emergency, public transport).

As discussed above, financial sources are allocated in compliance with needs and judging from the current commitment and disbursement rates, they are sufficient. Despite all initial problems and obstacles, the Programme implementation finally started if the current trend for increasing the speed of the implementation (mainly in terms of time used for administrative issues) continues, the initial delay might be overcome, thus ensuring a meaningful utilisation of all resources which would then bring maximum benefits for the region.

The description of beneficiaries and target groups is sufficiently clear and detailed. According to the list of partners currently involved in project implementation, most of the eligible categories of beneficiaries are already represented among the project partners. A European grouping of territorial cooperation has not been established in this area and therefore does not participate in the projects. The activity of Austrian partners is (and has always been) higher, which can have several reasons. The absence of

Slovak private companies among Lead partners also asks for an explanation, which cannot be provided and justified at this stage. As regards the description of activities, these are well defined, but the given separate description of types of actions and examples for actions is not well structured. To make the Programme less rigid it might be helpful to provide less specific definition of both categories (activities as well as beneficiaries/target groups – e.g. in case the list of eligible beneficiaries includes businesses, there is no need to mention European groupings of territorial cooperation as it is legally considered a business); it would enable more flexibility. In relation to outcomes/ results the main findings are described in the section on intervention logic above.

4.6 Programme application process

The analysed data and information confirm that applicants found the eligibility rules and conditions clear and sufficient. Nevertheless, a very important factor for applicants to manage the application process properly has been previous experience with EU funded activities, in particular with cross-border programmes. First time applicants have a very difficult task because they need to become familiar with a new terminology and have to understand how the given administration system works. The basic principles of EU funded initiatives are similar but there are significant differences as a result of national legislation or individual operational programmes. Obviously, as mentioned by the interviewees, community initiatives directly managed by the EU are the most straightforward in terms of management. Notably, beneficiaries also mentioned that even experiences with EU programmes such as Horizon 2020 was helpful in preparing an application, even though they differ significantly in structure and process. However, this of course concerned mainly Universities, where employees are usually much more used to preparing project applications in different settings than it would be the case e.g. for small enterprises.

While the provided information to applicants was found sufficient there were other issues, where assistance provided by the JS staff was still crucial. Filling in the application form was not easy and the applicants had to request advice in many cases. In particular, assistance was needed to explain some terminology and some content of parts of the application form. As the application is rather complex and still contains several annexes, the applicants lack a tool enabling the final check to assure completeness of the application.

JS communication with the applicants was highly satisfactory. There were some initial difficulties caused by the setup of the new Programme and its management and administration structures and processes, however mainly not related to the JS itself but to the time it took to get adjusted to the new system which also required the JS members to gain experience and deal with unexpected issues. This has been now gradually resolved for the most parts. The main communication lines are email and telephone. Phone conversation was preferred when a quick solution was sought. Email is the preference where a written confirmation of the provided instructions is required. Face to face communication serves mainly for a better explanation of specific issues. A few of the applicants mentioned workshops and group trainings as a potentially useful tool mainly in relation to the application process via ITMS.

4.7 Administrative processes

All respondents unanimously agreed that administrative burden within the Programme is high. However, it should be emphasised that this is not always in the control of the programme authorities but to some extent due to factors outside the Programme's control which have to be respected: the Slovak Public

Procurement Act, the Slovak Act on ESIF, obligatory use of the ITMS and strict control mechanisms. All these factors have to be brought in line with international cooperation needs, where partners have substantially different historical experience, culture and habits. The Austrian partners do not have to deal with most of the issues mentioned above in other projects and it can be difficult for them to understand the local circumstances of their Slovak partners. Nevertheless, the knowledge on the existence of these issues is spread among Austrian partners as well in a lot of cases (e.g. it was mentioned by several Austrian interviewees, that they are aware of the difficulties their partners have to face). Despite the evident effort of JS and MA, administrative procedures for the Programme remain demanding and do not reflect the specific features of cross-border cooperation and the participation of Austrian partners. Applicants with experience in other ESIF or even cross-border programmes in most cases mention that the SK-AT Programme is by far the most demanding in terms of administrative burden. This appears as a key issue for discouraging future applicants, since in the comparably small circle of potentially interested people and institutions, the perceived “reputation” of a programme is communicated quite freely and directly. Furthermore, such a perception will extend beyond the ongoing programming period, thus even if considerable simplification is ensured this message might not reach potential applicants.

Nevertheless, for some applicants it is the only possible source of external funding. Especially cross-border cooperation in research and innovation in both countries as well as support of cultural heritage on the Slovak side suffer from the lack of other sources for funding. There is, however, an indication that the setup of the system – mainly as far as state aid is concerned – is discouraging for the Slovak private sector applicants. Partnerships comprising public administration bodies, non-governmental organisation as well as private sector companies could bring much better synergies and benefits for all involved parties. The conducted interviews confirmed an interest to simplify administration processes and to further improve support structures.

One important limiting factor for the Programme is the language barrier,³⁵ causing several problems during preparation and implementation. Confusions are likely to appear with various language versions (German / Slovak) of important Programme documents, rules and guidelines. From the legal point of view in case of need, a legally binding language version should exist. The current bilingual preparation of applications is mentioned as one of the most complicated issues at the preparatory stage, in particular for applicants active in research and innovation. Simplification and practical solutions could be found in unifying three languages into one.

The supporting structures to assist with the administration are established and provide all required services. The JS offices on both sides of the border assisted the applicants and their services are customer friendly, professional and highly appreciated. The issue of Programme transparency is more nebulous and is perceived differently by the individual actors, notably applicants. For the ESIF national programmes it is not common that the (JS) supporting staff is in the role of project assessors at the same time. Usually, the task of checking administrative compliance of the ESIF operational programmes is carried out by the programme administration staff, while the technical assessment, especially taking into account the wide scope of different topics within the programme, is performed by relevant specialists. It has to be noted though, that the approach of developing a project in cooperation with an applicant

³⁵ Listed in the results of questionnaires (Annex 2) and repeatedly emphasised during interviews.

allows to pinpoint the likely issues in project assessment more clearly and avoid “formal” denials as it would more often be the case otherwise.

Besides that, the MC comprises members representing institutions, which are submitting project proposals of the same institution they work for or are part of the (strategic) partnership in other projects. This issue was stressed in audit findings, suggesting a possible conflict of interest. Some measures were subsequently introduced but the main perception of the division of roles for the involved stakeholders is still not clearly framed and therefore remains ambivalent.

Despite generally adequate Programme support structures, the fundamental question of their usefulness arises when project approvals are based less on technical sophistication but more on unilaterally defined, so-called regional development priorities. This theme is primarily characteristic for the Slovak part of the Programme. The question which needs a common perception and clarification is: if the Programme is solely the tool of the regional offices to implement their regional policies. These offices have the competencies in relation to regional development³⁶ and it is understood that their view is important as most of the projects are closely related to regional development. However, this is not the case of research and innovation or all topics related to culture. The MA is managing the Programme with a main emphasis on its cross-border feature, which provides opportunities for wider socio-economic development – with regional development goals from a regional offices point of view being only one of several relevant factors. This gives a space to consider the most optimal set up with the use of so-called strategic projects (Integrated Territorial Investments) and decide the ratio of the future Programme for the strategic interventions of the regional offices, Small Project Fund with much lighter administration and other projects.

4.7.1 Previous experiences

Practically all applicants have already had some experience with EU supported programmes. Most of the Austrian interviewees emphasised that current SK-AT Programme was one of the most difficult and tedious programmes they applied for. On the Slovak side only 1 of 15 Lead Partners/ applicants was applying for the first time. Among the interviewed Austrian Lead Partners only one had no experience with INTERREG programmes, however all had experience with some ESIF programme and partly also other EU programmes such as LIFE or Horizon 2020. Half of the interviewees mentioned specific experience with the SK-AT programme.

Previous experience of applicants was obviously very useful but was not considered the main motivating factor. A well-functioning partnership from previous programmes or other forms of professional cooperation on individual or institutional level proved to be the best motivation. The “old” partnerships with good relationships where people know each other, can rely on the partners’ performance, and a common understanding of objectives is key for successful implementation. Some new partners occasionally join existing partnerships. Beneficiaries perceived completely new partnerships rather risky as it could jeopardise the project if some of the partners failed to deliver its tasks or the relationships would not work well, however this is not specifically related to the programme. On the other side, as proved through the current Programme experience, newly established partnerships can be also very successful and may open the door to new common activities and exchanges beyond the project itself, especially related to research and innovation activities.

³⁶ In Slovakia still shared with the central body/Ministry responsible for the regional development

4.7.2 Applications' processing

The ratio of returned applications (applications accepted with conditions/ comments) is very high (see Annex 5). In the 1st round of the assessment 10 of 15 applications were returned for completion and 3 applications were returned as “could be accepted” but had to be rewritten for re-submission. In the following rounds the number of applications reduced but nearly all were again returned. Overall, out of 29 approved applications³⁷ 23 were returned with some conditions/ comments, which is some 80 % so far. Although the number of applications is decreasing, the ratio of projects accepted with comments is bigger and none of the applicants is currently able to submit a fully acceptable proposal. This indicates that - despite all efforts of the JS staff, guidelines and experience of applicants there is most likely a systemic problem, which would deserve some deeper investigation.

The main reason for returning applications concerned budget issues. The required budget revisions relate mainly to unit costs, relevance of expenses or eligibility of expenditures. Besides that, missing documents or further details had to be provided; sustainability had to be strengthened; changes in the partnership were required as some partners had no meaningful role while, other important partners were missing; or there were additional comments linked to state aid or communication strategy. The different financial conditions on both sides of the borders were sometimes a limiting factor. For instance, the centrally determined maximum fee rate for experts in Slovak projects was found too low to enable the involvement of international specialists.

4.7.3 Simplification

It is understood that the Slovak management system for ESIF is unlikely to be changed, in particular at the end of the programming period. Despite that, during the evaluation numerous issues were identified that could make at least some partial steps possible. Administrative obligations, which have been considered redundant or could be simplified concern the following aspects:

- unclear, repetitive and complicated application form including budget form;
- unclear, and often updated/ changed guidelines (21 updates) and forms for which the changes are not always clearly communicated to applicants;
- provision of the signed Partnership agreement together with the application;
- missing possibility to sign documents electronically for Austrian applicants;
- missing contact for the new project/ financial manager at JS/FLC;
- wider use of unit costs and flat rates;
- problems with internal financial sources for the project;
- use of ITMS.

While some of the measures have been in the meantime introduced, there is still space to intervene and speed up the implementation.

³⁷ till 4th round (cut-off date 31 December 2019)

4.7.4 Respecting deadlines

Considerable delays occurred in relation to the contract signature. The time period from the submission of proposals to the contract signature has been already reduced (see Fig. 3) and a more significant reduction is expected soon, however the duration at the moment still significantly hinders an efficient implementation of the programme.: The aim is to sign contracts within 6 months from the submission of the proposal. This may still take longer as applicants have to deal with numerous comments and in some cases also have to arrange a building permit. Programme internal, the length of the approval procedures has been adjusted: preparation of minutes from the MC meetings as well as time for commenting these minutes have been shortened.³⁸ It still is perceived as a problem though, that there are some issues with reliability of set appointments and meetings as well as distribution of documents and relevant information in a timely manner.

According to the interviewees, most of the deadlines are kept by all involved parties but the approvals are usually provided only in the last minute. Requests for payment are submitted together with the regular monitoring reports and use to be accompanied with requests for changes. If these additional requests are not coordinated in the partnership and come separately and sometimes too often and/ or the administration procedure for the requests for changes are not correctly chosen and do not follow the guidelines, some additional delays are likely to appear. The JS staff has to work in couples and each request needs to be processed by both, Slovak and Austrian managers, which needs some time. Some delays are likely to occur at the level of individual projects; however, this should not have any substantial influence on the Programme implementation. The most substantial delay for the overall Programme was experienced at its start for reasons already explained and since then the situation has improved, however still needing additional improvements to be considered satisfactory. With the current increase in pace of the implementation, and if this increase can be continued it can be expected that the Programme will catch up with the appeared delay.

4.7.5 Personal and administrative capacities

The initial phase of Programme implementation was suffering from frequent staff turnover (especially in the Slovak programme bodies) and from staff that did not have sufficient experience to run a Programme like the given one. After some two years the situation has finally settled and capacities have been built. Many of the initial problems have been sorted out or are in the process of being sorted out: the quality of guidelines has improved, assistance to the beneficiaries is provided more promptly and satisfactory and in consequence, Programme implementation is running with less delays. The administrative staff has gained sufficient experience, skills and knowledge to manage the Programme appropriately however, procedures still have to improve to successfully complete the implementation. In terms of staff number, however it still might need some strengthening.

4.8 External factors influencing Programme implementation

Overall, the Programme suffers from all adverse external factors systemic for EU funded interventions (ESIF) in Slovakia, i.e. it is too bureaucratic, time-consuming and complicated. Moreover, the applied

³⁸ This is valid as of the 6th MC meeting

national management system has not been suitable for this special kind of intervention mechanism. The only provisional adaptation of the national management system did not work well, it underlined the systemic deficiencies of the unified system and forced the MA to develop ad-hoc solutions which could alleviate at least the most serious shortcomings.

The most significant factor, which cannot be influenced by the MA is the Slovak national legal framework, specifically the Act on ESIF and Public Procurement Act. The Act on ESIF and the Management system of ESIF are the legal norms valid for all national EU funded programmes within the programming period 2014-2020. While it can cover all specific issues of the national operational programmes, it does not fit well with the specific features of cross-border programmes (e.g. it does not include any FLC). Such weakness also concerns the use of ITMS, which is one of the ESIF management tools. Originally, the ITMS was not assumed to have any other language version and that it should be accessible also for Austrian applicants. The required additional effort to adapt the system was not able to include and adjust all necessary items, which had and continues to have some negative effect on the Programme as such.

Public procurement remains problematic for many EU funded activities. It is a specific problem for research and innovation activities where every special technical equipment has to be procured. Such equipment is often produced by only one company (often outside EU) and therefore it is practically impossible to get three offers for a tender. Equally, some standard testing methods require chemical substances from the same producer (the same product from other producers usually cause deviation/errors in measurements). In such cases procurement needs special exceptions. The procurement processes for the other areas within the Programme also experienced complicated administration and repeated long-term control processes, often followed by budget reduction.

4.9 Programme monitoring and horizontal principles

In general, the monitoring processes are set up and work well with some limitations as regards the indicators. The uploading and aggregation of indicators, which was supposed to work automatically, encounters some difficulties. This is caused primarily by the timing of the reporting at the level of project and Programme. With the 6 months reporting period depending on the start date of the project contract, it could happen that the Monitoring report could be delivered after the deadline for the Programme reporting. Therefore, the information on the achievements of indicators would not be reflected in the summary.

Another issue, which needs some attention is the set of indicators. While it is understood that the use of common indicators is obligatory, it does not mean that this type of indicators can fully reflect the nature of the implemented Programme interventions. The justification of the achievement of individual specific objectives would require proper set of SMART³⁹ indicators. The current set up for the most part does not provide a sufficient base to judge the achievement of objectives due to the lack of appropriate indicators that could measure longer-term effects (results) of the Programme interventions. By the cut-off date of the report no results have been reported. This is equally valid for the level of impact, which might be observed much later.

³⁹ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound

In relation to the horizontal principles, Natura 2000 and Europe 2020 Strategy the assessment of the Programme contribution is equally premature and it is not expected to be substantial due to the Programme limited resources. The general compliance with all above mentioned HP and strategies is perceived as basic condition for the approval of the projects. The random assignment of the output indicators to some of the HP has not demonstrated any added value and confirmed the lack of intervention logic (also for HP and their respective objectives).

The assessment of sustainability in the absence of results and impacts is pure estimate. The overall Programme perspective suggests that the Programme should primarily support the idea of the cross-border cooperation through the established partnerships. Mainly the research measures reported networking potential but the findings indicate that most of the project partnerships had been already created and the space for the new partners to join the Programme seems to be rather limited. The interviews confirmed that the views on widening the space for the newcomers differ, which is also influenced by the perception of the Programme - either understood as a special tool for the regional development or is seen as a wider cross-border instrument. This view needs to be clarified in the programming phase. The sustainability of the projects is likely to be subject of the availability of future financial support. As most of beneficiaries are currently public institutions or public service institutions, it can be expected, that the achieved benefits will be sustained.

4.10 Communication of the Programme's results

To communicate the results of the Programme which provides support in four so different areas is a very challenging task; therefore, an option could be to communicate special topics instead of the Programme's "brand" and to focus on particular target group. Subsequently, the positive perception of the Programme could be supported and built through selected topics and results achieved. For example, a very popular event the Fruit growing days (Ovocinárske dni) organised by one of the projects, is attended by students, fruit growers / farmers, people from the relevant Ministries but also general public. It serves as a forum to discuss partial problems and related topics but also to taste various products. It raises the awareness of farmers, traders and consumers that regional provenance of the vegetables/fruit's should be perceived as an environmental and health benefit, which can eventually affect the regional economy in a positive way. The visitors of the event are made aware that the project is supported by the EU cross-border initiative, which makes the Programme more visible to the general public and such events are much better form of the promotion than standard newspaper articles or printed leaflets.

Similar approach can be used via social networks to attract certain target groups interested in specific problems (future moms, older people, environmentalists, etc. According to some beneficiaries it is worth considering a sensitive use of influencers. Celebrity campaigns as ambassadors of the project are also much more effective than flyers and one of the projects has good results in using this tool. Generally, people are reading less, therefore it would be good to concentrate on visual presentations, e.g. YouTube videos could be considered. According to the beneficiaries, data are not used sufficiently. Tools such as google analytics can identify what works best. Provided that paid advertisements are used, then not formal but more innovative up-to-date approach should be more effective.

Certainly, the best results can be achieved by incorporating all these aspects in a professional public relation campaign. Joining technical assistance sources and promote all cross-border initiatives could eventually save sources. As an example, cross-border programme Hungary - Slovakia offers its own

communication link in the national television broadcasting in Hungary. Similar solution for all cross-border programmes could promote results and added value of all co-operation programmes. Radio broadcasting with the interviews could also draw attention of the public.

Another option can be a closer cooperation with the communication department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development SR (MA) or with the respective regional governments in Austria, organising regular press conferences in order to present various activities / events of the Ministry and its organisations. The Programme results could become part of such presentations and other forms of the Ministry's and governmental institutions communication. As the organisational set up of the Ministry in Slovakia is just about to change, it could be useful to draw attention of the new management to this option and make it an organic part of communication policy of the Ministry. This could gradually increase awareness of the general public about the Programme.

4.11 Recommendations

Based on the above conclusions we suggest to consider following recommendations:

During the application phase

the JS could

- prepare an example of a completed application to enable a better understanding on how to fill in an application form;
- publish a short check list, to make sure all the necessary annexes and documents are submitted (for details referring to the Guideline for Applicants);
- elaborate a “dictionary” providing clear definitions of the basic terms, and examples of (non)eligible expenses to allow for a better understanding of the applied terminology;
- ensure the access to the updates of documents for all applicants and instruct potential applicants on the web page and/or in the guidelines to register/ sign up for a „newsletter“, which would automatically announce changes and other relevant information;

the MA should

- consider allowing that the signed Partnership Agreement would be provided after project approval, replacing it with a solemn declaration at the application stage and warning that the preparation of the Partnership Agreement should be initiated immediately with the submission of the application;
- continue providing sufficient and adequate training to secure that beneficiaries can fully use any IT system used by the programme;

the MC should

- increasingly take into account the technical⁴⁰ qualifications of the applicants; otherwise, there is a risk that the applicants will quickly lose interest in the Programme, which could also have a negative impact on the reputation of the Programme.

During the implementation phase:

the MA should

⁴⁰ For details see part 3.8

- in case of further changes of the guidelines, consider to offer also versions where the made adjustments are clearly displayed, for instance in the form of track changes;
- review the potential projects in the PA 3 and decide if the application to reallocate funds need to be submitted in the shortest possible time; in case such an application is prepared, the revised Programme indicators should be attached;
- ensure that the personnel continuity is kept to finalise the Programme smoothly and retain historical memory and know-how.

For the next programming period:

the preparatory working group (which has already started to deal with the planning of the future Programme) should

- pay special attention to the Programme intervention logic and ensure that it is well designed and the achievements can be monitored and justified through the set of relevant output and result indicators including their baseline and target values; if possible, consider involvement of external monitoring and evaluation expert;
- pay special attention to the potential support of transport investment projects; the obligation of preparatory work during one programming period and implementation of such a project during the next programming period can be set as a rule for funding of any large-scale investment project;
- include a Small Project Fund scheme into the next programme to facilitate participation of small municipalities in the programme activities;
- consider to fund support in those areas that are needed but currently excluded due to legislative restrictions; e.g. there are projects from other cross-border cooperation programmes working in the area of health emergency (see reference in the findings);
- clarify during the programming stage the perception of the future role of the Programme; it might be considered solely as a support tool of the regional offices to implement their regional policies using Integrated Territorial Investments and deciding the ratio of the future Programme for the strategic interventions of the regional offices and/or it can be seen in a wider context mainly as a cross-border cooperation for a wider group of beneficiaries;
- consider to what extent and in which way it wants to influence the composition of the future partnerships; if there is a need to keep the same experienced partners or a stronger focus should be laid on new partners, the composition can be influenced through the conditions for the assessment of the project proposals either at the eligibility or quality criteria level;

the MA should

- make sure that for the next programming period this type of Programme is not included anymore under the central management system of the national ESIF to avoid difficulties and enable smooth implementation of the future Programme, it is necessary to agree the exemption of the cross-border programmes from the Slovak legislation and follow the rules, that are either applied by Community programmes or similar initiatives; the preparatory work for such management should be initiated as soon as possible to enable a smooth start of the new period;
- consider initiation of the proposal to apply a unified community management system for all cross-border programmes supported from EU sources within EU (namely INTERREG);
- consider simplification of the Programme communication; instead of three languages officially used now, English could serve as principal language to be used for all Programme communication and documents;

- consider use of the future user-friendly IT system allowing fully electronic processes and electronic signatures, to reduce the administrative burden for application and other administration processes;
- consider change in the Programme communication activities and to focus on new contemporary approach with a professional support provided during the whole programming period systematically, addressing relevant target groups and using the most effective communication tools.

Annex 1 List of documents reviewed

Programming document Interreg V-A Slovakia-Austria
Ex-ante evaluation of the programme
Internal procedures guideline
Programme eligibility rules
Calls for proposals including the application package
Management system for European Structural and Investment Funds
System for financial management of ESIF
Act on ESIF (No. 292/2014)
Updated National Strategy for the Protection of Biodiversity to 2020, 2014, Min. of Environment SR
The EU Environmental Implementation Review 2019, Country Report - Slovakia
Slusarciuc, M. 2013. Partnership and Cooperation Models in Cross-Border Areas, *Acta Universitatis Danubius*, Vol. 9 (4), p. 267-280
Kaisto, V. (2016). *Cross-Border Areas Facing Europe's Crises: Problems in Measuring Territorial Development with Statistical Data and Analyses*. Year Book Cross-Border Review. European Institute of Cross-Border Studies – CESCO Budapest, p. 65
Cross-Border Cooperation Yearbook 2016, 2017, 2018, CESCO
Annual Implementation Reports
Plan of Economic and Social Development for Bratislava region
Plan of Economic and Social Development for Trnava region
STEP Vienna 2025
Strategie Innovatives Wien 2020
Smart City Rahmenstrategie
Niederösterreich Landesentwicklungskonzept
Entwicklungsstrategie Burgenland 2020
Landesentwicklungsprogramm, Perspektiven für die Hauptregionen
EU Strategy for Danube Region
Country reports 2019, EC
External support for the Evaluation of the Programme for Cross-Border Cooperation Slovakia-Austria 2007 – 2013 (2012)
First Phase evaluation of the cooperation programme INTERREG V-A Slovakia-Hungary (2018)
OECD Regulatory Policy Outlook 2018, OECD Publishing, Paris
Border Orientation Paper Slovakia – Austria (EC)

Annex 2 List of evaluation questions – Task 1 and 2

Task 1: Revisiting the programme strategy

1. Is the strategy, choice of thematic objectives and objectives of the Programme corresponding with the current needs of the Programme area?
2. Does the intervention logic of the Programme tackle the challenges of the Programme area appropriately?
3. Which opportunities of the Programme area were fostered by the intervention logic?
4. Are the allocated financial resources distributed to each of the Specific Objectives (SO) effectively and efficiently and in accordance with the needs of the Programme area?
5. Is the financial allocation for the Programme sufficient to address the needs of the Programme area?
6. Is the description of activities and outcomes sufficiently clear? Are target groups and types of beneficiaries set up efficiently, unambiguously and appropriately?
7. What are the needs of the Programme area that should be tackled in the next programming period? What should be the focus of activities in the next programming period?

Task 2: Investigating options to reduce the administrative burden

1. Are there any (unnecessary) administrative steps that slow down the implementation of the project/programme?
2. Are deadlines during administrative proceedings met? If not, does it affect project/ programme implementation?
3. Does the administrative burden discourage potential applicants from applying for contribution? Do supportive structures exist/ are supporting services provided to a sufficient extent? Are the supportive structures transparent, sufficient and are they customer friendly?
4. What is the ratio of applications returned for completion? What was the main reason for that? Is it possible to simplify the administration processes?
5. Are applicants sufficiently informed about the eligibility rules and conditions they have to meet? What forms of communication do applicants prefer during the preparatory stages of the project?
6. What is the ratio of first-time applicants? Are applicants motivated by their previous experiences?
7. Are there any external factors beyond the MA reach and control, that influence the implementation of the programme? If yes, what are they? Do they have positive or negative effect? Which priority axis is the affected one? Can MA take any measures to mitigate its negative effect?
8. Are personal and administrative capacities for the management and implementation of the programme adequate?

Annex 3 Results of questionnaires

Tab. 8 Slovak Applicants /Beneficiaries

1. Previous/current experience with CBC or other EU programmes	Yes	14
	No	1
2. Usefulness of previous experience	Yes	13
	No	2
3. Submission of the applications	In printed form (+ via e-mail)	11
	Via ITMS	6
4. Sufficient info during preparing the application	Yes	13
	No	2
	If no, why:	
	- Some info was unclear and confusing, especially in preparing the budget, similarly, ITMS was not working well in budget	
	- It was necessary to consult some questions when completing the application, but this was highly effective and solved all problems	
5. Difficulty in finding a suitable CB partner/s	Yes	1
	No	13
6. Knowledge whom to contact if necessary	Yes	14
	No	1
7. Sufficient support of programme staff	Yes	14
	No	1
	If no, why:	
	- I contacted staff of the TTSK via e-mail a few times, but they did not response; It was impossible to reach them by phone and the Austrian partner could not communicate to them in English or German	
	- Presentation of the project for regional representatives was interpreted but many terms were lost in translation and the meaning was distorted	
8. Preferred form of communication with programme staff	Phone:	10
	Mail:	10
	Seminars:	2
	Other:	direct personal consultation 5
9. The most complicated part in preparation of application	- Bilingual application preparation	
	- Approval/signing must be aligned with a schedule of meetings of the relevant institutions what is a very time-consuming process	
	- Requirements of the Programme and regional authorities are defined differently, in some cases even contradict each other	
	- Request for payment in ITMS (consisting of request and a description) is confusing	
	- Budget preparation: the description of the items in the manual was not always specific and clear	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The current indicator reporting system is based on definition of several sub-outputs that do not influence the main output quality. However, they are strictly controlled by the FLC what does not make sense - Monitoring periods are strictly set by the MA during the whole implementation period, some flexibility in a line of Partnership Agreement would be welcome - Orientation in documentation (the Guide for Applicants, the Eligibility of Expenditure Guide) is not easy, they contain a large number of formal requirements - Harmonizing the needs of three different actors into a single methodology - It was difficult to define precisely and explicitly the number and form of some project outputs and their corresponding budget lines in advance 								
<p>10. Proposals for process changes /improvements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use the universal communication language – English when preparing the project - Re- consider the submission of the project documents in electronic as well as in paper form - Submit the signed PA only after approval of the application; during the approval process an affidavit should be accepted - Minimise the application documentation to the maximum extent possible. Require it from the institution only after the approval of the application - ITMS should be adjusted for the needs of CBC programme or it should be replaced by another MS - To set clear rules, including content requirements for project intention, and to harmonise them between the Programme authorities, including the FLC - The control methods are close to administrative bullying what is demotivating; is we want positive changes, let's look at the results, not just the papers - Prepare a completed sample of the budget as a guide - Consider a pre-financing, state organisations have a problem in securing finance 								
<p>11. ITMS</p>	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="padding-left: 20px;">System is user friendly</td> <td style="text-align: right; vertical-align: bottom;">4</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-left: 20px;">System is not user friendly but manageable</td> <td style="text-align: right; vertical-align: bottom;">8</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-left: 20px;">System is not suitable for Programme purpose</td> <td style="text-align: right; vertical-align: bottom;">5</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-left: 20px;">If it is not suitable, why:</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	System is user friendly	4	System is not user friendly but manageable	8	System is not suitable for Programme purpose	5	If it is not suitable, why:	
System is user friendly	4								
System is not user friendly but manageable	8								
System is not suitable for Programme purpose	5								
If it is not suitable, why:									

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - MS is not designed for the structure of the partnership; it does not have processes set for possible requirements for project changes - Does not take into account the structure of the project intention prepared in a form of project packages - Is confusing and non-intuitive - Does not provide any assistance in monitoring the project and its activities at any level, monitoring becomes a formal fulfilment of indicators without reflecting the real progress of the project - Is particularly unsuitable for Austrian applicants; the complexity of the system is compounded by numerous formal fields, many of which are not relevant for CBC - Does not comply with the basic GDPR requirements: the project partner account allows to see all implemented projects of the organisation, including personal data - It would be logical to upload data which would subsequently not have to be supplied in paper form, such as in IMIS used in SK-HU - It did not work well when introducing the changes in the budget - Impossible to work with the system from abroad
<p>12. Focusing the future of the programme on other areas</p>	<p>Yes 3</p> <p>No 10</p> <p>Which areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agriculture and sport – both areas are suitable for the Small Fund Facility - It is impossible to react on the new/ urgent needs of regions. The possibility of “ad hoc” defined calls, based on the current needs, could help as they can react promptly on new challenges - Include contemporary culture and art (the cultural heritage focus is limited)

*A total of 21 questionnaires were sent to the Slovak Applicants and Beneficiaries, 15 of them returned; partial responses do not always reach number 15, because some of the recipients used more options or they did not answer all questions.

Tab. 9 Austrian Applicants /Beneficiaries

1. Previous/current experience with CBC or other EU programmes	Yes	11
	No	0
2. Usefulness of previous experience	Yes	9
	No	2
3. Submission of the applications	In printed form (+ via e-mail)	5 ⁴¹
	Via ITMS	7
4. Sufficient info during preparing the application	Yes	8
	No	1
If no, why – plus additional remarks:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initially no clear guidance was available. After providing this everything was clear - Content wise everything was clear. Administrative side however was lacking on information sometimes - Even if the provided information was clear in most cases, it still was remarked by around half of the participants that it was considered unnecessarily complicated 		
5. Difficulty in finding a suitable CB partner/s	Yes	0
	No	11
6. Knowledge whom to contact if necessary	Yes	9
	No	1
7. Sufficient support of programme staff	Yes	9
	No	2
If no, why:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A lot of documents had to be resubmitted and little understanding on any occurring problems on the beneficiaries' side was shown - Procedures were perceived as tedious and unnecessarily complicated, with the programme staff not interested in changing any of that - Little transparency in what is needed and what has to be prepared is criticised 		
8. Preferred form of communication with programme staff	Phone:	4
	Mail:	6
Seminars:		2
Other:		
direct personal consultation		1
only through professional e-call system		1
Remarks:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The preferred method differs between short term inquiries (phone) and overall communication (e-mail) in many cases - The explicit reason for e-mail in multiple cases is stated as “being able to prove what has been said in case staff members change their opinion or provide contradictory information 		

⁴¹ Those who have submitted both in paper and electronic form are counted twice

<p>9. The most complicated part in preparation of application</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constant and unannounced changes of forms and information on the website. This leads to doubling or tripling of work, if an applicant is working on some form for some time, it is changed in the meantime without him knowing and then has to be re-done - The structure especially related to billing processes if very difficult for first-time applicants to understand - Text limits in the application form, especially when it comes to scientific issues that cannot be explained easily in a brief manner. There also seems to be no reason/structure behind the number of characters allowed - Repetitive questions where the same answers have to be given. It is not really complicated but just perceived unnecessary - Partnership agreement (when a larger number of partners is involved) was perceived tedious - Formulation and translation of texts for the submission form - General late publishing of guidelines, and publishing of the call - Unclear rules in the initial phase of the programme – different guidelines on accepted cost between the two countries - ITMS in general 						
<p>10. Proposals for process changes /improvements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use English project, as the cooperation is in English in most cases anyways and the two other languages just lead to additional effort - Standardize application procedures between INTERREG programmes. Many beneficiaries work in multiple programmes and could save a lot of time and effort like this - Reduce the administrative effort in general, especially the number of forms that have to be submitted - Improve the support for applicants especially in terms of dealing with the administrative issues of the programme - Reduce the general focus on administrative issues and focus on the content side - Use an electronic management system (not ITMS though) exclusively, so all communication is documented and structured - Publish clear guidelines from the outset that are binding and not changed multiple times - Unification of eligibility guidelines 						
<p>11. ITMS</p>	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="padding-left: 20px;">System is user friendly</td> <td style="text-align: right;">0</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-left: 20px;">System is not user friendly but manageable</td> <td style="text-align: right;">1</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-left: 20px;">System is not suitable for Programme purpose</td> <td style="text-align: right;">9</td> </tr> </table>	System is user friendly	0	System is not user friendly but manageable	1	System is not suitable for Programme purpose	9
System is user friendly	0						
System is not user friendly but manageable	1						
System is not suitable for Programme purpose	9						

	<p>If it is not suitable, why:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - non-intuitive and needs extensive training - respondents have experience with other systems like EMS and consider them much more suitable - in general, it is not understood why different monitoring systems are used if there are well working ones already available - missing translations in the system, not only in terms of error messages (this makes it difficult for Austrians to understand what has been done wrong and how it can be fixed) but also in terms of fields and descriptions
<p>12. Focusing the future of the programme on other areas</p>	<p>Yes 5</p> <p>No 6</p> <p>Which areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Renewable energy and climate research - Biodiversity and environment in general should be a bigger focus - Education should be promoted more and attention should be paid to the different nature of such projects (e.g. long-term effects) - Extension to tourism cooperation

Annex 4 Programme data

Tab. 10 Basic data - Interreg V-A Programme SK – AT in the period 2007 - 2013

PA measure	Topic	No of projects	ERDF budget	% of OP allocation	average size of project (in €)
1.	Knowledge region	47	22 664 692	37,8	480 000
1.1	R&D/ SME	17	6 774 111	11,3	398 780
1.2	Culture/ Tourism	14	6 561 868	10,9	468 704
1.3	Education/ Labour	12	6 836 987	11,4	569 749
1.4	Social/ Health	4	2 491 726	4,1	622 932
2.	Accessibility and sustain. devel.	44	27 994 298	46,7	636 234
2.1	Transport	9	12 805 708	21,7	1 422 856
2.2	Reg. government	13	5 146 686	8,5	395 899
2.3	Protected areas	8	4 475 629	7,4	559 453
2.4	Energy	14	5 566 275	9,2	397 591

Tab.11 Basic data - Interreg V-A Programme SK – AT in the period 2014 - 2020

PA measure	Topic	No of projects	ERDF budget	% of OP allocation	average size of project (in €)
1.	Smart cross border region	7	14 206 372	25,9	2 029 482
2.	Natural and cult. heritage & biodiv.	13	20 678 476	36,7	1 590 652
3.	Sustainable transport solutions	0	0	12,7	0
4.	Cross border gov. and inst. cooper.	7	10 317 820	18,7	1 473 974

Tab. 12 Financial data - Interreg V-A Programme SK – AT in the period 2014 - 2020

Priority Axis	ERDF Allocation		Contracting 2018		Contracting 2019	
	Eur	% OP	Eur	% PA	Eur	% PA
PA1	19 683 142	25,9	11 244 587	57,13	14 206 372	72,18
PA2	27 820 000	36,7	15 079 777	54,21	20 678 476	74,33
PA3	9 655 000	12,7	0	0	0	0
PA4	14 180 979	18,7	5 989 302	42,24	10 317 820	72,76
TA	4 553 560	6,0	4 298 293	94,39	4 298 293	94,39
Total	75 892 678	100	36 611 958	48,24	49 500 960	65,22

Tab.13 Contracting and Disbursement 2018 - 2019

PA	Allocation ERDF	2018		30/6/2019 Cumulative		31/12/2019 Cumulative	
		Contracted	Disbursed	Contracted	Disbursed	Contracted	Disbursed
PA1	19 683 142	11 244 587	335 962	13 635 087	466 745	14 206 372	1 982 256
PA2	27 820 000	15 079 777	197 064	18 603 621	411 530	20 678 476	2 242 566
PA3	9 655 000	0	0	0	0	0	0
PA4	14 180 979	5 989 302	409 913	7 602 920	440 971	10 317 820	1 854 294
TA	4 553 560	4 298 293	966 438	4 298 293	983 810	4 298 293	1 524 815
Total	75 892 681	36 611 958	1 909 376	44 139 921	2 303 056	49 500 960	7 603 930

Figures rounded

Tab.14 Contracting and Disbursement according PA /SO as of 31.12.2019

PA	SO	No of projects	Contracted ERDF		Disbursed ERDF	
			€	%	€	%
1	1.1	5	12 807 651	87,9	1 026 903	7,1
	1.2.	2	1 398 721	27,3	955 353	18,7
Total PA 1		7	14 206 372	72,2	1 982 256	10,1
2	2.1.	7	11 822 810	61,9	1 124 005	5,9
	2.2.	6	8 855 666	101,4	1 118 561	12,8
Total PA 2		13	20 678 476	74,3	2 242 566	8,1
3	3.1.	0	0	0,0	0	0,0
Total PA 3		0	0	0,0	0	0,0
4	4.1.	6	6 685 469	43,5	719 444	7,9
	4.2.	1	3 632 351	71,9	1 134 850	22,5
Total PA 4		7	10 317 820	72,8	1 854 294	13,1
5	5.1.	5	4 298 293	94,4	1 524 815	33,5
Total PA 5		5	4 298 293	94,4	1 524 815	33,5
Total		32	49 500 960	61,7	7 603 930	10,0

Financial figures rounded

Annex 5 Overview of the approval process

Table 15 Project approvals with/out conditions

Project name (acronym)	Lead partner	Budget ERDF- Eur	Specific objective	1st round		2nd round		3rd round		4th round		5 th round	
				accepted	conditions	accepted	conditions	accepted	conditions	accepted	conditions	accepted	conditions
NUTRIAGING	AT	1 112 424	1.1	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
DREAM SK-AT	AT	8 326 113		Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
StruBioMol	SK	991 779		-	-	-	-	Y	N	-	-	-	-
IDARPO	SK	571 285		-	-	-	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	-
NAREG	AT	1 836 406		Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
IFIT 4.0	SK	1 519 322	1.2	-	-	-	-	-	-	Y	Y	-	-
CAPSID	AT	485 364		-	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-
RoboCoop	AT	913356		-	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-
Heritage	SK	3 110 821	2.1	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Treasure	SK	4 398 815		Y	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
NemoNET	AT	1 232 637		Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
DiviTV	AT	794 978		Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
NatureTourNet	AT	589 722		-	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-
NaturGrünesBand	AT	696 540		-	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-
VISIO	AT	999 298		-	-	-	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	-
Po stopách legionár.	AT	592 373		-	-	-	-	-	-	Y	Y	-	-
Eco Region SK-AT	SK	4 405 564		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Y	Y
3E-Morava Nature	SK	2 339 151		Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
BLUEHLINGE	AT	1 116 149	2.2	Y	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Alp.-Karp. Fluss cor	AT	1 789 942		Y	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
PlasticFreeDanube	AT	1 042 263		Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
CITY NATURE	SK	1 442 604		-	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	
CLIM VINO	AT	1 075 557		-	-	-	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	
VYSOMARCH	SK	5 025 880		-	-	-	-	?	-	Y	Y	-	
ConnReg	SK	679 875	4.1	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Design and Innovat.	SK	1 251 007		N	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	
ProDaM	AT	1 103 983		Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
CAA	SK	2 714 901		N	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	
B4B	SK	362 610		-	-	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	-	
BAUM 2020	SK	573 093		Y	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
BIG SK-AT	AT	3 632 351		Y	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Total				15	10	8	8	4	3	3	3	1	1

Table 16 Submitted and approved applications (*approved)

Specific objective	Project applications (No.)			Round (date)					
	submitted	approved (AT)	approved (SK)	1. (28.02.17)	2. (15.11.17)	3. (29.06.18)	4. (31.01.19)	5. (28.06.19)	6. (29.11.19)
1.1	13	3	2	5	2	3	0	0	3
1.2	12	2	1	5	3	1	1	0	2
2.1	12	6	3	5	3	2	1	1	0
2.2	8	4	2	5	1	1	0	0	1
3.1	5	0	1	5	0	1	1	2	1
4.1	12	1	5	5	4	0	0	1	2
4.2	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Total	63	17	14	26 / 15*	13 / 8*	8 / 4*	3 / 3*	4 / 1	9 / n.a.*
Success rate		49 %		48 %	62 %	50 %	67 %	-	-

Note: includes two approved projects but no contract signed

Table 17 Reasons for conditional approval. Note: No. of conditions does not correspond to the number of projects, some conditions belong to more categories

Reasons of conditional approval (topics)		Frequency	Total
Budget revision	Unit costs	8	35
	Non-eligible expenditures	5	
	Partner's budget	8	
	Costs effectiveness/Relevance/Further details	14	
Partnership	Inclusion of relevant institutions	4	6
	Exclusion of a specific partner	2	
Further details/documents request		10	10
Sustainability strengthening		7	7
De minimis/ State Aid		5	5
Communication/ Awareness raising /		5	5

Annex 6 Duration to contract signature

Table 18 Time from the submission of proposals to the contract signature

Registration date	Contract signature	Date of MC decision	Specific objective	Round	Duration (months)	Average (months)
27.02.2017	10.07.2018	11.09.2017	4.2	1	16	16,9
01.03.2017	04.07.2018	11.09.2017	4.1	1	16	
28.02.2017	22.06.2018	11.09.2017	4.1	1	16	
28.02.2017	26.06.2018	11.09.2017	2.1	1	16	
01.03.2017	22.06.2018	11.09.2017	2.1	1	16	
01.03.2017	26.07.2018	11.09.2017	2.2	1	17	
01.03.2017	26.07.2018	11.09.2017	1.1	1	17	
01.03.2017	12.07.2018	11.09.2017	2.2	1	16	
01.03.2017	26.06.2018	11.09.2017	4.1	1	17	
01.03.2017	21.07.2018	11.09.2017	1.2	1	17	
01.03.2017	07.08.2018	11.09.2017	2.2	1	17	
01.03.2017	04.07.2018	11.09.2017	1.1	1	16	
01.03.2017	09.04.2019	11.09.2017	2.1	1	23	
01.03.2017	17.08.2018	11.09.2017	2.2	1	17	
01.03.2017	16.08.2018	11.09.2017	2.1	1	17	
21.11.2017	07.05.2019	26.04.2018	4.1	2	17	19,6
21.11.2017	27.09.2019	26.04.2018	4.1	2	22	
21.11.2017	07.05.2019	26.04.2018	4.1	2	17	
21.11.2017	17.04.2019	26.04.2018	2.2	2	17	
21.11.2017	22.05.2019	26.04.2018	2.1	2	22	
21.11.2017	27.03.2019	26.04.2018	1.2	2	20	
21.11.2017	27.04.2019	26.04.2018	1.2	2	21	
21.11.2017	01.05.2019	26.04.2018	2.1	2	21	
04.07.2018	11.06.2019	12.12.2018	1.1	3	11	12,5
04.07.2018	05.09.2019	12.12.2018	1.1	3	14	
04.07.2018	25.07.2019	12.12.2018	2.2	3	12	
04.07.2018	06.08.2019	12.12.2018	2.1	3	13	
29.01.2019	n.a.	13.06.2019	2.1	4	11	11,0

Source: Monitoring tables and Minutes of the MC of the Programme

Annex 7 Performance framework

Tab.19 Performance Framework Indicators

A	Indicator	Measurement unit	Milestone 2018	Achieved 2018	Achieved 2019	Final target 2023
1	Total funding certified to EC for Priority axis 1	mil. €	3,01	0,524	1,982	23,157
	No of jointly developed major products & services related to research & innovation	No	0	0,1	0,8	5
	No of contracted projects (1b)	No	4	3	7	9
2	Total funding certified to EC for Priority axis 2	mil. €	4,525	0,232	2,243	32,729
	No of contracted projects (1b)	No	6	3	13	16
	No of jointly developed major products & services related to cultural & natural heritage development (6c)	No	0	2	4	16
	No of contracted projects (6d)	No	4	4	6	8
	No of jointly developed major products & services related to ecological networks and green infrastructures (6d)	No	0	0	11	8
3	Total funding certified to EC for Priority axis 3	mil. €	0,765	0	0	11,359
	No of contracted projects (7c)	No	3	0	0	7
	No of jointly developed major products & services related to environment-friendly and low carbon transport systems (7c)	No	0	0	0	7
4	Total funding certified to EC for Priority axis 4	mil. €	2,169	0,482	1,854	16,684
	No of contracted projects (11)	No	4	4	6	13
	No of jointly developed major products & services related to institutional cooperation, integrated frameworks and planning tools	No	0	0	0,5	8
1-4	Total funding certified to EC EUR	mil. €	10,198	1,238	7,604	83,928
	No of contracted projects	No	21	10	31	53

Annex 8 Indicators

Tab. 20 Indicators of results

PA	SO	Indicator	Baseline 2014	Target 2023	Status 31/12/18
1	1.1. Strengthen the collaboration of key actors in the regional innovation system in order to enhance knowledge transfer, capacity building and the establishment of common frameworks, common research and innovation activities and joint research facilities	Intensity of cooperation of key actors in the programme area in order to strengthen the regional innovation system	2,8	Increasing qualitative target	2,6
	1.2. Improve the capacity of the cross-border educational system to provide human resources knowledge and skills demanded by the regional innovation system	Intensity of cooperation of key actors in the programme area in order to improve higher education and lifelong learning	2,5	Increasing qualitative target	2,2
2	2.1. Strengthen common approaches to valorise the natural and cultural heritage in a sustainable way in order to further develop the programme area as an attractive tourism destination	Monthly average of cyclists and pedestrians at the counting point "Freiheitsbrücke" (Morava/March)	15 066	Increasing qualitative target	21 020
	2.2. Strengthen the cross-border integration of functional ecological networks and green infrastructures in order to preserve biodiversity and to contribute to the stability of ecosystems	Number of major bottlenecks along the Alpine-Carpathian Corridor which interrupt the wildlife corridor	12	9 (reduction by 25%)	Not defined
3	3. Improve joint planning, coordination and practical solutions for an environmentally- friendly, low-carbon and safer transport network and services in the programme area	Capacity in public cross-border transport on an average workday	30 700	31 314	38 280
4	4.1. Strengthen the institutional cooperation in the cross-border area through mobilizing stakeholders and building the capacities for planning and acting in the framework of multi-level governance	Intensity of cooperation of key actors in the programme area in order to strengthen institutional capacities	2,9	Increasing qualitative target	2,2
	4.2. Strengthen the links between institutions providing pre-primary and primary education (kindergartens and primary schools) to jointly develop and implement educational programmes	Intensity of cooperation of key actors in the programme area in order to strengthen the cooperation between educational institutions	2,3	Increasing qualitative target	2
5	5.1. Ensure the efficient and smooth implementation of the cooperation programme	NA	NA	NA	NA

Tab. 21 Indicators of outputs /Measurable programme indicators

PA	SO	Indicator	Target 2023	Contracted	Status 31/12/19	Achieved %
1	1.1. Strengthen the collaboration of key actors in the regional innovation system in order to enhance knowledge transfer, capacity building and the establishment of common frameworks, common research and innovation activities and joint research facilities.	▪ No of jointly developed major products & services related to research & innovation*,**	5	7	0,8	16
		▪ No of new researchers in supported entities*,**	20	2	4	20
		▪ No of organisations/entities participating in research & innovation related collaboration activities*	25	4	2	8
		▪ No of participants in joint training schemes related to research & innovation**	125	245	100	80
		▪ No of research facilities developed**	1	6	2,80	280
		▪ No of research institutions participating in cross-border projects**	6	0	0	0
	1.2. Improve the capacity of the cross-border educational system to provide human resources knowledge and skills demanded by the regional innovation system	▪ No of institutions directly involved in cooperation aiming at better quality of higher education and lifelong learning	20	17	2	10
		▪ No of jointly developed major products & services related to higher education and lifelong learning*	4	10	1	25
		▪ No of participants in joint education and training schemes to support youth employment, educational opportunities and higher and vocational education across borders*	500	4 250	169	34
	2	2.1. Strengthen common approaches to valorise the natural and cultural heritage in a sustainable way in order to further develop the programme area as an attractive tourism destination	▪ No of jointly developed major products & services related to cultural & natural heritage development	16	82	4
• Increase in expected number of visits at supported sites of cultural or natural heritage and attraction			32 000	15 699	3 150	10

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No of organisations/entities participating in cultural & natural heritage development 	80	26	16	20
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No of participants in joint training schemes* 	400	1055	61	15
	2.2. Strengthen the cross-border integration of functional ecological networks and green infrastructures in order to preserve biodiversity and to contribute to the stability of ecosystems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No of jointly developed major products & services related to ecological networks and green infrastructures 	8	58	11	137
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surface area of habitats supported to attain a better conservation status** 	1000 hectares	40947,7	66,2	6
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No of organisations/entities participating in the development of green infrastructures 	34	36	0	0
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No of participants in joint training schemes* 	194	11 440	2432	1253
3	3. Improve joint planning, coordination and practical solutions for an environmentally- friendly, low-carbon and safer transport network and services in the programme area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No of jointly developed major products & services related to environment-friendly and low-carbon transport systems ** 	7	0	0	0
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No of organisations/entities participating in the development of environment-friendly and low-carbon transport systems 	23	0	0	0
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No of participants in joint training schemes* 	175	0	0	0
4	4.1. Strengthen the institutional cooperation in the cross-border area through mobilizing stakeholders and building the capacities for planning and acting in the framework of multi-level governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No of jointly developed major products & services related to institutional cooperation, integrated frameworks and planning tools*, ** 	8	18	0,5	6
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No of organisations/entities participating in institutional cooperation 	80	61	98	123
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No of participants in joint training schemes* 	200	2457	126	63
	4.2. Strengthen the links between institutions providing pre-primary and primary education (kindergartens and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No of participants in joint education and training schemes to support youth employment, educational opportunities and higher and vocational education across borders* 	625	0	0	0

	primary schools) to jointly develop and implement educational programmes	▪ No of jointly developed major products & services related to pre-primary and primary education**	5	4	0	0
		▪ No of educational institutions directly involved in cooperation at pre-primary and primary level of education	25	116	116	464
5	5. 1. Ensure the efficient and smooth implementation of the cooperation programme	▪ Number of employees (FTEs) whose salaries are co-financed by TA	18	14,45	14,04	78
		▪ Number of major publicity events	8	12	7	88
		▪ Number of compulsory information events for beneficiaries at project start	10	17	9	90
		▪ No of projects committed and successfully closed	53	95	1	2

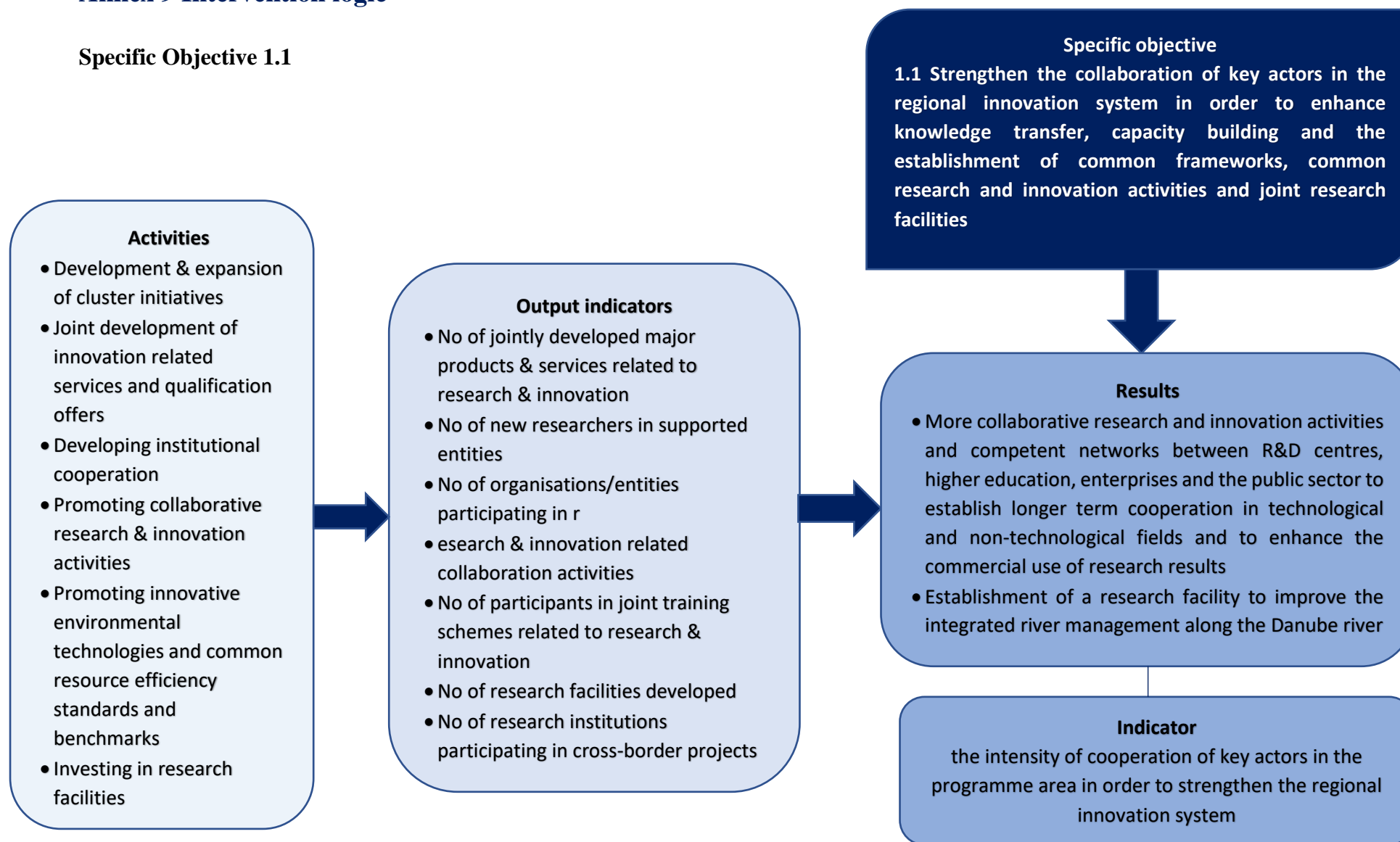
*Horizontal priority Gender equality and non-discrimination, **Horizontal priority Sustainable development

Tab. 22 Comparison of achieved outputs according PA

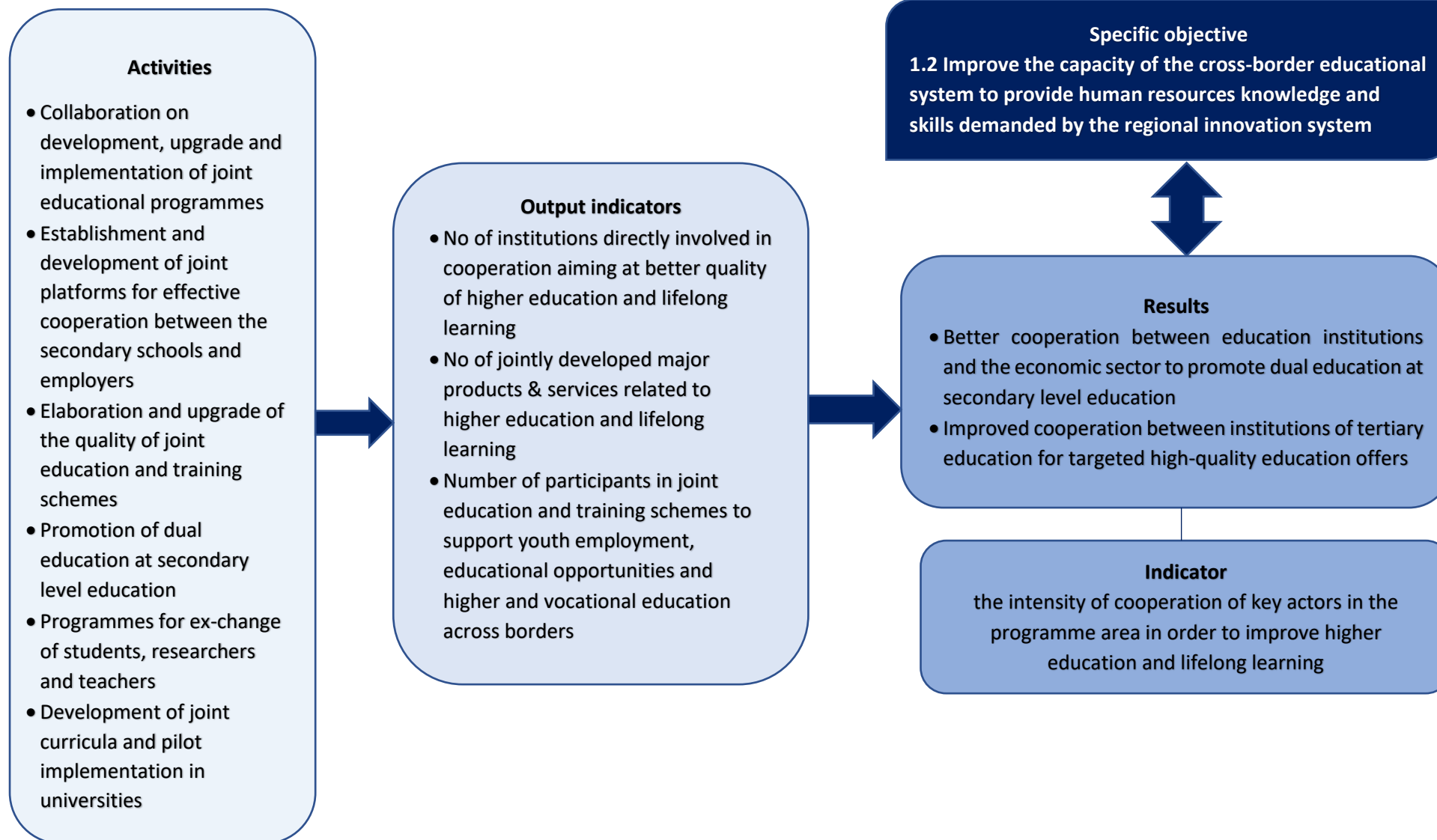
SO	Allocation	Contracted	No of jointly developed major products & services			No of participants in joint training schemes			No of organisations/institutions participating		
			Target	Contracted	Achieved	Target	Contracted	Achieved	Target	Contracted	Achieved
1.1	14 563 142	11 001 601	5	7	0,8	125	245	100	25	4	2
1.2	5 120 000	3 204 771	4	10	1	500	4 250	169	20	17	2
2.1	19 090 001	11 822 810	16	82	4	400	1 055	61	80	26	16
2.2	8 729 999	8 855 666	8	58	11	194	11 440	2432	34	36	0
3	9 655 000	0	7	0	0	175	0	0	23	0	0
4.1	9 130 978	6 685 469	8	18	0,5	200	2 457	126	80	61	98
4.2	5 050 001	3 632 351	5	4	0	625	0	0	25	116	116

Annex 9 Intervention logic

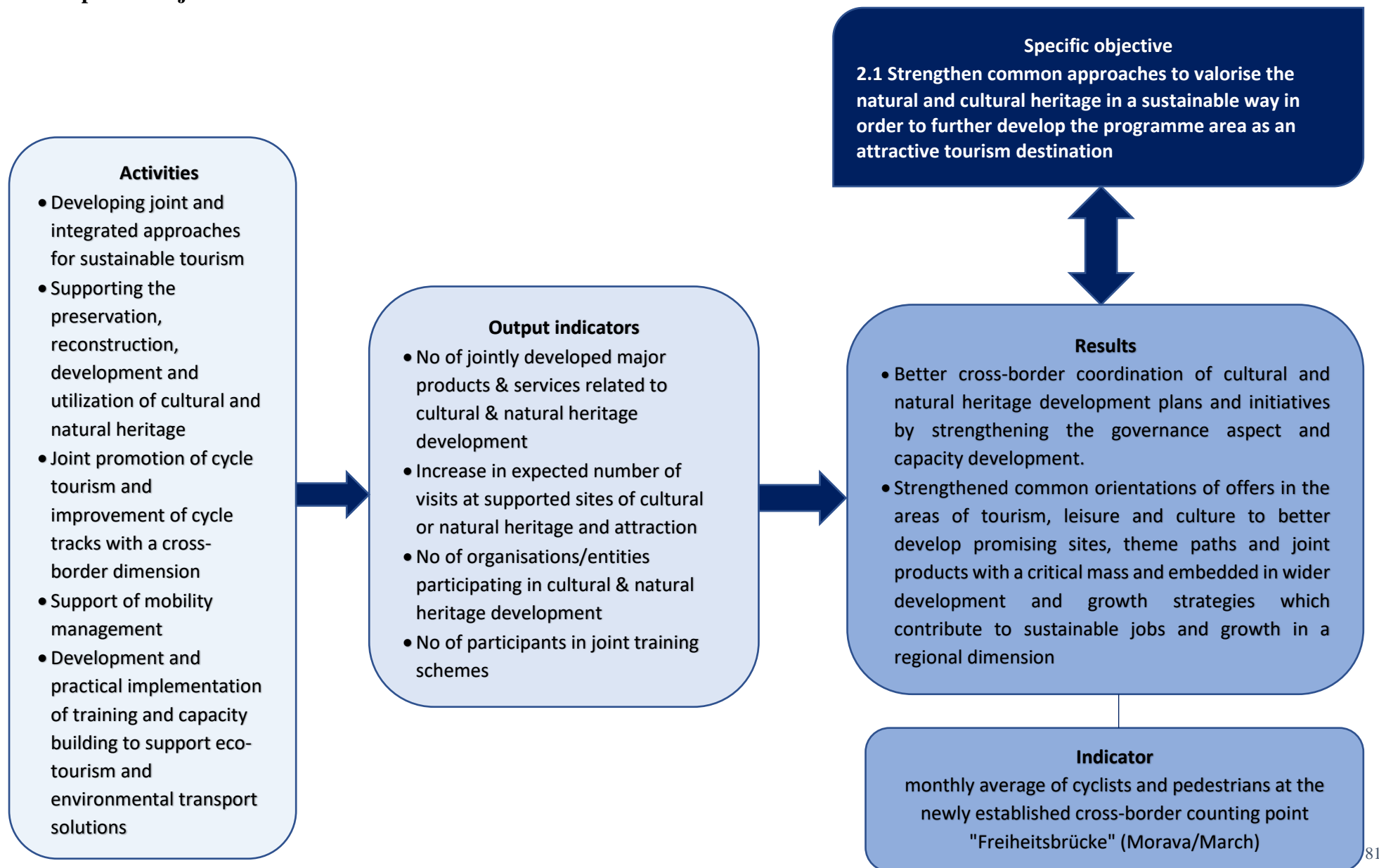
Specific Objective 1.1



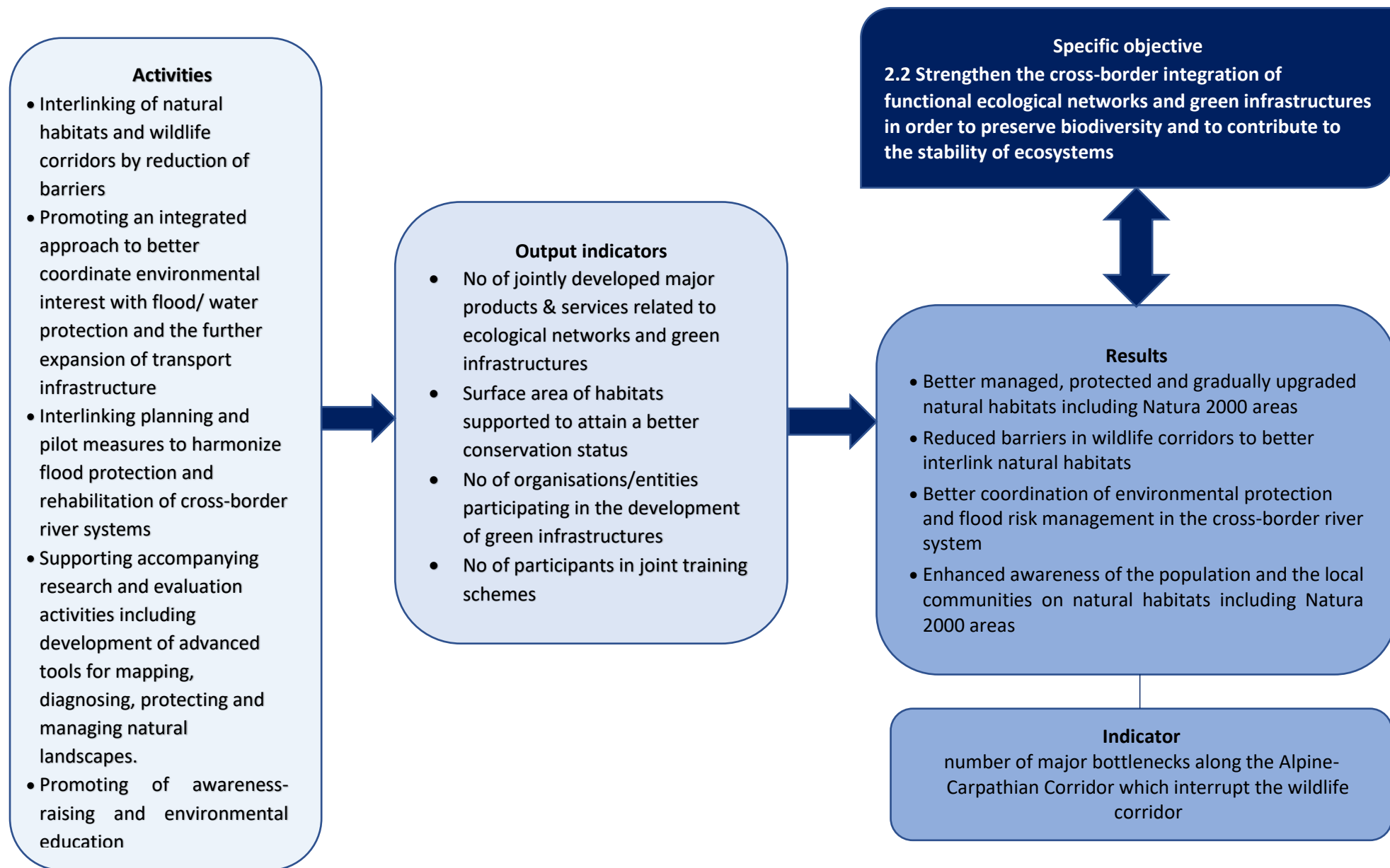
Specific Objective 1.2



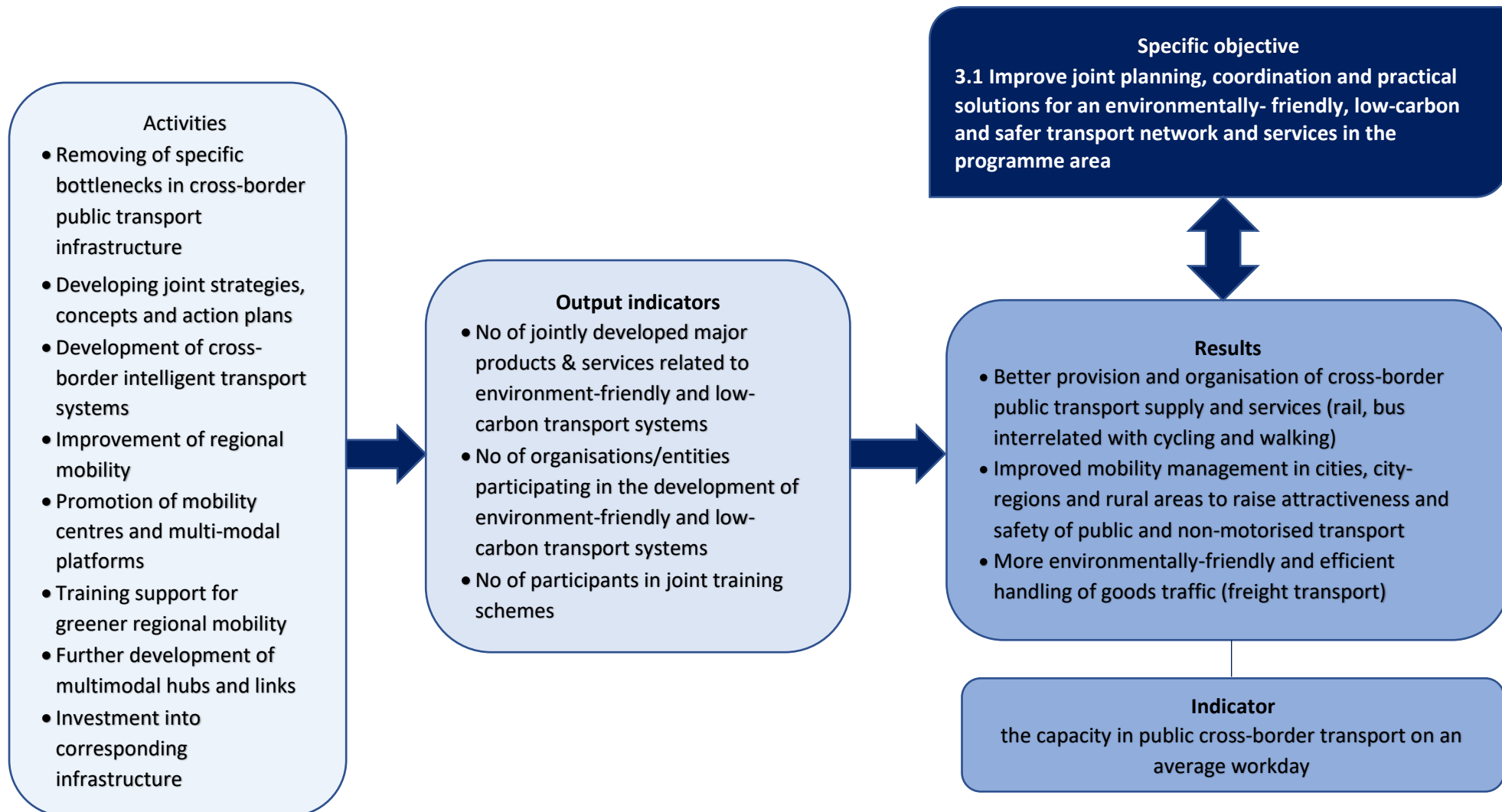
Specific Objective 2.1



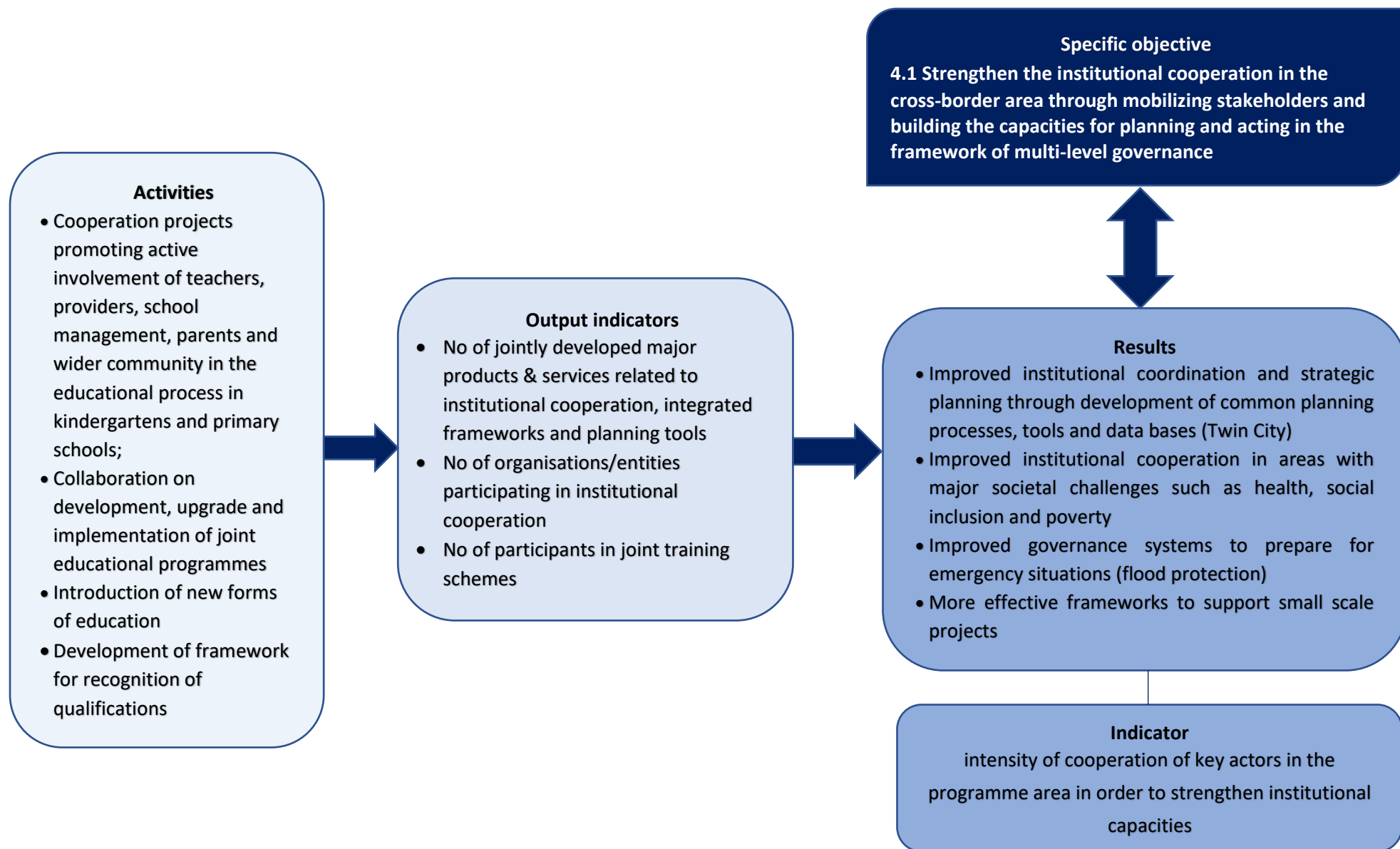
Specific Objective 2.2



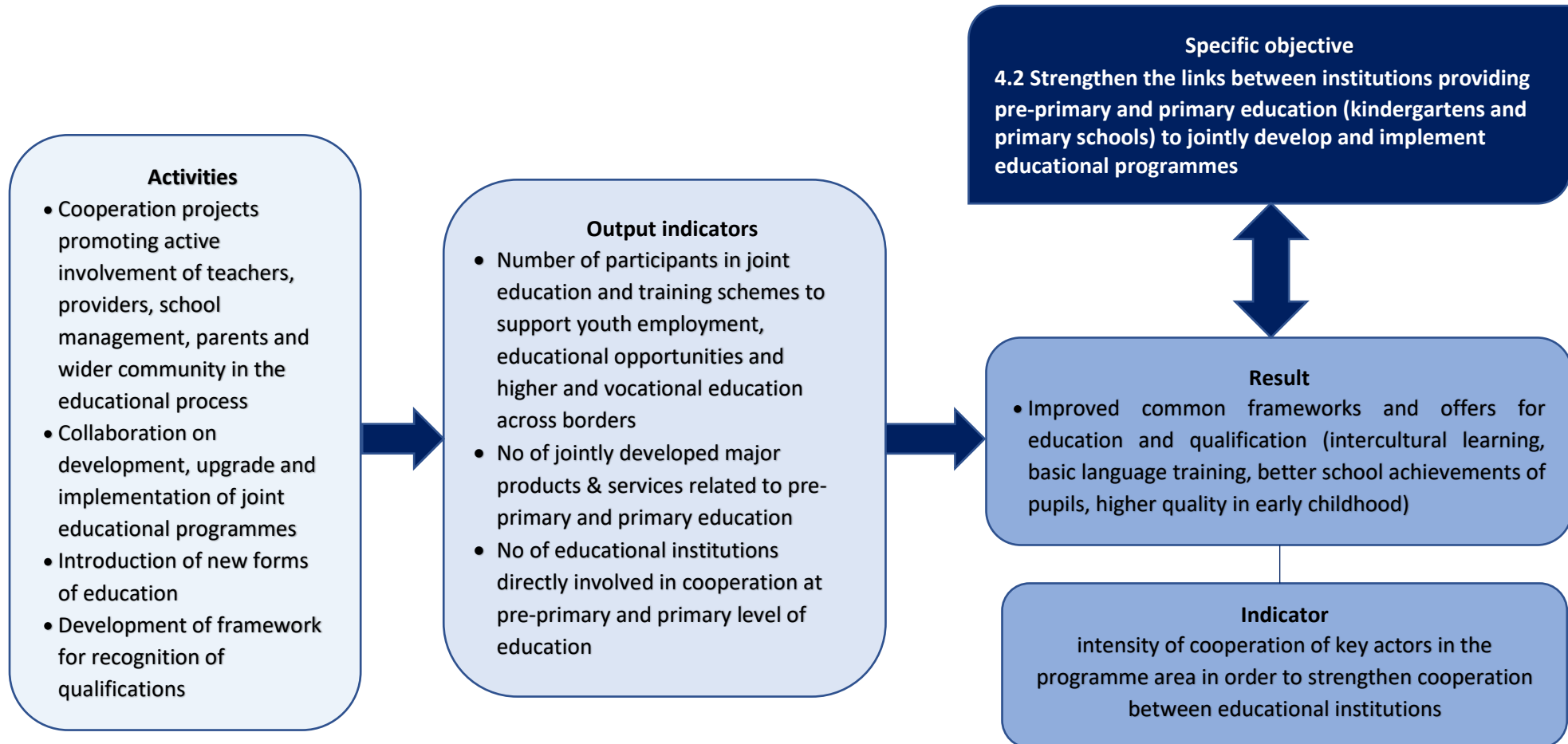
Specific Objective 3



Specific Objective 4.1



Specific Objective 4.2



Annex 10 Strategic Documents

Tab. 23 Links connecting strategies and IPs

SO/ IP	Justification	Gender equality	Natura 2000	E 2020	Sustain. Devel.	Projects
1.1/ 1b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very different stages of research and innovation systems with heterogeneous starting conditions and institutional settings • Development of Bratislava and Vienna potentialities is vital for the economic competitiveness of both countries • A strong need for a better collaboration of research and innovation actors by improved networking and exchange, jointly developed solutions and shared research facilities • Preparation of the ground for a wider application of environmental technologies 	X	X	X	X	4 projects contributing to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nutrition and healthy aging, • building of educational and research capacities in biomedicine and biotechnologies, • research and management of Danube river, • identification of regional fruits production.
1.2/ 1b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing the relevance of education to labour market needs and foster lifelong learning • A need for high-quality education and training systems in order to support the development of an economy based on knowledge and technology 					3 projects in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • building of science capacities in bio-medicine research, • robotics education, • regional resources use.
2.1/ 6c	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination of strategies and development plans developed at regional and/or local level • A need to develop a common orientation of cross border offers in the areas of tourism, leisure and culture in particular in the field of eco-tourism 	X	X	X	X	7 projects contributing to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reviving of cultural traditions, • protection of nature, • management of biotopes and strengthening of biodiversity, • producing TV magazines for Croatian minority, • developing eco-tourism marketing, • inter-active tourism in regions Neusiedler See and Modra, • exploring cultural and natural heritage on bicycle.
2.2/ 6d	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only a small proportion of the habitats and species of Community interest are in a favourable conservation status • The goal of developing ecological networks can be in conflict with the expansion of transport infrastructure and urban sprawl • A better coordination of env. protection and flood risk management need to be achieved 					6 projects in area of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • protection and development of river biotopes, • flowering country for butterflies, • management of biotopes and strengthening of biodiversity, • trying to solve macro-plastic waste along Danube,

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More integrated concepts for a better cross border integration of functional ecological networks and green infrastructures 					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing of eco-system tools and services for the biodiversity protection and restoration, • reducing the risk of wine diseases.
3/7c	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A truly integrated cross-border network of public transport is not yet visible and will require the establishment of a suitable legal and operating framework • A strong need for comprehensive approaches to mobility management • Fostering environment-friendly modes of transport: public transport, pedestrian and cycle transport 	-	-	-	-	-
4.1/11*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening of the institutional and administrative capacity in the strategic planning capacity (more coherent spatial planning), information collection and evaluation, human resource development and the capacity to implement public investments • A great imbalance between the two countries in the capacity and approach to CBC project development – targeted support for project generation 	X	X	X	X	6 projects contributing to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • territorial management, • connecting regions, • research and management of Danube, • active aging, • creating competence centre for health of seniors, • institutional cooperation in digital period design.
4.2/11*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common priorities in early childhood and primary education 					1 project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • education cooperation in border region.

* ETC Reg. 1299/2013 Art.7 (a) iv

Annex 11 List of Respondents/Interviews - Lead Partners

No.	Name	Institution	Project/Acronym
1	Beniač Michal	Bratislava Self-governing Region	Heritage SK - AT
2	Böhm* Thomas	Regionalmanagement Wien Süd	NatureTourNet
3	Čunderlík Zoltán	Bratislava Self-governing Region	Heritage SK - AT
4	Cvečka Ján	Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, Comenius university	CAA
5	Frank* Georg	Nationalpark Donauauen	AKK Fluss Korridor
6	Gallová Veronika	Bratislava Self-governing Region	Heritage SK - AT
7	Habersack* Helmut	University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna	DREAM
8	Hakel Martin	Bratislava Self-governing Region	Heritage SK - AT
9	Hamar Dušan	Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, Comenius university	CAA
10	Horanová Elena	Trnava Self-governing Region	ConnReg
11	Horváth Marek	Bratislava Self-governing Region	Vysomarch
12	Hudcovicová Martina	National Agricultural and Food Centre	IDARPO
13	Keding* Marcus	Forschung Burgenland (Research cluster)	NAREG
14	Kirchner* Christa	Land Niederösterreich	BIG
15	Kollár Ján	Bratislava Self-governing Region	Heritage SK - AT
16	Kuchta Daniel	City Forrest Bratislava	City Nature
17	Kutejová Eva	Institute of Molecular Biology of Slovak Academy of Science	StruBioMol
18	Lepuschitz* Wilfried	Practical Robotics Institute Austria	RoboCoop
19	Litschauer* Christoph	Nationalpark Donauauen	AKK Fluss Korridor
20	Matloňová Zuzana	Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic	B4B

21	Obersteiner* Gudrun	University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna	PlasticFreeDanube
22	Ondreičková Katarína	National Agricultural and Food Centre	IDARPO
23	Pepelová Zdenka	Slovak Centre of Design	Design and Innovation
24	Pevala Vladimír	Institute of Molecular Biology of Slovak Academy of Science	StruBioMol
25	Poliak Michal	German – Slovak Academy	IFIT
26	Prešnajderová Klára	Slovak Centre of Design	Design and Innovation
27	Schwarz* Sabine	Municipality of Purbach	NemoNet
28	Sedliak Milan	Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, Comenius university	CAA
29	Sládeková Anna	German – Slovak Academy	IFIT
30	Slobodová Dana	Slovak National Museum	Treasures
31	Sordian* Martina	Global 2000	BLUEHLING
32	Steiner* Franz	Viadonau (administration of austrian waterways)	ProDaM
33	Tirpáková Veronika	Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, Comenius university	CAA
34	Vallová Barbora	Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic	B4B
35	Vašinová Daniela	Stupava	3E Morava Nature
36	Weitschacher* Hannes	Weinviertel Tourismus GmbH (Tourism association)	NaturGrünesBand
37	Antipovová Ida	Trnava self-governing region, MC member	
38	Bachora-Nowak Adriana	City of Vienna	
39	Csonková Monika	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development SR, MA	
40	Martin Hakel	Bratislava self-governing region	
41	Hudzík Martin	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development SR, MA	
42	Ladich Harald	Regionalmanagement Burgenland	

43	Mihaľová Katarína	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development SR, MA
44	Novotná Alexandra	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development SR, MA
45	Nöbauer Martin	Ministry for Sustainability and Tourism, Austria
46	Ortis Genia	Joint Secretariat Vienna
47	Pailleron François-Edouard	Land Lower Austria
48	Polonijo Alena	Joint Secretariat Vienna
49	Swiatlowski Tomáš	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development SR, MA
50	Wallner Petra	City of Vienna

* telephone interview

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- 11 - Basic data - Interreg V-A Programme SK – AT in the period 2014 – 2020
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- 21- Indicators of outputs

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- 23 - Links connecting strategies and IPs

Annex 13 Evaluation team

Dagmar Gombitová	D&D Consulting s.r.o.	Team Leader
Dana Šimová	Euconet s.r.o.	Evaluation Expert
Bernd Schuh	ÖIR GmbH	Evaluation Expert
Dietmar Aigner	D&D Consulting s.r.o.	Quality Control
