Operational Evaluation of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme

Final Evaluation Report

2 August 2019

This report was prepared for the
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AA	Audit Authority	HoC	Head of Communication
AF	Application Form	HoEM	Head of Evaluation and Monitoring Unit
AIR	Annual Implementation Report	HoF	Head of Finance Unit
CA	Certifying Authority	HoO	Head of JS (Head of Office)
CE	Central Europe	JS	Joint Secretariat
CP	Cooperation Programme	MA	Managing Authority
DMCS	Description of the Management and Control System	MC	Monitoring Committee
		MRS	Macro-regional Strategy
eMS	electronic Monitoring System	MS	Member State
EC	European Commission	NCP	National Contact Point
EU2020	European Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth	NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
		SCO	Simplified Cost Options
FUA	Functional urban area	SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
FLC	First Level Control	SO	Specific Objective
HEI	Higher Education Institution	SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
HIT	Harmonised Implementation Tools		

Executive summary

Evaluation of programme management systems and processes

The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has a well-defined management structure. Each body has specific functions and responsibilities, which are widely determined, by the regulatory requirements and specified by the Cooperation Programme, its annexes and relevant internal documents. The adequateness of the distribution of roles and processes is confirmed by the overall results of the programme management. The programme is managed smoothly and according to the planned activities and established targets in the Cooperation Programme and in detailed Annual Work Plans for technical assistance activities. This was confirmed by the MA/JS/CA (Managing Authority/Joint Secretariat/Certifying Authority) system audit that certified that the management system "works well or only minor improvement(s) are needed". In addition, representatives of the European Commission highlighted that "*Central Europe is ahead of most Interreg programmes, when it comes to the effectiveness and efficiency of programme management*".

Workflows have been optimised as a result of learning from the past programming period. In general, there is an efficient relationship between available resources and tasks so that all bodies can efficiently cope with the extent and scope of the assigned responsibilities and tasks. The processes and administrative procedures foresee an adequate and timely flow of information.

Decisions concerning the programme are taken by consensus, striving for a balance of interests and positions. The consensual decision-making process is actively supported by the MA/JS that provides well-prepared and evidence-based background material. The programme bodies have established adequate mechanisms to involve relevant partners during programming and implementation.

Communication

The programme communication strategy is sound, concrete and coherent to support effective programme management and implementation. Roles and responsibilities are clearly assigned and are effectively carried out. There is a considerable progress in implementing communication measures, which is completely aligned with overall programme progress. Communication spending seems to be highly efficient and effective.

The programme has a wide array of support measures to projects and to beneficiaries on communication. Beneficiaries and users of communication tools and activities are highly satisfied with the support given by the programme on communication. Overall, the communication approach can be assessed as very advanced and highly effective. The integrated communication approach is based on professional standards. All communication tools can be considered user-friendly, up-to-date and well-targeted. There are diverse tools and channels to increase outreach to new groups and new applicants. Many of the tools and activities allow for interaction and participation, in particular events and social media.

The programme enters now a stage where communication on results and capitalisation becomes the focus of communication activities. The communication of results is based on a well-defined and integrated approach. As a good practice, the programme has developed a social media monitoring tool. The JS plans a capitalisation workshop for 2019 with all projects in the view of call 4. There are several measures that contribute to the dissemination and transfer of project results outside project partnerships. The programme encourages actively the capitalisation of project results through thematic workshops, storytelling, participating in project platforms and in EU-wide events and networks.

Application and selection processes

Application and selection procedure/s have been evaluated as rather efficient. The assessment criteria used during selection are considered balanced, aiming at innovative projects with a high strategic relevance and high potential impact, but also at a high operational quality. The relevance filter can be considered a useful and effective instrument to assure efficiency of the application and selection process. The selection process is considered fair and impartial, giving each application with sufficient quality an equal chance of being selected for funding.

Project cycle and programme support to applicants and beneficiaries

The set-up of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE reporting and monitoring processes is evaluated as effectively contributing to the verification of project progress. The timing for the reimbursement of claims is adequate and respects the deadline of 90 days set by the EU Regulation. The reimbursement process has improved and sped up compared to the previous programming period. The merging of MA and CA, in addition to the simplification that lead and project partners no longer have to provide hard copies of financial documents, are viewed by the JS as playing a key role in the increased efficiency of reimbursement of payment claims. The programme set-up is likely to reduce the risk of financial errors and de-commitment, thanks to clear procedures allowing early detection of errors already at project level through lead partner (LP) control and thorough verification at every step (from LP to CA), but also to the introduction of simplification measures (electronic monitoring, harmonisation of budget lines). An aspect considered as potentially increasing the risk of errors is the lack of harmonisation of financial control, in particular first level control, among ETC programmes. Some difficulties in the efficiency and interaction with first-level controllers in certain participating Member States have been reported, in particular in decentralised control systems.

The programme has effectively set up quality controls at project and programme level to ensure the monitoring of project output quality and their progress towards the set targets. The effort of the programme to group programme-specific indicators in typologies (strategies, tools, pilot actions and trainings) common to all Specific Objectives (SO) allows for a more effective measurement of outputs at programme level in the performance framework.

A review of the Cohesion Policy open database and clarifications with other JS of transnational programmes revealed that common output indicators (CO) were not coherently calculated. This referred to CO 1, CO26, CO41 and CO42 in particular and led to incomparability of CO indicators, which is opposing the original aim of the CO indicators. It was recommended by the evaluators that the CE

programme should recalculate the CO indicators concerned. A corresponding change was included in the revised CP version adopted by the European Commission in April 2019.

The use of programme-specific result indicators helps to monitor programme results. With them, the adequateness of the monitoring system to periodically measure programme results during implementation has increased. The programme has defined also a set of general result indicators. In general, the monitoring process has to follow a strict methodology to be useful. Given the relatively low relevance of the updated values in the case of Interreg programmes, monitoring result indicators more than once can be deemed as highly inefficient. It is recommended to skip the next monitoring of progress as scheduled for 2020, as it will bring hardly new insights. It is seen as sufficient to anticipate the verification of the final achievements (2023) in order to feed still into the impact evaluation to be conducted in 2020/2021.

The feedback from beneficiaries as well as the analysis of programme documents allows to positively evaluate the support provided by the programme on reporting and using the electronic monitoring system (eMS) and on communication, target group involvement and mainstreaming of project outputs and results. The eMS is positively evaluated in terms of allowing a complete documentation of relevant data (with special regard to progress reports and payment claims).

The introduction of simplification measures has noticeably reduced the administrative burden for applicants and beneficiaries in the application phase. This included a decrease in the number of ineligible applications, simplified reporting through the introduction of eMS, the use of Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT)[1] and the application of Simplified Cost Options (SCO), although the latter have not been used widely. One example for simplification is the 20% threshold for the flat-rate reimbursement of staff costs (Art.19 of the ETC regulation).

Programme progress on implementation

After three calls for proposals, the programme allocated slightly more than 100 % of the available funds to 129 projects. 21.6 % of programme funds have already been certified to the European Commission (as of April 2019). To maximise the absorption of funds, the fourth call will be mostly funded through savings generated by projects approved in earlier calls.

The programme management and control system is well functioning and beneficiaries are fully implementing their projects, leading to good programme performance from both the physical and the financial point of view.

Performance milestones planned for 2018 have been successfully achieved and even surpassed.

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[1] Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT) as proposed and developed by Interact in cooperation with different Interreg programmes.

The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE programme is well on track with its programme implementation regarding output indicators. The high level of progress is due to an overall higher number of projects than expected, but also to more than expected outputs per project. An in-depth analysis in the impact evaluation is recommended for SOs 2.1 and 2.3 (advanced relative progress), SOs 1.1 and 3.2 (highest number of projects), as well as SO 4.2 to highlight the reasons leading to later delivery of transport project outputs. Examples of project results identified through case studies show the wide range of topics and relevant outputs in practice. These range from training schemes to pilot actions, from leveraged investments funds to commitment for further action.

With regard to monitoring additional thematic result indicators that have been defined by the programme, first project impacts can be observed. The expected impacts of projects are considerable: more than 2,700 institutions are expected to adopt new or improved strategies and action plans, more than EUR 500 million of additional funds are expected to be leveraged, almost 2,800 jobs will be created based on project achievements and approx. 31,000 people will be trained. Within this framework, projects have already managed to have a leverage of more than EUR 27 million of additional funds, have already trained more than 8,000 people, created 47 new jobs and engaged 267 institutions to adopt new or improved strategies and action plans.

As for the programme-specific result indicators, it is still too early for a thorough analysis. The results of the 2018 update show that the situation of the indicators are considered by experts as generally more positive than in 2014, before the start of the programme. The trends are therefore positive in all relevant specific objectives.

Generation of synergies

The programme has well developed mechanisms in place for developing synergies with other EU programmes. The programme bodies foster the generation of synergies through diverse coordination and cooperation measures. The activities at programme level can be evaluated as effective to generate synergies, for instance, the coordination with macro regional strategies, Interact, other Interreg programmes and coordination within the fourth call. The fourth call is the first of its kind in European Territorial Cooperation. It might bring valuable insights on future coordination, complementarity and coherence between EU funds while striving for stronger impacts of project results at the regional level. There are also relevant synergies at project level. Some examples are: The SULPiTER project has presented its (first) results to projects of HORIZON2020, URBACT and Interreg Med. RUMOBIL complements TEN-T Corridor initiatives and aims to strengthen the links between TEN-T corridors and Central Europe's peripheral area.

Stakeholder involvement and partnership structure

The programme has so far managed to involve 4,200 organisations as applicants. When considering the composition of applicants, a leading role is occupied by public authorities (27%), followed by higher education and research institutions (18%), SMEs (16%) and interest groups including NGOs (15%).

The most represented category of partners (34%) and lead partners (45%) are local and regional public authorities.

Private partner involvement is positive, with 41% of overall applicants being private organisations[2]. The share of private partners in selected operations is 29%, which is still a considerable share and higher than in other transnational programmes, as far as data is available. Private partner involvement is rather heterogeneous across different thematic fields, which mirrors the different importance of private entities for different Priority Axes and Specific Objectives. It can be observed that the share of SMEs (16%) is relatively large in applications, however only 7% of project partners are SMEs. Private partners, including SMEs and large enterprises, are thematically predominant in projects under PA 1 and SO 4.2 on the coordination of freight transport stakeholders. This SO shows the importance of links between public organisations and enterprises.

Geographically, applicants are distributed relatively evenly. Countries with a high share of lead partners with respect to overall population size are Slovenia, Hungary, and to a lesser extent, Austria. In absolute terms, partners are well distributed geographically, but with a marked predominance of lead partners from Italy. Smaller Member States like Slovenia and Croatia are very active in applying, whereas stakeholders from Czech Republic and Poland, and partially from Germany, are comparatively less active in the programme.

The analysis shows that 24% of applicants are newcomers to Interreg. This is quite an impressive rate of newcomers for a long-standing programme such as CENTRAL EUROPE. This may be due to a relatively high visibility of the programme in the programme area and effective attraction of newcomers through communication activities. To evaluate this aspect further, in the next programming period the Programme should define what a "newcomer" or "new partner" is and what its expectations are with regard to newcomers. To evaluate this aspect in the next programming period, there could be a statistical data collection on this aspect during the project application stage or more specific questions in surveys to applicants.

The programme is generally successful in involving a diverse set of target groups, with a focus on private organisations and enterprises, in particular, for PA 1. Projects use a very broad range of tools and methods for communication with target groups, which, in most cases, was found to be well planned.

Compliance with horizontal principles

The horizontal principles are integrated in the programme management arrangements as general statements of principle. Their possible implementation tools and methods are briefly referred to in programme documentation. The incorporation of principles in the key phase of project selection seems to be the most powerful tool that the programme has used to promote them. Principles are included as part of the selection criteria.

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[2] Including SMEs, large enterprises, but also other organisations operating under private law.

The horizontal principles are well integrated in projects, with a large quantity of operations tackling sustainable development, including environmental sustainability, and equality as parts of their key goals. The thematic focus of the programme can encourage the promotion of topics closely related with horizontal principles, e.g. SO 1.2 on social innovation or the protection of the environment under SO 3.1. However, the contribution to sustainable development, equality and equal opportunities does not solely depends on the project theme, as all projects – despite their topic – can make a positive contribution to the principles. The analysis shows for most SOs that a considerable share of projects contributes to the horizontal principles.

Contribution to EU 2020 Strategy

The programme contributes considerably to the Europe 2020 Strategy (EU2020). Most projects contribute to at least one of the strategic goals of EU2020. The majority of the funding is targeting the EU2020 sustainable growth objective with approx. 65% of the projects reflecting the sustainable growth objective. In addition, the contribution to the smart growth goal is high with 35% of projects contributing. This confirms the initial concept of the programme to concentrate contribution on these two EU2020 objectives. Nevertheless, also the goal of inclusive growth is embedded in the programme and addressed by some projects of different SOs. This is most obvious in SO 1.2, where projects contribute to social innovation, or to bridging and reducing innovation divides and addressing relevant social challenges.

Even if the single contribution per project is minor, the accumulated contribution at programme level through practical, on-the-ground solutions, pilot actions and transnational knowledge transfer and learning is deemed as very important to move forward towards the strategic goals of Europe 2020.

Contribution to macro-regional strategies

Due to its geographic overlaps, the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has a bridging function and contributes to all four macro-regional strategies: EUSDR, EUSALP, EUSAIR and EUSBSR. At programme level, there is a continuous contact and information exchange between the programme and all macro-regional strategies (MRS) in the programme area.

About 81% and 84%, respectively, of projects declare to contribute to the EUSBSR and EUSAIR, whereas more than 90% indicate a contribution to EUSALP or to EUSDR (almost 97%). Most projects contribute directly to at least one MRS. Even if the contribution is often not concentrated on one single MRS, many projects make an important contribution through implementing objectives of four different macro-regional strategies "on the ground".

Recommendations

The first evaluation report and on-going evaluation led to a set of operational recommendations to further improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme management system and processes. Thus, follow up measures have been implemented since 2017 to amend certain flaws of the system or to further improve its efficiency and quality. Most recommendations have been tackled by the relevant

programme authorities (mainly MA/JS, Monitoring Committee and National Contact Points) and brought the desired improvements.

The current evaluation leads to some minor suggestions on how to further improve programme management, project cycle and progress and achievement of results, given the overall highly positive performance of the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme in all aspects. Considering the advanced implementation of the programme, most recommendations refer already to the next programming period rather than the current programme. These suggestions and recommendations for the upcoming programming period are presented in chapter 6 of the final evaluation report.

1   Introduction

The operational evaluation of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE 2014–2020 Programme aims to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme management system and related structures, i.e. to detect potential weaknesses already in the course of programme implementation. It shall also assess whether the programme is well on track towards reaching the set programme specific objectives and identify potential gaps to be considered in the final years of the programme life.

The operational evaluation focuses on evaluating

- the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme management regarding programme management structures, settings and processes;
- how effectively and efficiently the programme organises and supports the project cycle and support to applicants and beneficiaries, as well as the efforts made to reduce the administrative burden for applicants and beneficiaries;
- the progress of programme implementation regarding the achievement of programme objectives.

In line with these evaluation objectives, the final evaluation report has the following structure:

- Chapter 2: Methodology and context
- Chapter 3: Operational evaluation of the programme management system
    - o Programme management system, structures and processes
    - o Programme communication
    - o Project application and selection processes
- Chapter 4: Operational evaluation of the project cycle and support
    - o Evaluation of the project cycle
    - o Evaluation of support to beneficiaries and applicants
    - o Evaluation of reducing administrative burden through simplification measures
- Chapter 5: Operational evaluation of progress of programme implementation
    - o Progress in programme implementation
    - o Stakeholder involvement and partnership structure
    - o Compliance with horizontal principles
    - o Contribution to EU2020 Strategy and to macro-regional strategies
- Chapter 6: Overall conclusions and recommendations
- Annex: Supporting information in tables, diagrams and maps

2 Methodology and context

This final evaluation report is the result of a continuous evaluation process that started in 2016. A first evaluation report drafted in 2017 focused on the programme set-up and first findings regarding the processes established for the first two calls for applications. During 2018 and 2019, additional data gathering and analytical processes helped to draft this final evaluation report. In this final evaluation report, the findings of the first evaluation report have been updated integrating additional data. This report shows also how initial recommendations have been taken up by the programme.

The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE 2014–2020 Programme is at an advanced **mid-term stage of implementation**. By March 2019, three calls have been closed and the fourth call has been opened. Within these three closed calls, 129 projects out of a total of 1,020 applications (495 of them were full applications) have been selected and are currently implemented. The budget allocation corresponds to 101.5% of the ERDF share of the programme budget committed for projects[3]. As most projects are still on-going, it is too early for a thorough evaluation of achievement of results and impact. However, there are good reasons for a mid-term operational evaluation accompanying programme implementation. During a first evaluation phase in 2016-2017 (Part 1), the programme authorities obtained early evaluation findings regarding the programme management structures and selected programme management processes, which allowed the programme – already during the evaluation process – to take on board results of the evaluation for the design of the next calls for proposals and for timely adaptations to programme management settings and procedures. During the second evaluation phase (Part 2: 2018-early 2019), the focus was on evaluating modifications in programme management settings and procedures, on programme support to applicants and beneficiaries, as well as on the progress on implementation and contribution to results.

The evaluation used the triangulation approach and took into account a large variety of information sources, applying different methods.

Evaluators could draw on an abundance of data as the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme implementation is based on an **ample architecture of programme documents**. The **desk review** of available documentation has been the backbone for both parts of the operational evaluation.

The following documents have been reviewed during the evaluation:

- the Cooperation Programme and Annexes incl. amendments;
- the Programme Communication Strategy;
- the call-specific Application Manuals;
- the document 'Description of the functions and procedures in place for the Managing Authority and the Certifying Authority';

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[3] This allocation takes into account the experience with previous programming periods that shows that not all projects will absorb 100% of their estimated budgets and that there will be a certain degree of additional available funds to be allocated to new projects.

- the Internal Manual with Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs);
- the Programme Evaluation Plan;
- the Programme Ex-ante Evaluation Report;
- Programme Annual Implementation Reports 2015, 2016 and 2017;
- the Description of the Management and Control System & Annexes;
- the Programme Technical Assistance annual work plans 2015/2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019, as well as the work plans of the National Contact Points.

In addition, the desk review has covered

- monitoring information and data retrieved from the electronic monitoring system (eMS), e.g. call statistics, financial data, data on communication activities, call-specific project assessment report & annexes,
- results from surveys to applicants and beneficiaries,
- additional reports commissioned and/or developed by the programme,
- minutes of MC meetings, as well as
- data from the CE 2007–2013 programming period.

The written information was complemented with information obtained from **semi-structured interviews** to representatives of the different programme bodies. Covering all 9 programme countries, 37 interviews[4] have been conducted with

- 2 representatives from the Managing Authority,
- 1 representative of the Audit Authority,
- 5 representatives of the Joint Secretariat (some of them, twice),
- 9 Monitoring Committee members from the participating Member States,
- 9 representatives from National Contact Points,
- 9 representatives of National Control Bodies, and
- Desk officer in charge of the Programme at the European Commission (DG Regio).

In addition, **three Focus Groups' sessions** were organised in spring 2018 to complement other methodological approaches by providing triangulation and validity checking of working hypotheses. Focus Groups were held with representatives of a) Managing Authority and Monitoring Committee members, b) National Contact Points and c) National Control Bodies and the Certifying Authority. The method assured participation and the involvement of these stakeholder groups during the evaluation and allowed for the immediate testing of different ideas on pre-defined topics within each of the groups.

Finally, **eight Interreg CE projects** were analysed more in-depth with a **Case Study approach** in order to obtain qualified and detailed information about key aspects of territorial cooperation projects that are

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[4] Two representatives of the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of the JS as well as two representatives of the MA were interviewed jointly. In the case of Poland and Slovakia, MC and NCP were represented by the same person and the interview covered both functions.

not easily visible in the quantitative monitoring of indicators. Case Study reports were elaborated on the following projects: FabLabNet, Focus IN CD, GeoPLASMA-CE, SULPITER, RAINMAN, YouInHerit, LUMAT, and RUMOBIL. The selection of case studies was based on certain selection criteria to obtain a sample as representative as possible with regard to progress under the four priority axes and balanced geographical distribution.

The information obtained by the different data gathering methods was analysed in the context of common criteria for effectiveness (e.g. goal achievement, quality of procedures and tools, quality of projects) and efficiency (e.g. use of resources, workload, time consumption, clarity and efficiency of processes), and against established target indicators to evaluate the progress of programme implementation.

3 Operational evaluation of programme management system

3.1 Evaluation of the programme management settings, structures and processes

3.1.1 Introduction

Programme management structures and processes define the basic framework that determines how efficient the programme can be implemented and how effective it is in achieving its objectives. Efficient processes within a given management structure, a clear and effective distribution of roles and tasks, as well as a good internal flow of information and communication are key elements of a successful programme. The operational programme evaluation therefore starts with an evaluation of the programme management system and structures.

One central part of the evaluation has been the assessment whether the programme management system and related structures allow an effective and efficient implementation of the programme. This chapter presents the results of this assessment. In particular, it highlights the on-going improvement of the management settings, presenting the conclusions of the initial evaluation on the system[5] in 2016-2017 and the relevant changes and follow-up measures implemented afterwards.

3.1.2 Methods used

As part of the desk analysis key documents were analysed such as the Cooperation Programme, the annual Technical Assistance Work Plans, the Internal Manual on Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and the Description of the Management and Control System (versions 1 and 2) and its Annexes. In addition, interviews to representatives of programme bodies have complemented the written information. A set of three focus groups with representatives of Member States and programme bodies allowed to discuss working hypotheses and to further develop arguments for the assessment.

3.1.3 Evaluation question/s

The evaluation was guided by the following questions defined during the initial definition of the evaluation scope:

- Do programme management structures support an effective and efficient implementation of the programme?
- Are the programme management system and related structures set up in an effective and efficient way allowing for reaching the set programme objectives and results?
- Are decision making processes at programme level clearly-defined, transparent and efficient? How effective is the involvement of relevant partners? How effective is the programme coordination with other Interreg programmes on management tasks? Have any synergies been

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[5] In the first evaluation report, a more detailed description and analysis of the management structure was provided.

leveraged? Does the programme foresee mechanisms to effectively involve relevant programme partners and stakeholders?

3.1.4 Main findings

The programme management system of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme supports the implementation of the programme. It has a clear assignment of functions, responsibilities and tasks of the different programme bodies involved in the management of the programme. The settings and processes favour an efficient and effective work.

3.1.4.1   Clarity and organisation of the programme management structure, tasks and functions

The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has set up, in compliance with the EU regulatory requirements and in line with the national institutional, legal and financial framework of the programme countries (MS), a programme management system that clearly establishes functions, responsibilities and tasks of the different programme bodies involved in the management of the programme. These are the Managing Authority (MA), Certifying Authority (CA), assisted and supported by a Joint Secretariat (JS), the Monitoring Committee (MC), National Contact Points (NCP), the Audit Authority (AA), including the Group of Auditors (GoA), and national controllers. Furthermore, national authorities in each Member State (MS) are in charge of setting up and implementing the national management and control systems. Member States, in accordance with the partnership principle, have also set up national committees as a mechanism to involve relevant partners (as defined in the Article 5 of the CPR) in the implementation of the programme.

Analysing the relevant documents and specifications, it can be concluded that the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has a well-defined management structure. Each body has specific functions and responsibilities, which are widely determined by the regulatory requirements and specified by the Cooperation Programme and its annexes, by the "*Description of the functions and procedures in place for the Managing Authority and the Certifying Authority*" and its annex the "*Internal Manual - Compilation of Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)*" that focuses on MA/JS-internal procedures.

MA and JS have a key role in the management of the programme, which is also reflected in the share of the overall technical assistance budget absorbed by both functions. As expressed in the annexes to the Cooperation Programme 2014-2020[6], the MA, among other functions, "*ensures to manage the cooperation programme in accordance with the principle of sound financial management*" and the JS "*supports the managing authority in day-to-day management, […]*".

In interviews, representatives from all programme bodies confirm that the management structure of the programme leads to a highly professionalised programme management and favours efficient and

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[6] Annex 16 of the CP about the Functions of the managing authority, Annex 18 of the CP about the Functions of the joint secretariat.

effective workflows. Therefore, the programme management structure can be considered as adequate in its definition and in setting the framework for an efficient management. This was also confirmed by the MA/JS/CA system audit that certified that the management system "works well or only minor improvement(s) are needed". In addition, representatives of the European Commission highlighted[7] that "*Central Europe is ahead of most Interreg programmes, when it comes to the effectiveness and efficiency of programme management*".

All programme bodies are, in general, well aware of their roles and function within the programme. The distribution of tasks between JS and NCPs is well organised but seems to give some leeway of interpretation as interviews have shown. NCPs seem not to be equally endowed with resources (both in terms of staffing and financial backing), even if all NCPs are effective in carrying out their functions (information to potential applicants, advice and assistance to project partners, information on programme achievements and support to programme management). In general, all NCPs work effectively together in the NCP network, assuring the usefulness of the overall network. This is particularly important when considering that NCPs are an important tool to reach out to potential applicants and project partners at local and regional level.

3.1.4.2   Effectiveness of role distribution and processes

The adequateness of the distribution of roles and processes is confirmed by the overall results of the programme management. The programme is managed smoothly and according to the planned activities and established targets in the Cooperation Programme and in detailed Annual Work Plans for TA core management and national management activities. The Annual Work Plans for the programme's TA tasks with the quantification and delivery month of deliverables serve as a tool for planning and monitoring the implementation of management tasks. An on-going monitoring of management activities both within the JS and within the overall programme governance allows for quick reaction to any difficulties or challenges that arise in the management process.

According to the interviews with programme representatives, the programme strikes a good balance between strong leadership and the promotion of open exchange of opinions and ideas. There is a broad consensus among all programme representatives that the programme is very well managed by the MA/JS, that discussions in the programme are constructive, that all arguments and ideas are taken seriously and that the programme actively seeks for a balance of interests. The collaboration between the MC and the MA/JS is generally built on trust in their good work and on transparency of all decisions taken.

3.1.4.3   Efficiency of workflows and management tools

Relevant workflows, processes and tools have been examined in comparison to previous funding periods and/or to other Programmes. Overall, workflows and processes are similar to other Interreg programmes and to the previous CENTRAL EUROPE programme. It can be observed in the programme documents and has been confirmed by interviews, that many workflows have been optimised as a result

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[7] Interview with the Desk Officer of the Programme at the European Commission, carried out for this evaluation.

of learning from the past programming period. In general, there is an **efficient relationship between available resources and tasks** so that programme bodies can efficiently cope with the extent and scope of the assigned responsibilities and tasks, with the possible limitations of some NCPs as mentioned above.

The comparison of current processes with the previous funding period 2007-2013 and former processes has allowed identifying some areas where efficiency was increased[8]:

- Regarding the *processing and assessment of application forms*. The programme has a fully paperless application process in place. All documents and data are submitted electronically through the eMS and hard copies of declarations - as from call 3 contracting – do not have to be submitted anymore. Thanks to the fully paperless application process, the administrative compliance check could be considerably simplified in the current period with the number of eligibility criteria being reduced.
- Regarding the *increased use of internet-based communication and learning tools*: physical meetings and trainings are partly replaced by webinars (e.g. webinars for external experts, national controllers, etc.) and virtual meetings (e.g. Skype/phone consultations to lead applicants and for mid-term reviews); event material is made available for download, etc.
- Regarding *communication activities* and other events, the programme has increased efficiency by putting greater emphasis on smaller and less expensive events, looking for synergies with other events (training, information for applicants, cross-fertilisation etc.). This way, more potential beneficiaries and stakeholders can be reached than by single events. The efficiency gain is increased by a more intensive use of social media and electronic communication tools (see also chapter 3.2) and by turning programme events into largely paperless events.
- Regarding the *merging of MA and CA*. This has contributed to increased efficiency of reimbursement of payment claims.

The introduction of simplification measures has noticeably reduced the administrative burden for applicants in the application phase, including a decrease in the number of ineligible applications.

3.1.4.4   Use of available capacities

Efficiency of using available programme management capacities has to be assessed in the context of very high quality that the programme bodies expect from the programme and its projects. Implementing some optimisations and new processes outlined above helped to increase the efficiency of available resources.

3.1.4.5   Quality management, feedback loops and learning

The Programme management includes also risk management to avoid the loss or ineffective use of programme resources and warrant a good functioning of the programme in general. This means, that the programme management foresees several risk mitigation measures. The Programme has also a

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[8] For further detail on effects of simplification and reduction of administrative burden, see also section 4.4.3.

high interest in learning and improving quality and effectiveness over time. One example for learning is that the feedback from the assessment of applications are used to develop tailor-made recommendations for projects and to improve trainings on project management and other measures supporting project applications.

3.1.4.6   Internal communication

The JS has several mechanisms in place to ensure that communication within the JS is open and that decision-making leads to sustainable and effective decisions that enjoy broad acceptance in the team. Within the units and across the units, regular coordination meetings are held to ensure effective and efficient workflows and to communicate decisions taken by the management to the entire staff. Beside these meetings, the management team of the JS (i.e. Head of Office and Heads of Units) have periodic jour fixe for collecting feedback on pending decisions. Usually, decisions in the management team are taken by consensus, even if that may sometimes require longer discussions. In order to establish continuing improvement of communication in the team, the JS organises a two-day retreat approx. every second year to discuss and improve processes within the JS. As a result of the 2016 retreat, staff is now more actively involved in strategic questions and feedback from them is sought more actively than previously.

JS and MA have well-established interfaces, with the JS being in charge of most of the programme management and having a high degree of autonomy. Most strategic decisions are taken jointly at the management level of MA and JS, which contributes to them being well-informed, building on the necessary technical knowledge and evidence provided by the JS. Regular joint meetings between MA and JS contribute to the smooth communication and coordination between the two programme bodies.

The processes and administrative procedures foresee an adequate and timely flow of information between JS, MA, MC members and NCPs. In interviews, both MC members and NCPs confirmed that they feel well informed and appreciate the regular provision of updates on developments in the programme. Provision of inputs and responses to requests are described as "prompt", "reliable and accurate", "of high quality" and "fact-based".

3.1.4.7   Decision-making processes at programme level

Decisions concerning the programme are taken by consensus, striving for a balance of interests and positions. The consensual decision-making process is actively supported by the MA/JS that provides well-prepared and evidence-based background material. The MA/JS usually prepare alternative options for MC meetings and if no agreement can be reached in the first place during the meeting, the MA/JS systematically collects the positions of the different MSs. Interviews to representatives of the different programme bodies highlighted the respect and understanding for the different MS positions that often result from different administrative systems and traditions in the programme countries. The drawback of this highly efficient process is that pre-defined alternative options reduce the possibility for open strategic discussions in the MC and for alternative solutions. Mainly pre-defined options are discussed, which might limit the creativity and potential for an emerging consensus. It might be useful in the future to combine efficient processes in decision-making (e.g. on project selection) with more open strategic discussions (e.g. on call priorities, topics), as it was done already for the call 4 design, for example.

It is generally agreed that decision-making in writing (i.e. the "written procedure") is used where appropriate: e.g. for the adoption of programme documents and their revisions, programme procedures and tools, annual implementation reports, evaluation reports, etc. Its use has been expanded in the current programming period to a larger number of essentially technical questions of programme management, which has helped to avoid an overloaded agenda for MC meetings and, hence, increases the efficiency of decision-making.

In general, decision-making procedures can be assessed as effective, transparent and democratic. In the first phase of the evaluation, an interest in having more room for content-related and strategic debates in MC meetings was expressed by some MC members. This request seemed reasonable, as far as it could fit within the overall framework of limited time resources and the need for effective decision-making. Taking this proposal on board, the JS prepared the following MC meetings with more time for strategic debates, e.g. to prepare the thematic focus of Call 3 or the design of the experimental Call 4.

3.1.4.8 Involvement of relevant partners

The participation of the relevant partners in the implementation of the cooperation programme is assured through a number of measures both at the level of the programme and the level of the national delegations, i.e. through "*participation of relevant partners in national coordination committees preparing and supporting the MC members in the execution of MC tasks (in accordance to Articles 5(2) and 47 of regulation (EU) No 1303/2013)*".[9]

National delegations are free to decide about their own proceedings when involving partners during programme implementation. All Member States in CENTRAL EUROPE have a national committee to involve relevant partners and coordinate with other transnational (and interregional) cooperation programmes. National committee work and partner involvement were perceived as working well regarding features like coordination between programmes, open participation, consensus-oriented decision-making and bringing together different (sectoral) perspectives. Critical reflections can be grouped along two main issues. Firstly, on occasion there is lack of interest of some partners to become more actively engaged, and secondly, scarce resources (e.g. for travelling to meetings) that limit the involvement of partners. Both issues seem to affect the effectiveness of cooperation negatively. But there are also examples for successful ownership creation. One example was a dedicated national event for all transnational programmes with project partners and NGOs etc. to give sufficient room to these partners to voice their perspectives.

3.1.4.9 Coordination efforts at programme level

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[9] Annual Implementation Report 2016. Page 50.

The Cooperation Programme mentions several measures to ensure coordination with other ESIF programmes, with EU programmes and with the four EU macro-regional strategies that partially cover the area of the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme.

Coordination allows for leveraging results of CE projects into other networks and into mainstream policies and Research and Innovation initiatives. Synergies[10] and coordination usually help innovations and new knowledge to be disseminated faster and more widely. Also, the leverage of funds for follow-up projects or the transfer of project ideas to other European areas or countries is much more likely than without coordination. One example of the relevance of coordination efforts is the promotion of the Priority 4 'Transport' of the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme for calls 2 and 3 through CE participation in meetings of EU macro-regional strategy transport coordinators and the INTERACT thematic network for transport. This promotion of the programme in European networks helped increase significantly the number of applications and approved projects under Priority 4 in Calls 2 and 3, compared to a rather low response in Call 1.

At **programme level**, the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has developed several mechanisms for coordination. These include information exchanges, meetings and communication activities for better dissemination.

National coordination committees and alike, involve representatives from institutions that participate in the implementation of ESIF national and regional programmes, for coordination at different stages of the programme's lifetime. Similarly, when it comes to coordination with national funding instruments, the national coordination committees or alike involve representatives from institutions that deal with the set up or implementation of national / regional / local funding instruments for ensuring mutual information that could support effective national / regional / local policy implementation.

National Contact Points have an important potential when it comes to developing synergies with other programmes. However, this role is not fully taken forward. The following tentative observations regarding the role of NCPs for the development of synergies, capitalisation and dissemination can be pointed out:

- Not all NCPs are active in liaising with stakeholders, other programmes, or national experts; they rather react on requests from these actors. In some instances, National Contact Points in charge of CENTRAL EUROPE do not have the mandate to liaise with other EU Programmes or other Interreg programmes in their country, except for the cases in which they manage several Interreg OPs in the country.

- This is the first programming period in which NCPs are required to look for synergies with other programmes. Therefore, some adjustment and learning is currently ongoing in order to develop this capability. In consequence, the approach currently varies case by case.

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[10] Synergies at project level are further described in chapter 5.1.4.2.

Dissemination of project outputs and results is another mechanism introduced in the cooperation programme. This mechanism is particularly relevant for synergies with other ESI Funds and EU instruments. The MA and JS together with the National Contact Points communicate outputs and results of operations through relevant tools, as defined in the communication strategy of the programme. NCPs of several Member States organise (or contribute to) dissemination events at regional, national or EU level where CENTRAL EUROPE projects results, among others, are presented.

Synergies and coordination with other ETC programmes mainly regard ETC programmes with overlapping geographies, such as neighbouring transnational programmes. The programme tries to avoid overlaps and double financing with thematically similar projects but also to foster coordination and synergies. There are three key mechanisms for this:

- Information exchange during the application assessment to identify and avoid any overlaps or duplications, but also to initiate synergies between complementary operations.

- Information exchange regarding the monitoring of the implementation of approved operations to avoid overlaps but to foster cross-fertilisation of actions.

- Use of the Article 20(2) of the ETC Regulation, which allows for geographical flexibility, i.e. the development of transnational operations outside the programme area, creating links and opportunities across areas with common challenges and features.

Examples in this context are a number of visits that have taken place between the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme and the Interreg Baltic Sea Region, the Alpine Space, and the MED Programme. This is complemented by informal exchanges during events and meetings, mainly on programme management related topics, finances and control, monitoring system and others[11]. JS members confirm increased efforts for creating more synergies with other programmes and policies at programme level. There is a lot of information exchange, for example, with Interreg Europe, Interreg Alpine Space, the Interreg Danube and the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programmes. The programme exchanges with other programmes particularly regarding quality assessment on received applications to create synergies and avoid overlaps, which are then reflected in the conditions for approval[12]. However, the JS highlights that this process requires a lot of time and resources. Nevertheless, the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme applies double checks of applications and operations of other programmes to detect similar projects to avoid double financing. It can be useful to formalise this process in the future, currently based on informal exchanges.

INTERACT is an important facilitator of coordination among programmes, both for thematic, content-related work and for management issues such as evaluation, indicators, communication, financial management. Members of the CENTRAL EUROPE MA/JS participate regularly and actively in several

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[11] INTERACT, 2017, Coordination and cooperation: how? Working document presenting ideas on coordination and cooperation: how can we achieve these in Interreg, pg.16
[12] INTERACT, 2017, Coordination and cooperation: how? Working document presenting ideas on coordination and cooperation: how can we achieve these in Interreg, pg.22

thematic networks and management working groups organised by INTERACT. This includes, in particular, thematic networks on migration, transport etc. as well as the evaluation, project management, finance, eMS and HIT as well as communication core groups.

With regard to *other EU instruments*, the programme has developed particular synergies with focusing on Smart Specialisation Strategies. The MA/JS has even directly cooperated with DG Regio in relation to the thematic focus of the third call. For example, the JS participated actively in RIS 3 events of DG Regio where the third call was promoted in order to achieve a matchmaking of partners. There are also synergies with LIFE to promote it as one possible follow-up funding possibility.

Furthermore, there is an important exchange with the Research Programme Horizon 2020 and other EU directly managed programmes, such as LIFE, Creative Europe, etc. in the context of call 4. The CE Programme seeks to foster the roll-out of research results and to support transnational implementation via exploitation and coordination actions in its experimental fourth call[13]. In fact, a representative of the H2020 programme attended a CENTRAL EUROPE MC meeting and to the programme's cross-fertilisation event in April 2019. In May 2019, a common information event, organised by H2020, was planned. These concrete and active coordination efforts can be highlighted as good practice among European transnational cooperation programmes (see the text box below for further details on the fourth call).

4th Call for proposals –Capitalisation through coordination[14]

With the fourth call, the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme intends to facilitate the exploitation of transnational project outputs and results, in order to increase their impacts in central European regions. The experimental character of the call goes beyond the simple exploitation of outputs and results. It also aims at a better coordination of exploitation activities within and beyond the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE community. Projects are encouraged to involve relevant stakeholders who have not yet participated in Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE projects. Above all, they have to demonstrate how their project will create synergies and add value beyond what was already achieved. With the fourth call, the programme offers the opportunity to combine not only Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE outputs and results, but also those delivered by projects funded under other EU programmes. The external focus will be on those programmes directly managed by the European Commission (e.g. FP7/Horizon 2020, LIFE, Connecting Europe Facility, Creative Europe etc.).

Projects funded within the fourth call shall exploit transnational outputs and results by following two different approaches:

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[13] Launched in March 2019 and open until 5th July 2019.
[14] Based on information from the Call Announcement and the Application Package for the 4th Call Application Package published 4th of March 2019 on https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/apply/apply.html .

- Upstreaming: Existing outputs and results are taken up and tailored in a way that they can be integrated into relevant territorial or thematic policies and strategies. This should happen at the most appropriate level, i.e. European, national, regional or local.

- Down-streaming: Existing outputs and results are tailored in a way that they can be further rolled-out at the national, regional or local level. Such roll-out could happen geographically to utilise adapted outputs and results in other regions; or thematically to utilise these in other sectors than initially addressed. The main aim of down-streaming is to give regions in central Europe easier access to transnational outputs and results.

By encouraging thematic coordination between the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE community and stakeholders from other EU funds, the fourth call will be an important experience for preparing the next EU programming period 2021-2027. This call experiment might bring valuable insights for applying future coordination, complementarity and coherence between EU funds.

3.1.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The evaluation of programme management system and structures led to the following conclusions:

- The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has a well-defined management structure. Each body has specific functions and responsibilities, which are widely determined by the regulatory requirements and specified by the Cooperation Programme, its annexes and relevant internal documents.
- The adequateness of the distribution of roles and processes is confirmed by the overall results of the programme management. The programme is managed smoothly and according to the planned activities and established targets in the Cooperation Programme and in detailed Annual Work Plans for technical assistance. Efficiency was confirmed by the MA/JS/CA system audit that certified that the management system "works well or only minor improvement(s) are needed". In addition, representatives of the European Commission highlighted that "*Central Europe is ahead of most Interreg programmes, when it comes to the effectiveness and efficiency of programme management*"[15].
- Workflows have been optimised as a result of learning from the past programming period. In general, all interviewed programme bodies (MA, JS, MC, AA, CA, NCPs) affirm that there is an efficient relationship between available resources and tasks so that they can efficiently cope with the extent and scope of the assigned responsibilities and tasks.
- The relationship between available resources and tasks is efficient.
- The processes and administrative procedures foresee an adequate and timely flow of information. MC members and NCPs confirmed that they feel well informed and appreciate the regular provision of updates on developments in the programme. Provided inputs and responses to requests are described as "prompt", "reliable and accurate", "of high quality" and "fact-based".

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[15] Interview with the Desk Officer of the Programme at the European Commission, carried out for this evaluation.

- Decisions concerning the programme are taken by consensus, striving for a balance of interests and positions. The consensual decision-making process is actively supported by the MA/JS that provides well-prepared and evidence-based background material. The drawback of this highly efficient process is that pre-defined alternative options reduce the possibility for open strategic discussions in the MC and for alternative solutions. It might be useful in the future to combine efficient processes in decision-making (e.g. on project selection) with more open strategic discussions (e.g. on call priorities, topics), as it was done for the call 4 design, for example.
- The Programme bodies have established adequate mechanisms to involve relevant partners during programming and implementation.
- Coordination with other Interreg programmes and EU programmes is pro-actively promoted by the JS and leads to synergies, for example with LIFE, H2020 and the thematic platforms for RIS3 Strategies. Informal exchanges with other ETC programmes to avoid overlaps and double funding are helpful and might be formalised in the future. The cooperation with H2020 and other EU programmes through Call 4 can be already highlighted as good practice among European transnational programmes, even if the call is still open at the time of the evaluation and final results are still missing.
- Differences in rules between Interreg programmes are not a problem that can be fixed by the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme. However, the wish for more harmonisation of rules can be taken forward to the relevant decision-makers also by the CE Programme.

Relevant recommendations were already defined in 2016/2017 during the first part of the evaluation and corresponding follow-up measures have been implemented on all recommendations since then[16].

3.2 Evaluation of programme communication

3.2.1 Introduction

The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has developed its own communication strategy. It presents details on how the communication objectives of the Programme will be achieved. In particular, the communication strategy (p.3) states: "*Communication will play a key role in achieving the strategic and operational goals envisaged by the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme. Communication will overall help to raise awareness and inform stakeholders and the interested public about the programme as well as to build, manage and sustain mutually fruitful relationships with key audiences.*" The four main objectives of the communication activities cover the internal communication within the programme (objective 1), as well as external communication with stakeholders, potential applicants, beneficiaries and other audiences (objectives 2-4).

At the heart of this evaluation task is the evaluation of the communication strategy and the set-up of programme communication (activities and tools) as well as the progress made on the implementation of

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[16] See chapter 6 on conclusions and recommendations and, in particular, chapter 6.1 for recommendations and uptake during implementation.

the strategy. These aspects were already evaluated in the first phase of the evaluation. The assessment has been complemented and updated in 2018/2019 for this final evaluation report.

3.2.2 Methods used

For the evaluation of the different aspects of programme communication, the following methods have been used:

- Review of documents.
- Review and analysis of the communication output and result indicators, as defined and connected to baseline and target values in the communication strategy document, as well as the updated achievements until end of December 2018.
- Interviews with the Communication Unit of the Joint Secretariat (Head of Unit), regarding progress made on the implementation of communication activities and tools and the quality of the internal and external communication.
- Review and analysis of concrete activities and tools regarding the up-take by participants/users, user-friendliness, inclusiveness and accessibility, interactive features and target group orientation (in terms of content, form and format).
- Analysis of the situation and effectiveness of communication output and result indicators.

The qualitative evaluation is based on the aggregated feedback of stakeholders, collected from case studies, interviews, feedback surveys to events as well as other comments of users and target group representatives.

3.2.3 Evaluation question/s

The evaluative analysis was guided by the following questions as defined initially by the Terms of Reference:

- Is the strategy for programme communication sound, specific and coherent?
- How is the programme progressing on the implementation of the programme communication strategy?
- How effective and efficient is programme communication, in particular with regard to project and programme results?

3.2.4 Main findings

The Programme Communication Strategy has been found to be sound, concrete and coherent for achieving communication and programme objectives. The communication strategy is well progressed in terms of implementation and communication tools are considered effective and efficient.

3.2.4.1 Soundness, concreteness and coherence of the Programme Communication Strategy

In order to assess the soundness, concreteness and coherence of the communication strategy, the contents of the strategy have been analysed. The strategy builds on a clear and well-founded intervention logic. It reflects a logic connection between communication audiences, approaches and

activities, outputs, communication results and the contribution to the overall management and programme results. As a result of this, communication is not seen as an isolated "service function" but an important, integrated part of programme management. However, external factors in the intervention logic that could influence the production of communication outputs and results are not specifically identified[17]. Knowing specific external factors that could hamper the achievement of communication results might contribute to a better prevention of risks and to better effectiveness of the communication activities.

The strategy integrates lessons learned from previous programming periods. Lessons and recommendations of previous evaluations, reports and studies have been taken into account to actively improve the quality of the communication strategy. The strategy is tailored to different communication audiences and their needs. Messages, approaches and activities are defined in line with the needs of the specific audiences and their needs for information and knowledge. The strategy has clear and measurable communication objectives that are operationalised through suitable result and output indicators with baseline and target values. Target values are clearly defined.

Roles and responsibilities are clearly assigned. With regard to roles and responsibilities, the strategy document mentions that the MA and the JS with its Communication Unit will be mainly responsible for implementing communication activities as well as for coordinating communication activities of other programme bodies. In addition, the network of national contact points will be directly involved in programme communication. The strategy highlights that in order "*to increase quality and efficiency, communication tasks will be internalised to the possible extent*". The strategy assigns who is in charge of implementing the activities in general. Together with the Annual Work Plans, it assigns the specific responsibility for each of the involved actors (MA, JS-Communication Unit, and NCP). Regular mail exchange with NCPs, upload of shared documents to a cloud as well as two coordination meetings per year serve the purpose to clarify the responsibilities at the level of activities.

3.2.4.2 Progress in implementing Communication

A budget of EUR 1,180,000 is available for communication activities for the 2014–2020 programme covering the period between 2015 and 2023. Real implementation of the communication activities funded under the 2014–2020 programme budget started not before 2016. Roughly, by the end of 2018 about 36% of the communication budget has been spent. Taking into account that achievements are already quite high, this indicates a high efficiency in spending.

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[17] External factors are, for example, communication capacities of stakeholders, changes in social media channels, new social media, data protection rules etc. It is estimated that it will be difficult to foresee the role of external factors for a seven-year-period (in particular, when it comes to social media channels and online communication). However, identifying the external factors would show the interlinkages between the communication strategy and other relevant external factors and contextualise the communication strategy.

With regard to the progress on implementation on communication activities and tools, the detailed 2016-2018 activities have been reviewed. The situation of the overall communication output and result indicators has been analysed.

The results show that progress is in line with the foreseen planning and already exceeds the foreseen pace of implementation. As can be seen from the effectiveness analysis of the **communication output indicators** (see Annex 1), most indicators show a high and satisfactory level of achievement. The average level of effectiveness compared to the 2023 target value is 123%. Due to some changes in the strategy, a logical consequence of the fast development of social media and consumer behaviour, some values of the indicators are far beyond the initially planned targets. This is mainly due to an increased use of certain social media channels and video tutorials and films. Only one indicator shows a relatively low value. This indicator depends on the work of the NCPs and is linked to dissemination of project results, a work which is just about to start. Therefore, the low performance is not due to a delay in implementation but linked to the normal cycle of activities.

In addition, the review of the **communication result indicators** (see Annex 1 for more detail) shows that there is a highly positive impact of communication activities. The indicators show predominately the level of satisfaction with the work of the Programme. Most achieved values are considerably higher than expected. Also, the number of user sessions on Internet web sites is much higher than expected. This indicates an effective work on communication, information and dissemination by the Programme, in particular the JS and the NCP network.

3.2.4.3 Programme communication activities, tools and support to beneficiaries on communication

The programme has a wide array of support measures to projects and to beneficiaries on communication. This starts with training events and workshops and includes manuals, templates, video tutorials, as well as personalised feedback on project websites to improve their attractiveness and effectiveness.

To be able to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme communication, the different activities and tools have been analysed. In a first step, the extent and quality of the communication activities and products has been examined within the framework of the used resources. In a second step, the satisfaction of beneficiaries with the communication work of the Programme has been checked. Satisfaction and qualitative assessment is usually measured after each event or in general surveys to applicants and beneficiaries by the programme.

With regard to the extent and quality of the communication activities, the review of communication outputs (see Annex 1) shows that tools are numerous, very diverse and use many different channels. The usage of tools shows the adequateness to target groups' needs and the existing demand for information and support. This is confirmed, for example, by the high number of participants at trainings and events organised by the JS (approx. 2,590), the high number of short films produced and disseminated (61), as well as the high number of visits to the programme website (more than 235 000

in 2018 for result indicator C.2.1). Considering the resources available for Communication at the JS (2.5 full time equivalents) and the efficient spending, the achievements are outstanding.

The second step of the analysis shows a very high level of satisfaction of stakeholders with communication activities and tools. The latest survey to beneficiaries confirms the already positive assessments by beneficiaries and applicants, as analysed in the first evaluation report in 2016.

The analysis shows an overall high satisfaction with communication, information and support offered by the JS and the NCP that is worthwhile to be highlighted. Satisfaction is slightly higher with activities and tools offered by the JS (on average 88% are satisfied or completely satisfied) than with activities organised by the NCP (on average 79% are satisfied or completely satisfied).

There are differences between Member States. While there is a generally high assessment by beneficiaries of the work of the JS (an exception is Germany), the evaluation of the NCP is slightly more diverse and ranges from very high satisfaction in Poland and Croatia to less satisfaction in Germany, Czech Republic and especially in Slovenia and Slovakia.

Figure 3-1 Satisfaction of beneficiaries with information, support and communication provided by the JS, by country (Q3.1 Beneficiary Survey) n=124
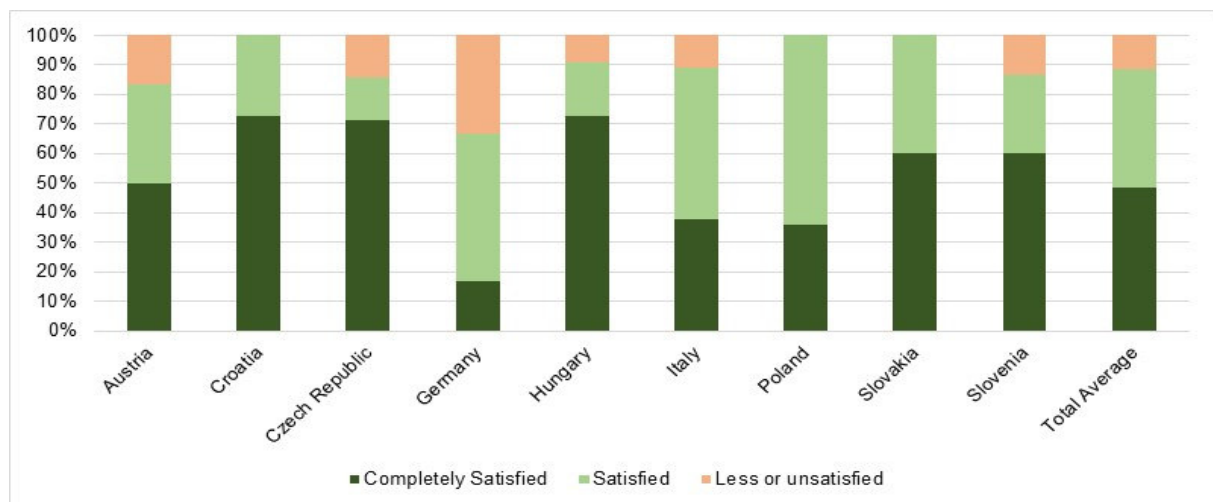
Source: Central Europe Programme Survey to beneficiaries on communication 2017.

Interestingly, high or low satisfaction from a given country is sometimes similar for the JS and for the NCP (e.g. Germany and Hungary). This indicates that beneficiaries rather rate the programme as a whole and not so much the specific activities of the JS or the NCP. This may be due to cultural differences. In general, it seems that countries with more institutionalised support through national activities that complement the JS activities and events are rated higher.

Figure 3-2 Satisfaction of beneficiaries with information, support and communication provided by NCP, by country (Q4.1 Beneficiary Survey) n=129
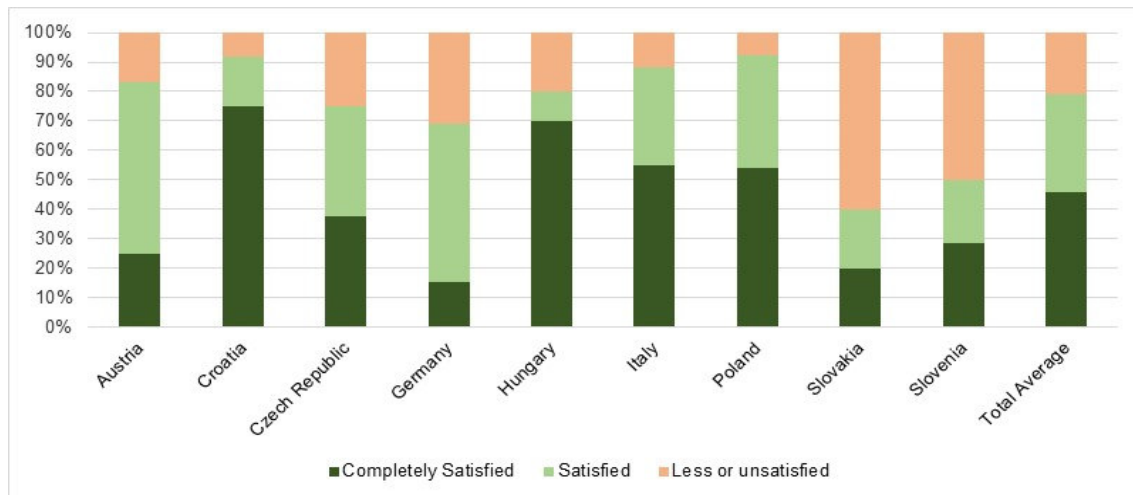
Source: Central Europe Programme Survey to beneficiaries on communication 2017.

A screening of the communication tools, taking into account the high satisfaction levels of users, all communication tools can be considered user-friendly, up-to-date and well-targeted. There are diverse tools and channels to increase outreach to new groups and new applicants. Many of the tools and activities allow for interaction and participation, in particular events and social media.

Figure 3-3 Overall satisfaction with tools for information and support offered by the JS (Q3.2 Beneficiary Survey)
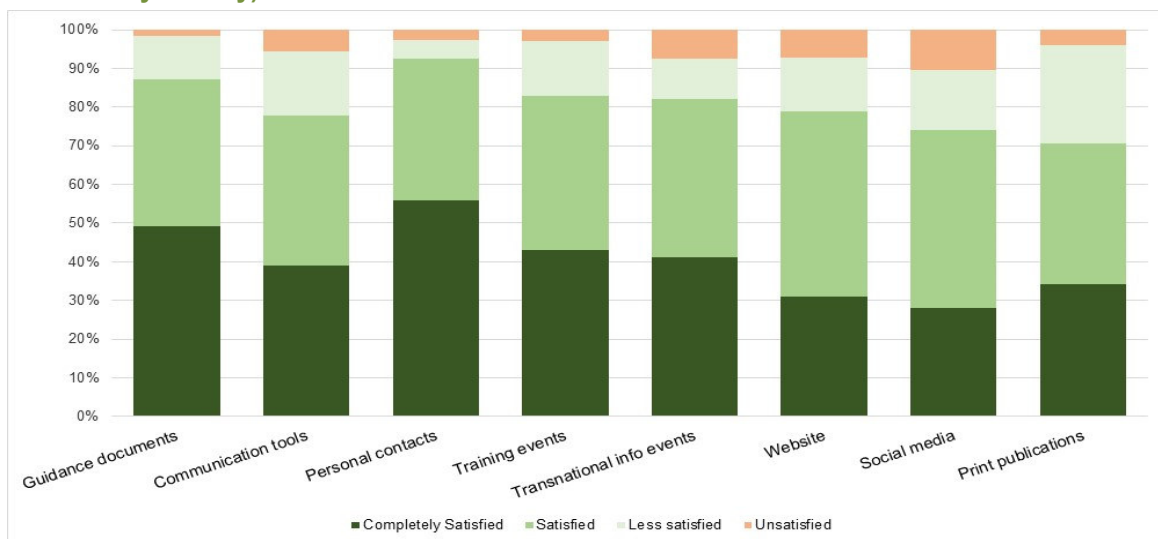
Source: Central Europe Programme Survey to beneficiaries on communication 2017.

Figure 3-4 Overall satisfaction with tools for information and support offered by NCP (Q4.2 Beneficiary Survey)
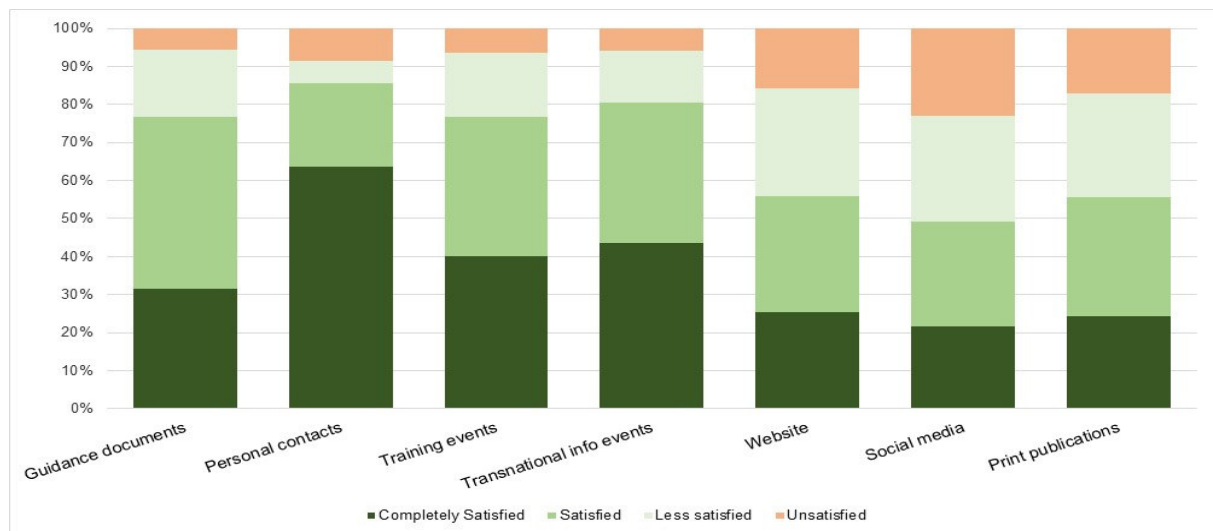
Source: Central Europe Programme Survey to beneficiaries on communication 2017.

As regards social media, it is still difficult to find adequate variables and indicators to plan and monitor the communication work of a programme, given the innovativeness and speed of changes in channels such as LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube or Twitter. The experience of the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme shows that it is difficult to foresee within the Communication Strategy all social media changes and interactions for seven years. The platforms change constantly their rules and the algorithms behind analytics. At the same time, users change more frequently their favourites and their media behaviour. However, the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has found a good solution to work successfully with social media. First, the communication unit plans social media activities for a more short-term period (1-2 years) to be able to react to changes in user behaviour. Second, there is a social media strategy that adapts 'traditional' news to the speed and rhythm of social media news items (for example, one press note is divided in five key messages that are published at five different points of time). Third, the JS monitors its social media activity in order to see immediately what works and what does not, to plan better future activities and to be able to analyse the programme's activity in this area in addition to the more traditional communication indicators. This social media tracking can be highlighted as a good practice for Interreg communication management and should be taken as an example to follow for other programmes.

3.2.4.4 Communication of programme results

The Programme enters now a stage where communication of results and capitalisation becomes the focus of the communication activities, while the first phases of the programme cycle were used to inform applicants and beneficiaries.

The new focus is clearly visible when looking at the Annual Work Plans but also at the type and mode of communication activities. For example, the programme website is now increasingly dedicated to 'tell stories' about projects, outputs and achievements and contribution of projects.
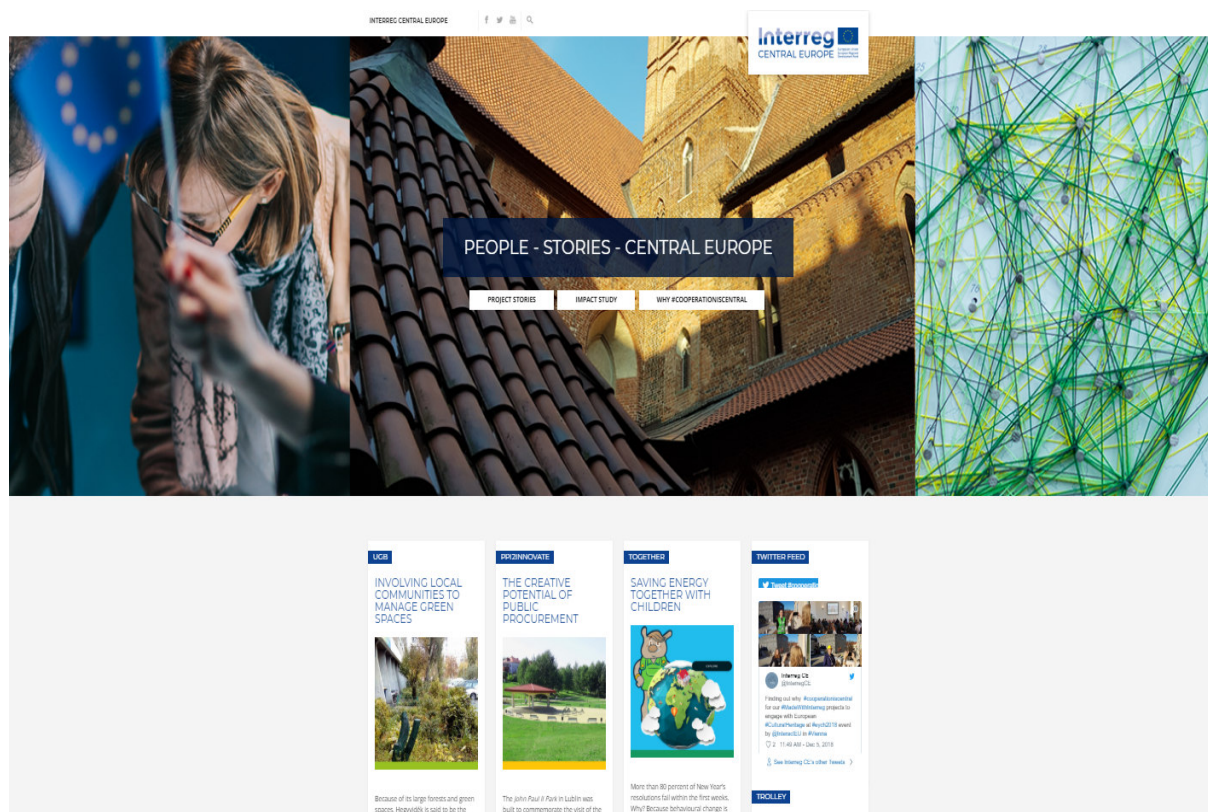
Programme Website December 2018: 'Stories' https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/cooperationiscentral.html

The communication of results is based on a well-defined and integrated approach that covers the programme website, project websites, key messages, stories, social media channels (Facebook, LinkedIn, Google, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter) and new formats such as network maps, photos and videos.

Discover 10 good reasons for transnational cooperation in CENTRAL EUROPE

https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/cooperationiscentral.html

One activity can be highlighted as good practice. Ten key messages of transnational cooperation[18] are linked to examples and project stories within the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme. This coverage of project results and stories is designed as a campaign under the Slogan 'Cooperation is central'.

Furthermore, in 2019 the output library will be launched on the programme website. This will be one of the main tools to communicate programme results.

In addition, reflections based on challenges of the CENTRAL EUROPE area and on impacts of the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme since 2007 have been analysed in a dedicated impact study[19]. These reflections feed also into the communication of programme results and contributions to territorial changes. Elements and results of the study will be highlighted over the next months and years. This has been facilitated by an early integration of the Communication Unit into overall programme management and reflection processes.

The programme encourages capitalisation of project results. The JS plans thematic workshops for 2019 with finalised projects of the different Priority Axes in order to stimulate the cross-fertilisation and the dissemination of similar, connected and complementary project results. This is an important activity to facilitate capitalisation. CE projects are also allowed and kindly invited to take part in the thematic Project Platforms promoted by the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme. Moreover, Call 4 will be dedicated to capitalisation and will be organised in cooperation with H2020, LIFE and other EU programmes to further enhance possibilities of implementation.

Other examples of activities to communicate results and to support capitalisation are:

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[18] Based on 'Ten Things to know about transnational cooperation'.
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/news/2018/02/02-12-2018-10-things-to-know-about-transnational-cooperation
[19] Study on "Socio-economic challenges, potentials and impacts of transnational cooperation in central Europe"
published by The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw) and Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE in October 2018.

- EU-wide events and networks such as the INTERACT Transport days are used to present projects with a similar thematic focus from different Interreg programmes.
- Survey and focus groups are conducted with experts in the framework of updating values of Programme Result Indicators (January/February 2019).
- NCPs support the dissemination of results and developing synergies between projects at national level.
- NCPs manage project databases, produce project brochures and factsheets and organise networking events at national level.
- Involving national exchange platforms (thematic, cluster, networks) in the dissemination work and keeping them posted about projects and their results was seen as a good practice.
- In some countries, catalogues or databases of results including Interreg project results (from different programmes) are used to disseminate the results to a wider public.

3.2.4.5 Effectiveness of communication

Overall, the communication approach can be assessed as very advanced and highly effective. The communication approach is strategic and looks not only for 'reach' (i.e. reaching a higher number of people), but also for 'engagement' (i.e. engaging people, make them think and reflect and use the information they receive). The integrated communication approach is based on professional standards and goes far beyond what ESIF mainstream programmes and most Interreg programmes usually foresee. CENTRAL EUROPE Programme is also one of the few programmes that has the capacities and the ambition to attend many different social media channels. Considering the actual use of social media channels among current project partners and target groups, this may not be a necessity. However, this is considered a valuable and foresighted step as it comes to prepare for the communication with future generations of applicants and target groups. Since the mid-2000s, communication changes increasingly fast and using social media will be a must for the 2021-2027 ESIF Programmes. An example of the effectiveness of CENTRAL EUROPE communication is the relatively high number of subscribers to the programme's YouTube channel, even if different population sizes are taken into account (see table 3-1).

Table 3-1 Subscribers to YouTube Channels of Interreg programmes (December 2018)

Programmes 2014-2020 with YouTube channels	Number of subscribers
Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE	220
Interreg MED	157
Interreg Alpine Space	67
Interreg 2Seas	9
Interreg SUDOE	16
Interreg Baltic Sea Region	24
Interreg Danube	73
Interreg ADRION	5
Interreg EUROPE (not transnational, EU-wide coverage)	289

Source: YouTube

Overall, there are several measures that contribute to the dissemination and transfer of project results outside the project partnerships. The programme encourages actively the capitalisation on project results through thematic workshops, storytelling, participating in project platforms and in EU-wide events and networks.

The Programme also supports and encourages projects to make use of synergies in project communication (e.g. through joint project conferences, capitalisation in the area of communication and dissemination). This activity is emerging in 2019, when there will be more finalised projects.

Within the overall positive impression, one element to be improved can be the proactive communication activity of projects. Communication of project results at project level could be more effective with more professional dedication to communication activities and more resources dedicated to communication by all project partners, particularly by the partner in charge of communication coordination. Here, understanding of professional communication techniques and approaches, understanding of the specific target groups and their needs, as well as a well-integrated and on-going communication approach would be required. Reporting on project results (to the JS) and communication to target groups is not the same and should be differentiated. For the next programing period, the JS could continue informing applicants on the relevance of communication and supporting projects through adequate activities, such as specific workshops and video tutorials.

3.2.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The evaluation of communication strategy and measures led to the following conclusions:

- As already highlighted in the first evaluation report, the Programme Communication Strategy is sound, concrete and coherent to support effective programme management and implementation. Roles and responsibilities are clearly assigned and are effectively carried out.
- There is a considerable progress on implementing communication measures which is completely aligned with overall programme progress. Communication spending seems to be highly efficient and effective.
- The programme has a wide array of support measures to projects and to beneficiaries on communication. Beneficiaries and users of communication tools and activities are highly satisfied with the support given by the programme on communication.
- Overall, the communication approach can be assessed as very advanced and highly effective. The communication approach is strategic and looks not only for 'reach' (i.e. reaching a higher number of people), but also for 'engagement' (i.e. engaging people, make them think and reflect and use the information they receive). The integrated communication approach is based on professional standards. All communication tools can be considered user-friendly, up-to-date and well-targeted. There are diverse tools and channels to increase outreach to new groups and new applicants. Many of the tools and activities allow for interaction and participation, in particular events and social media.
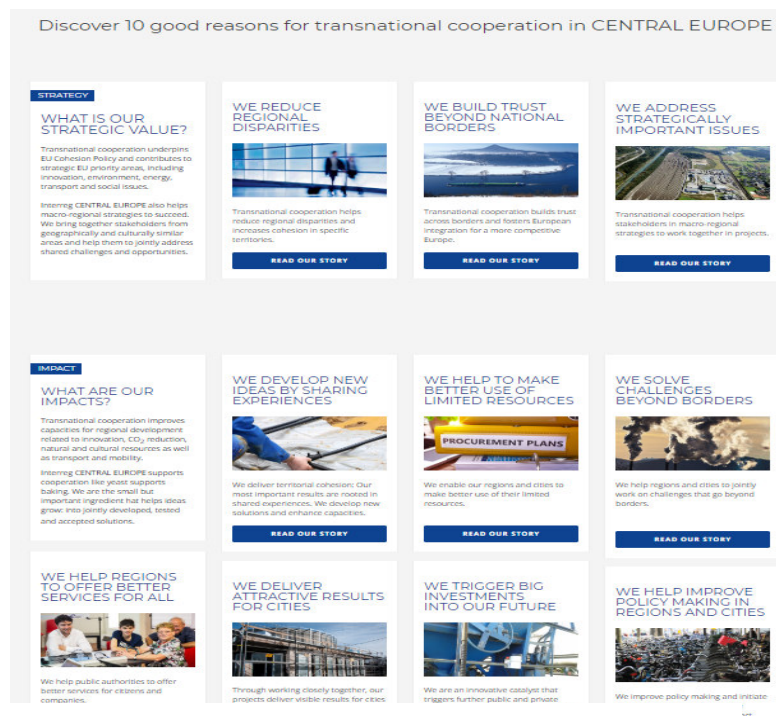- The Programme enters now a stage where communication on results and capitalisation becomes the focus of the communication activities. The communication of results is based on a well-defined and integrated approach. As a good practice, the programme has developed a

social media monitoring tool. The programme encourages also capitalisation of project results. The JS plans thematic workshops for 2019 with finalised projects of the different Priority Axes. There are several measures that contribute to the dissemination and transfer of project results outside the project partnerships. The programme encourages actively the capitalisation on project results through thematic workshops, storytelling, participating in project platforms and in EU-wide events and networks.

- Within this overall positive impression, an element to be continued can be the proactive communication activity of projects. For the next programing period, the JS could continue informing applicants on the relevance of communication and support projects accordingly.

There are two recommendations that were already defined in the first part of the evaluation and that are important for the next programming period:

- With regard to the communication strategy, specifically identify external factors that could hamper the achievement of communication results.
- Work on quantifying social media-related indicators so that they are useful and comparable over the whole programming period. Given the high volatility of social media channel uses and algorithms to describe usage, this seems to be a particular challenge.

3.3 Evaluation of project application and selection processes

3.3.1 Introduction

During the first years of programme implementation (2014-2016), two calls for projects were carried out with their respective assessment and selection procedures. These were assessed in part 1 of the operational evaluation. The evaluation of the project application and selection process looked at the entire process from the effort put into project generation, the organisation of the calls, the assessment procedure and the funding decision-making process, the available support for applicants, and, finally, contracting. Specific attention was paid to the different procedures used for the two calls that have been carried out by the programme, in order to generate valuable information for an optimised organisation of calls 3 and 4.

In the second part of the evaluation (2017-2018), the analysis was updated by including also information on the project selection of the third call and the launch of the fourth call. An evaluation of related topics can be found under chapter 4 of this report as part of the project cycle and support evaluation.

3.3.2 Methods used

For the implementation of this evaluation task, the following information sources were analysed:
- Screening and analysis of available programme documents and data, including the call-specific application manuals, assessment reports, MC decisions, call statistics, applicant surveys, and feedback from information events, etc.
- Analysis of data of the aggregated feedback from national and transnational events organised by the programme and responses to applicant surveys launched after call 1 and 2.

- Results and contents from the interviews with programme bodies have been used to complement the information on the perceived quality of processes and tools and on suggestions for improvement.
- Updated analysis on satisfaction of beneficiaries related to application and selection processes.

3.3.3 Evaluation question/s

The main evaluation questions that guided the analysis were:

- How effective is the programme in reaching out to (potential) applicants?
- How effectively and efficiently organised is the application and selection process in terms of call procedures and tools provided (including contracting)?
- Is the project assessment and selection process sound, efficient, transparent and fair, aiming at high quality projects to be funded?
- How well does the programme support applicants during the project application stage?

3.3.4 Main findings

3.3.4.1 Effectiveness of outreach to applicants

Until January 2019, the programme has implemented three calls for proposals that attracted 1,020 applications (out of which 495 full applications): 620 applications have been submitted in the first step of the first call (95 full applications in step 2), 209 in the second call and 191 in the third call[20]. This indicates a likely increase of applications per call compared to the past programming period 2007–2013, during which four regular (and one strategic) calls have altogether attracted 551 applications. In this sense, the programme has been successful in attracting applicants and potential beneficiaries[21].

3.3.4.2 Effectiveness and efficiency of application and selection processes

The analysis of programme documentation shows that the **application and selection process is clearly defined, documented and transparent for all steps**. The entire procedure can be considered both sound and transparent and guards the programme well against possible complaints.

The **application and selection procedure/s can be evaluated as rather efficient**. The duration during which calls are open (~60 days for calls 1 and 2 and 4 months for call 3) is evaluated as adequate, also when comparing it to other Interreg programmes. The contracting procedure is well-defined and well-documented, striving for a high quality and maximum avoidance of errors. For calls 1 and 2, the programme was able to achieve, from the previous to the current programming period, a reduction of the average time needed for assessing application from ~1.6 to ~1.3 calendar days per application[22]. However, for call 3, the time needed for the assessment and decision-making increased up to 1.86 days

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[20] Call procedures were different between call 1 (two-step application) and calls 2 and 3 (one-step procedure). In the CE 2007-2013 Programme all calls were following a one-step procedure.
[21] This comparison is somewhat biased due to the different procedures applied in the two funding periods.
[22] This includes several steps, e.g. eligibility check, quality assessment, time of drafting the assessment report, time of submission in advance to the MC.

per application. This was due to a peak in the workload of the JS with an intensive monitoring of the 85 on-going projects in parallel to the assessment.

Overall, the whole assessment and selection process (i.e. time between submission deadline and notification) takes between eight and twelve months on average, which is evaluated as largely satisfactory, in particular in view of the large number of applications received for the calls and the fact that more applications are eligible and, hence, have to be assessed and that the process involves two independent assessments.

3.3.4.3   Soundness and transparency for selecting high quality projects

The **assessment criteria** used during selection can be assessed as balanced, aiming at innovative projects with a high strategic relevance and high potential impact, but also at a high operational quality that avoids the risks of project failure. Naturally, the use of demanding operational criteria implies that these can be more easily met by experienced than by unexperienced project teams. However, the criteria are clearly communicated and explained in the relevant manuals and supporting documents and during programme events and consultations to all potential applicants.

The **relevance filter[23] can be considered a useful and effective instrument** to assure efficiency of the application and selection process. For call 2, a relatively low number of projects was filtered out (e.g. 7% in call 2). After a corresponding recommendation in the first evaluation report, efficiency of the relevance filter was significantly increased in call 3, when 30% were filtered out (54 applications). This increased the effectiveness of the overall process.

The **selection process is considered fair and impartial**, giving each application with sufficient quality an equal chance of being selected for funding.[24] The programme applies a four eyes principle and involves external thematic experts to ensure a transparent and fair quality assessment and selection. Since every step in the assessment and selection procedure is clearly documented, the final selection is considered transparent and able to depict the quality of projects. A particularly positive aspect is that the final selection is based on a transnational agreement and not on single MS interests.

However, consensus-finding and decision-making steps during project selection are questioned occasionally by representatives of one Member State. According to this Member State, there is room for improvement regarding strategic decision-making for consensus on project selection[25]. There probably

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[23] Call 1 followed a two-step application procedure and no relevance filter was applied.
[24] An indicator for the high level of fair and impartial selection is the low number of formal complaints, based on the Programme's formal complaints procedure. There were only four formal complaints on admin/formal eligibility checks (2 in call 1, step 1, 1 in call 2 and 3 each) and two complaints on the quality assessment in call 3. In addition, there were a number of informal technical information requests by applicants on the outcomes of the quality assessment, which were successfully clarified by the JS. (Information provided by the JS).
[25] It has to be considered that the MA/JS proposed for call 4 already a new method for project selection, which allows more strategic discussions of the MC.

is no such thing as the one 'ideal' procedure, as selection processes often represent different points of debate, and there is a payoff between efficiency and participation in decision-making.

3.3.4.4 Assessment of programme support for applicants during the application phase

The JS and NCPs provide support to applicants in different forms, including individual consultations[26], thematic workshops, individual support to applicants by NCPs, lead applicant trainings, national info days, help desk for applicants, and call-specific application manuals. The satisfaction with information and support by NCPs and JS is very high as shown by feedback from applicants. **Support to applicants** before and during application and selection phases can be evaluated as **targeted and adequate**, given the high number of attendees to information events and the high degree of satisfaction of participants/ users.

Regarding the support through Application Manuals and Application Forms in the eMS, some applicants regularly comment on the potential to further improve documents and forms in the eMS. They would prefer shorter and more streamlined documents and a better navigability of forms in the eMS system[27].

Feedback from participants of the different national info events show that the announcement and promotion of calls has been **evaluated either *excellent* or *very good* by most participants**. The high number of applications received in the first step of the first (620), second (209) and third call (191) indicates that programme outreach activities and support have been effective. However, the programme recorded a lower number of applications under priority 4 'transport'. Therefore, one of the recommendations of the first evaluation report was to increase efforts to attract applicants to priority 4. This was implemented in preparation of call 3 and led to a higher interest among applicants for priority 4, with 15 applications in call 3, representing 7% of the total number of applications (compared to 3% in call 1 and 5% in call 2).

3.3.4.5 Strategic steering of project generation

The programme assumes a pro-active role in promoting and supporting project (idea) generation to steer the types and number of applications it receives actively. It is also committed to the implementation of the programme strategy and is careful to select only projects that contribute to the programme strategy.

For this purpose, the third call introduced a more selective thematic focus to attract specific types of project application, i.e. for some SOs projects had to be based on pre-defined thematic topics clearly listed in the call announcement[28]. This allowed the programme to steer application towards topics of

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[26] For call 3 applications the JS did not provide individual consultations. They were replaced by thematic workshops with experts to ensure even more equal treatment and to provide the same level of information to all applicants.
[27] This feedback was already taken up by the programme. The application manual has been very much shortened and the information further streamlined for call 4.
[28] For four SOs a thematic focus was applied, five SOs were kept completely open and one SO was closed.

particular policy relevance as well as to topics that were missing or underrepresented in the previous calls.

Furthermore, through call 4, launched in March 2019, the programme has taken a strategic approach to the exploitation and coordination of project results. Specifically, Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE decided to shape the fourth and last call as a "capitalisation call" of experimental nature, also in view of the post-2020 period. The fourth call aims at exploiting existing CE project results by clustering results of projects funded in the first two calls in seven thematic areas and coordinating further activities of these projects, at the territorial level. Cooperation should be stimulated with innovation and research projects of the EU Research Framework Programme Horizon2020 and projects of other directly managed EU Programmes, such as LIFE, Creative Europe etc.[29]. It will be funded through savings of non-used funds coming from previous calls.

3.3.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The following conclusions can be drawn:

- Application and selection procedure/s have been evaluated as rather efficient. The assessment criteria used during selection can be assessed as balanced, aiming at innovative projects with a high strategic relevance and high potential impact, but also highly operational. The relevance filter can be considered a useful and effective instrument to assure efficiency of the application and selection process. The selection process is considered fair and impartial, giving each application with sufficient quality an equal chance of being selected for funding.
- According to one Member State, there is room for improvement regarding strategic decision-making for consensus on project selection.
- The fourth call is the first of its kind in European Territorial Cooperation. It might bring valuable insights on future coordination, complementarity and coherence between EU funds.

With regard to the application and selection processes, the recommendation from the first part of the evaluation remains valid:
- Continue improving user-friendliness of the eMS and of supporting documents such as application manuals. Here, it can be positively noted that the call 4 Application Manual has been shortened and streamlined into one single brief document – in line with previous suggestions by the evaluators.

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[29] Further details have been presented in chapter 3.1.4.9 of this report.

4 Operational evaluation of the project cycle and project support

4.1 Introduction

The evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation of the project cycle is a continuation of the evaluation of the project application and selection process. This update of the first part of the evaluation focuses on two elements: the evaluation of the project monitoring, support to projects during implementation and reimbursement procedures, as well as the evaluation of efforts made to reduce the administrative burden for applicants and beneficiaries.

4.2 Methods used

Evaluators have carefully reviewed the Cooperation Programme, the Description of the Management and Control System and the Application Manual regarding simplification measures, project support and project cycle. Templates and factsheets developed by the programme as part of the implementation toolbox have been reviewed, as well as the Implementation Manual and Annexes. Evaluators have looked into the introduction of simplified cost options, the electronic monitoring and data exchange system (eMS) and the use of the cooperatively[30] developed harmonised implementation tools (HIT) and harmonised eligibility rules. The evaluation findings have been analysed against the results of studies on administrative simplification undertaken by the EU Commission in recent years.

For evaluating the efficiency of the monitoring and control process, data retrieved from the monitoring system have been used as proxies, in particular to evaluate the efficiency of the reimbursement of claims (e.g. through the calculation of average, maximum and minimum time elapsing between the submission of the claim and the payment). Interviews and focus groups with the JS and National Control Bodies have been conducted to gather more information on these aspects.

In order to assess the beneficiaries' perception of the simplification provisions made, specific questions were asked to projects in the framework of case study interviews. Evaluators have also drawn on the beneficiaries' survey feedback on their satisfaction with programme support, on user-friendliness of the eMS as well as the availability of hands-on support. Questions have also addressed applicants/ beneficiaries' perception of *changes* associated with applying for/implementing an Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE project compared to the previous programming period and other Interreg programmes. Interviews with representatives of MA, JS, AA, CA, NCPs and National Control Bodies helped to assess the situation of control and audit procedures and the consequences of simplification measures.

4.3 Evaluation question/s

The following evaluation questions guided the evaluation:

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[30] Harmonisation of implementation tools (HIT) and eligibility rules was the aim of a process facilitated by INTERACT, involving also other Interreg programmes.

- Is the set-up of the process of reporting and monitoring (and related tools, including indicators) of project implementation robust and efficient?
- To what extent does the programme monitor and control the quality of project outputs?
- How well does the programme support beneficiaries during project implementation?
- Has the programme set adequate measures to reduce the administrative burden of applicants and beneficiaries?

4.4 Main findings

4.4.1 Project cycle

In the evaluation of the project cycle the following aspects have been analysed:

- effectiveness of the monitoring and reporting system set-up to verify project progress;
- efficiency of the reimbursement of payment claims;
- adequateness of the payment system;
- effectiveness of the eMS in documenting and handling relevant data; and
- monitoring and control of the quality of project outputs.

4.4.1.1   Effectiveness of the monitoring and reporting system set-up to verify project progress

The **set-up of** the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE **reporting and monitoring processes** is evaluated as effectively contributing to the verification of project progress. This is due to the presence of a clear division of tasks and to procedures put in place through the programme's Description of the Monitoring and Control System (DMCS), Internal Manual and Implementation Manual.

The verification of project progress is based on the analysis of the programmes' financial and physical progress towards its target results documented in the programme's monitoring and reporting system.

The programme provides a set-up for the efficient and effective monitoring and reporting, in particular drawing on:

- the Cooperation Programme and its annexes;
- the Implementation Manual and its toolbox;
- the DMCS; and
- the Internal Manual for Programme Bodies.

The cooperation programme sets up the governance structure and provides a specific description of the management and control arrangements, including the division of roles and tasks in the management control system among programme bodies (MA/CA, JS, AA, NCPs, National Control Bodies). It further states that monitoring "*will provide project-specific technical and financial information on the progress of the programme towards its goals […] and ensure the quality and effectiveness of implementation by assessing the progress of operations making use of periodic and final reports submitted by the project LPs on behalf of their partnerships […] in line with the requirements set out in Article 122(3) of the CPR.*" (p.103)

The Internal Manual represents the basis to ensure the correct and thorough monitoring and verification of projects' progress towards the achievement of results at programme level. The Internal Manual is organised in Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for every step of the project lifecycle, each including the purpose, scope, programme bodies involved, procedural steps and necessary documents.

Furthermore, a checklist with a set of criteria for the monitoring of progress reports is included in the DMCS. The document includes criteria on the type, level of detail and preciseness of information projects should include in their reports to be deemed of good quality (i.e. coherent, exhaustive etc.).

What should be considered as an important instrument for the verification of project progress is the **compulsory mid-term review** carried out by the MA and JS. The evaluation shows that the exercise allows reviewing project progress against the project objectives, outputs and expected results defined in the application form. The mid-term review takes place at the end of the first half of the project implementation phase. Feedback and possible recommendations for the remaining project period are given by the JS as an outcome of the mid-term review. The LP has to prepare a summary of the main points of discussion and the conclusions/agreements taken at the **mid-term review meeting[31]**.

As an effort by the programme to ensure a harmonised approach to reporting, the implementation toolbox for beneficiaries, made available on the programme's website, provides a vast array of template documents and guidelines necessary for project implementation, including:

- contracting documents (Subsidy contract, Partnership agreement and Financial guarantee)
- a project management toolbox (Mid-term review documents, Output factsheets, Investment report, Partner report, Joint progress report and Light report templates and Request for modification template)
- a project finances toolbox (Control documents, Daily rates, Financial correction report, Lead partner verifications checklist, List of expenditure, Mid-term review financial tables, Payment request form, Periodic staff report, Purchase form, Timesheet template)
- a project communication toolbox (Communication strategy template, Eligible promotional materials factsheet, Project brand manual and Project website manual)
- an eMS toolbox (eMS walk-through, guidance on Contracting, filling in Supplementary information, Partner report and Joint progress report and List of expenditure)

The support to a high quality reporting by beneficiaries is further integrated by project implementation trainings organised for lead partners on a yearly basis (more information below).

4.4.1.2 Efficiency of the reimbursement of claims

The timing for the reimbursement of claims is adequate and respects the deadline of 90 days set by the EU regulation. The analysis of data retrieved from the monitoring system of the current and previous

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[31] As a simplification, for call 2 projects mid-term reviews can be done through a face-to-face meeting but also online, e.g. via video conference.

Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE programme allows for a comparison of the speed of reimbursements to beneficiaries. In the current programming period, for periods 1 and 2 of call 1 projects, the start of the reimbursement process is calculated from the day the hard copies of expenses were received by the JS. However, the obligation for LPs to send hard copies was removed in December 2017, so for periods 3 and 4 the reimbursement procedure duration is calculated from the moment the JS electronically receives the final acceptable progress reports until the CA makes the payment to the LP.

In the current period, nearly all beneficiaries were reimbursed within adequate time and the 90-days limit. Furthermore, it can be observed how the procedure became faster, averaging to 25 days in period 4. This could also be due to the decision not to require hard copies from beneficiaries.

Table 4-1 Speed of reimbursement to beneficiaries in the current CE programme

	Interreg CE 2014-2020			
	Period 1	**Period 2**	**Period 3**	**Period 4**
Average no. of days	40	38	37	**25**
Minimum no. of days	9	20	8	10
Maximum no. of days	90	71	111	41

Source: monitoring data from Interreg CE 2014-2020, own elaboration

A comparison to monitoring data from the previous programming period shows that the speed of reimbursement to beneficiaries has significantly increased between and within programmes. In 2007-2013, the average number of days from payment request to transfer accounted for 58.4 days. In one exceptional case, a project LP was reimbursed after 186 days (in period 2).

Table 4-2 Speed of reimbursement to beneficiaries in the 2007-2013 CE programme

	Interreg CE 2007-2013					
	Period 1	**Period 2**	**Period 3**	**Period 4**	**Period 5**	**Total**
Average no. of days	62	60	57	59	54	**58.4**
Minimum no. of days	6	5	10	18	10	-
Maximum no. of days	140	**186**	134	133	138	-

Source: monitoring data from Interreg CE 2007-2013, own elaboration

Survey respondents with experience in the previous programming period often refer to the quick reimbursement of costs and shorter waiting times to receive feedback on reports in 2014-2020, compared to the previous period, when the MA/JS was perceived as spending long time on the analysis of project outputs (including minor ones).

The Interreg CE reimbursement process, compared to other transnational programmes, is perceived as faster by 42% of the consulted beneficiaries, while 36% are indifferent and 11% have no opinion (Survey on simplification, 2018, n=64). Only 11% do not agree that the Interreg CE reimbursement is faster.

The exclusive focus on the analysis of main project outputs by the MA/JS and the shift of the analysis of minor checks to national controllers was successful in speeding up reimbursement.

One reason for the efficiency gains was that lead and project partners no longer have to provide hard copies of financial documents and reports. Another reason for the faster reimbursement of expenses is the more efficient internal procedures due to the merging of the MA and CA, which were two completely separate programme authorities in the past programming period. According to interviews, the merging of MA and CA significantly improved the efficiency of the reimbursement of claims.

4.4.1.3 Adequateness of the payment system to reduce risk of financial errors and de-commitment

The programme set-up is likely to reduce the risk of financial errors and de-commitment, thanks to clear procedures allowing early detection of errors already at project level through LP control and thorough verification at every step (from LP to CA), but also to the introduction of simplification measures (eMS, harmonisation of budget lines).

The reduction of financial and de-commitment risks can be pursued through the early detection (and correction) of errors at project level. Therefore, the functioning of mechanisms put in place at national level through independent national controllers has been analysed.

The DMCS (p. 28) affirms that "*A pre-condition for including any expenditure of a project partner in a progress report is that it has to be verified by an independent controller selected in accordance with the national control system set up by each MS*."

There are two types of national control systems in the Interreg CE Programme: a) centralised systems, in which the MS appoints one body to perform the verification of expenditure of all beneficiaries in its territory; and b) decentralised systems, in which beneficiaries appoint their individual controllers either through procurement or by being assigned a controller from a pre-defined list of controllers, according to procedures at national level.

Controls performed on the expenditure submitted by beneficiaries can either be free of charge[32] or charged to the beneficiary (in the latter case, costs of control are also eligible as project expenditure and can be reimbursed).

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[32] In this case, the costs for controls are covered by the Member State.

The table below provides an overview of the national control systems in the MS participating in the programme.

Table 4-3 Overview of national control systems in Interreg CE countries

Member State	Type of national control	Costs of control
Austria	Decentralised	Charged to beneficiaries
Croatia	Centralised	Charged to beneficiaries
Czech Republic	Centralised	Free of charge for beneficiaries
Germany	Decentralised	Charged to beneficiaries
Hungary	Centralised	Free of charge for beneficiaries
Italy	Decentralised	Charged to beneficiaries
Poland	Centralised	Free of charge for beneficiaries
Slovakia	Centralised	Free of charge for beneficiaries
Slovenia	Centralised	Free of charge for beneficiaries

Source: Implementation Manual

The Implementation Manual (section A4) provides all the information and tools necessary to national controllers for the verification and certification of expenditure at national level.

In general, there are no significant issues reported by national controllers, the CA and AA concerning the Interreg CE payment system, with the only Member States reporting a risk of delays and general inefficiency being Hungary and Slovakia, due to controller's human resources bottlenecks. Furthermore, the support provided by the JS to national controllers is considered very satisfactory, with frequent interactions and quick feedbacks.

Following the interviews with the nine national control bodies, it can be concluded that the perception of the programme set-up is mostly positive:

- Overall, the programme rules are considered clear and allowing for an efficient and effective control.
- The Implementation Manual is perceived as a very complete and accurate document to correctly implement verifications. In general, national controllers consider it as the most advanced compared to all other Interreg programmes (e.g. Danube).
- Doubts or misinterpretations on financial rules by beneficiaries or national controllers occur, but the JS is usually contacted and provides prompt support. Few countries (e.g. Slovenia) believe the manual should include more concrete examples to prevent misinterpretation.
- Some countries (e.g. Slovakia and Poland) consider the CE rules related to expenditure too strict compared to other programmes.
- Controllers very often complain that different rules on the eligibility of expenditure among Interreg programmes lead to confusion and to an increased risk of reporting/financial errors.

This issue, however, cannot be attributed to Interreg CE but is rather a by-product of the overall Interreg system and negotiations between Member States.

Concerning the introduction of the electronic Monitoring System (eMS), the interviews with the nine national control bodies, the CA and the AA reveal this is considered as a significant step towards more efficient and harmonised financial reporting, and a considerable improvement to the reporting tool used in the previous programming period.

In terms of the impact of SCOs on the reduction of financial errors, the CA reported a potential increase in the risk of errors due to possible misinterpretations of SCO methodologies or procedures.

Taking into account the perception of beneficiaries who took part in the programme management survey in early 2018, an overall satisfaction with the procedures of verifying and validating project expenditures by national controllers can be reported (see Figure 4-1). Beneficiaries not satisfied with the general procedures mainly referred to problems with the decentralised control systems. The fact that certain national controllers are decentralised in the CE programme is reported to cause very heterogeneous interpretation of rules and procedures when it comes to the certifying process. This leads to confusion among partners in the programme area, especially for those who work with different national control bodies. Inconsistencies of reporting between different national controllers and the slow issuing of certifications have been cited. Furthermore, the fact that the process of expense certification is sometimes still based on paper copies and a register of receipts created a sense of double-reporting among beneficiaries. Respondents suggested to introduce further harmonisation of controlling rules and to refine the deadlines for national controls.

The satisfaction with the time required by National controllers for verification and validation is nearly as high as with general procedures (see Figure 4-1). Respondents not satisfied stated that sometimes national controllers took up to three months for certifying. What became apparent in the case study interviews was that the Austrian, Slovenian and Croatian national controllers are perceived as relatively slow in the certification of costs, causing some delays for the project partners[33]. It seems that delays in verification and validation cannot be attributed to the type of control system. Most beneficiaries noted that their FLCs are helpful and provide useful and detailed information and support in the certification phase.

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[33] It has to be taken into account that duration of controls and certifying processes is different for each project as it depends also on the size and dimension of the project and the invoices to be checked, the types of expenditure, the ready availability of all relevant documents at project side, etc. In addition, control procedures vary between partners and countries, so comparability is limited.

Figure 4-1 Beneficiaries' perception of general procedures and time required by national controllers for the verification and validation of project expenditures
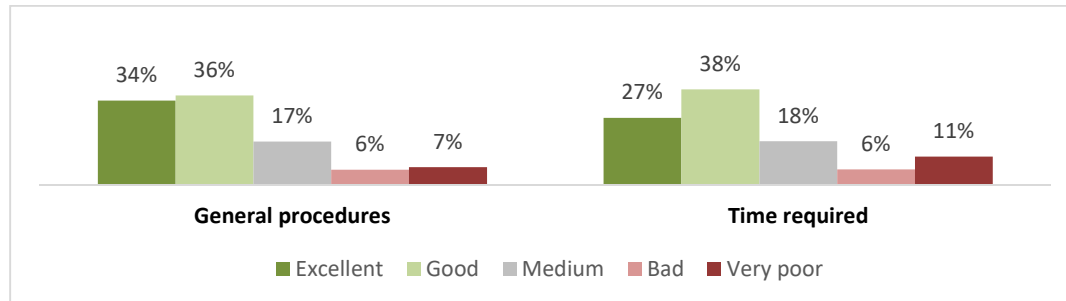
Source: Interreg CE Survey on programme management (2018)

4.4.1.4 Effectiveness of the eMS in documenting and handling relevant data

The eMS is positively evaluated in terms of allowing a **complete documentation of relevant data** (with special regard to progress reports and payment claims). The system has been set up so as to thoroughly store data at all stages of the project lifecycle, from application to closure, including payment claims. Thus, the eMS ensures a complete audit trail and archiving system.

The eMS allows to record and store data for each operation in order to allow it to be aggregated where this is necessary for the purposes of monitoring, evaluation, financial management, verification and audit. The DMCS (p. 18) includes the "*procedures for a system to collect, record and store in computerised form data on each operation necessary for monitoring, evaluation, financial management, verification and audit, including, where applicable, data on individual participants and a breakdown of data on indicators by gender when required*", which describes the eMS workflow, i.e. a set of steps, rules and tasks for all programme bodies in order to electronically fill in and store relevant data (e.g. application, subsidy contract, partner and project reporting, national control, JS/CA/MA verification, payment data etc.).

The value of the eMS for beneficiaries and other stakeholders can be linked to a more effective reporting (see chapter 4.4.2.1), while its role in simplification has been further analysed under chapter 4.4.3.5.

4.4.1.5 Monitoring and control of the quality of project outputs

The programme has effectively set up quality controls at project and programme level to ensure the monitoring of project output quality and their progress towards the set targets. According to Section 5 of the Cooperation Programme and the Implementation Manual, monitoring mostly relies on the assessment of indicators and project outputs monitored in progress and final reports. In line with the result-orientation characterising programmes in the 2014-2020 period, the programme authorities chose to focus on a limited number of common and programme-specific output indicators, as well as five thematic result and four communication result indicators, from which partners can choose during project applications.

The **programme-specific project outputs** are grouped into four main typologies: "Strategies and action plans", "Tools", "Pilot actions" and "Trainings". These typologies are common to all SOs[34], ensuring coherence of approach at project level and a more efficient measurement of outputs at programme level. To ensure that applicants understand these typologies, clear indicator definitions, explanations and examples are included in the Application Manual (Annex III). **Specific output indicators** can be assessed as fully adequate to measure project progress, outputs and direct results.

However, the use of the **common output indicators**, in particular CO 26, 41 and 42[35], has shown that measuring progress on these indicators is not homogeneous among Interreg Programmes, which results from a lack of a common and unambiguous definition of these indicators. For the purpose of those indicators, the CE programme so far has only counted institutions that are project partners. Many other transnational programmes (all for which corresponding data could be identified in the Cohesion Policy open data base) apparently count all institutions addressed by the outreach activities of projects. As it is the aim of the Common Indicators to assure comparison and aggregation of data among Interreg programmes, the evaluator team recommended during the evaluation to up-date target values and to re-count the achievements for these Common output indicators. This recommendation, inter alia, led to an amendment of the common output indicator targets in the new CP version 3, adopted by the European Commission in April 2019.

As concerns the monitoring of output quality, the Implementation Manual foresees an **internal project quality control** to be performed at project level. In this framework, a quality check is performed by each LP on partner inputs (activity and financial report) to verify if deliverables and outputs comply with content and quality requirements as set in the application form. Furthermore, the project steering committee (each project's decision-making body) is involved in validating the quality of main project outputs and the progress towards achieving the set objectives.

Apart from project outputs, **additional thematic result indicators** have been introduced in an effort to aggregate at programme level a number of common results achieved at project level. Already in the application phase, each project had to select relevant thematic result indicators (from a list of five indicators). Information on the progress of each thematic result indicator should be reported in progress reports[36].

What has emerged from the interviews to lead partners in the framework of the eight case studies is the difficulty for projects to report on these results, in particular in the early phases of implementation, as the horizon of these indicators is rather long-term.

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[34] The only exception is SO 1.1, where there is an additional output type called "innovation networks".
[35] CO26: Number of enterprises cooperating with research institutions (priority 1), CO41: Number of enterprises participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (priorities 1-4), CO42: Number of research institutions participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (priorities 1-4)
[36] The evaluation of the situation of the additional thematic indicators is presented in section 5.1.4.1 and in Annex 5 of this report.

In general, the use of additional thematic result indicators helps to monitor programme results. Experience with the "official" result indicators in the funding period 2014-2020 has shown that most ETC programmes suffer to demonstrate relevant contribution to change on large-scale and long-term impact indicators. Therefore, the use of specific, medium-term result indicators in Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE has increased the adequateness of the monitoring system to periodically measure programme results during implementation.

The programme has defined also a set of **programme specific result indicators[37],** covering the entire CE programme area for which the progress is monitored against a baseline as established in 2014. The first up-date of the programme specific result indicators was implemented through a monitoring process coordinated by the JS, which started in December 2018 and finished in March 2019. This update can only be seen as a trend indication[38]. As no projects are closed, tangible contributions to change on selected result indicators within the programme's intervention logic are rather limited. This contribution or larger impact can only be expected after final project results have been produced and could be disseminated, i.e. most likely after 2021. However, the monitoring process to produce an update requires a specific approach and relevant resources. In general, the monitoring process has to follow strictly the methodology as defined in the CP in order to be useful. Given the relatively low dynamics of the expected change at territorial level, monitoring programme specific result indicators in dense time intervals can be deemed as highly inefficient. Therefore, it is recommended to postpone or skip the next monitoring of progress as scheduled for 2020, as it will bring hardly new insights. It is seen as sufficient to anticipate the verification of the final achievements (2023) in order to feed still into the impact evaluation to be conducted in 2020/2021.

4.4.2 Programme support to beneficiaries

In the evaluation of the programme support to beneficiaries the following aspects have been evaluated:

- programme support to beneficiaries on reporting;
- programme support to beneficiaries on communication, target group involvement and mainstreaming of project outputs and results.

4.4.2.1   Programme support to beneficiaries on reporting

The feedback from beneficiaries as well as the analysis of programme documents allows to positively evaluate the support provided by the programme (see Annex 2 for details).

Reporting is widely linked to the eMS, which is also positively evaluated by beneficiaries. The assessment of the eMS is presented with more detail under chapter 4.4.3.5.

At project level, the Implementation Manual represents the cornerstone of guidance on project management throughout its lifecycle, intending to provide lead partners and project partners (but also national controllers) with information and guidance needed for a sound and timely implementation of

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[37] Defined in Annex 8 of the CP.
[38] The evaluation of the up-dated monitoring is presented in section 5.1.4.1 and in Annex 6 of this report.

projects. In terms of progress reporting, the Manual dedicates an entire section on "*How to report progress*", both at partner and lead partner level, describing in detail what kind of information has to be included in each section (e.g. activities, outputs, target groups reached etc.) and the way it should be reported.

According to the CP, the programme authorities planned comprehensive support to beneficiaries during project implementation, by organising ad-hoc trainings and webinars for reporting, control and audit. Extensive guidance documents have been elaborated, e.g. Annex 18 of the Cooperation Programme lists the functions of the JS to be carried out during project implementation.

In the framework of the survey on programme management conducted in 2018, beneficiaries rated the support offered by the JS during project implementation. The highest levels of satisfaction ("excellent" and "good" answers) were achieved with regard to personal contacts (over 92%), information support and communication in general (88%) and guidance documents (84%).

According to positive qualitative feedback from beneficiaries, the JS has been kind, helpful, fast and flexible in supporting projects during the implementation phase. The staff gave detailed and fast answers and prepared informative guideline documents and web material (factsheets, Application and Implementation Manuals, toolboxes, etc.) of high quality providing a good basis for all activities. Moreover, the organised national workshops and trainings for LPs, seminars, info meetings and individual consultations (through email and phone contact) were highly appreciated. On rare occasions, the JS support was viewed as unsupportive in solving day-to-day problems, inflexible and excessively formal to some project partners[39].

Project Implementation Trainings (PIT) were appreciated by the majority (93.3%) of the participants. The second PIT organised for beneficiaries of the second call was rated even higher, with 96.6% of the participants labelling it "excellent" or "good".

Another important programme body in programme implementation are the National Contact Points (NCPs). According to the beneficiary survey on programme management (January 2018), almost 80% of all respondents rated the general information, support and communication provided by the NCPs as "excellent" or "good". Beneficiaries stated they have been overall very helpful and supportive and provided ad-hoc and assistance in a professional manner. Personal contact and national training events were the most appreciated support measures as both were rated as "excellent" or "good" by more than 80% of respondents.

Finally, national controllers also play an important role during project implementation and provide great support to PPs and LPs. According to the beneficiary survey on programme management, especially

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[39] For more detailed information, see Annex 2 of the Evaluation Report.

the personal contact was highly appreciated (77% of "excellent" or "good" responses) as well as the general information, support and communication.

A comparison with other transnational programmes showed that almost 66% of the respondents with experience[40] rated the CE programme as more effective in terms of support provided by the programme bodies during implementation.

4.4.2.2 Programme support to beneficiaries (communication, target group involvement and mainstreaming of project outputs and results)

Project partners receive instructions and extensive information on communication management and branding through the Implementation Manual. The project communication toolbox, available to beneficiaries, includes further guiding documents and templates, for example on how to design a project communication strategy. Other guidance documents included in the toolbox are the User Manual for project websites or the Project Brand Manual.

In general, support in terms of communication was rated as highly positive, and even as the most useful service provided by the JS, according to the survey on programme management in 2018. Almost 80% of respondents regarded the communication tools (templates) during project implementation and capitalisation as "excellent" or "good". Activities such as the trainings in communication for LPs and project management teams were also positively valued by beneficiaries.

4.4.3 Efforts made to reduce the administrative burden for applicants and beneficiaries

In the evaluation of the simplification efforts the following aspects were analysed:

- Measures to reduce administrative burden for applicants and beneficiaries
  - Simplification of the application procedures
  - Simplification in progress reporting
  - Introduction of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs)
  - Introduction of the eMS and harmonised implementation tools
- Reduction of ineligible applications

4.4.3.1 Measures to reduce administrative burden

According to a recent study on the administrative costs and burden in ESIF[41], ETC has higher administrative costs and burden compared to mainstream ESI funds which can be partly explained by the small financial volumes and the multi-national structures of ETC programmes. Interreg beneficiaries point at gathering information on the progress and results of the project as the most burdensome task. This is followed by keeping records and preparing payment claims. The analysis of the cooperation programme highlighted the efforts made by the Interreg CE programme to reduce the administrative

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[40] Respondents that had experience with other Interreg programme were 38% of all respondents (n=167).
[41] European Commission (2018), *New assessment of administrative costs and burdens in the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds.*

burden for applicants, beneficiaries and programme bodies. Several actions have been implemented based on lessons learnt from the previous programming periods and the new simplification provisions introduced in the 2014-2020 programming period.

The introduction of simplification measures in the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has noticeably reduced the administrative burden in the application phase, including a decrease in the number of ineligible applications, and in reporting through the introduction of eMS and HIT and SCOs, although the latter have not been widely used. One likely reason might be the 20% threshold for the flat-rate reimbursement of staff costs (Art.19 of the ETC regulation).

4.4.3.2   Simplification of the application procedures

In the 2014-2020 programming period, significant efforts have been made to harmonise and simplify project application forms across ETC programmes. This has been facilitated by the harmonised implementation tools developed by Interact with the involvement of a wide range of Interreg programmes aiming to provide programmes with harmonised templates and thus reduce administrative burden and the risk of errors.

The electronic submission of harmonised application forms based on harmonised templates aimed to increase the efficiency of the application process, which used to absorb large amounts of time and programme resources for both applicants and programme bodies, as well as to decrease the number of ineligible applications. Automatic checks of application forms within eMS help users with filling in data fields and avoid mistakes in terms of consistency of financial information and coherence among partner information.

The introduction of the eMS has led to **63% of beneficiaries** rating the online application process as very effective or effective, based on the programme's survey to beneficiaries conducted in 2018. This survey has also confirmed that application processes have become simpler. About two third of beneficiaries able to compare the programming periods 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 confirmed this. Considering also the perception of applicants, the answers were similarly positive. The analysis of the CE applicant survey conducted in April 2018 showed that **64% of applicants** rated the usability of the electronic submission tool in eMS as excellent or good. Based on the qualitative feedback from project applicants, further simplifications are, however, still desired as applications are at times still perceived as "too demanding in terms of administrative burden". Suggestions include the improvement of the structure of call documents, the simplification of the budget and work packages and partner information sections. In case of errors, applicants wish to receive better support in tracing them.

4.4.3.3   Simplification in progress reporting

A major simplification in reporting, compared to the previous CE 2007-2013 Programme, was initiated by the introduction of **progress report templates** in eMS. Similar to the application forms, the templates help users fill in data fields and harmonise their content in both the activities and financial section, creating consistency among reporting periods and coherence among project reports. Moreover, the introduction of "light progress reports" to be submitted in the second and fourth reporting period limited the administrative burden on project LPs. Light progress reports are less detailed versions of progress

reports to be submitted by LPs to programme authorities every six months. As opposed to full progress reports, they demand less detailed information on project activities, deliverables, outputs and indicators. Furthermore, they neither need to include reporting on communication objectives nor a quantification of target group outreach. According to the programme survey on simplification conducted in 2018, the introduction of these two measures was rated as very positive. 75% of respondents viewed the use of project report templates as "very effective" or "effective" simplification measures, while the introduction of light reports was rated even higher (79%). The two measures indeed seem to have caused a decrease of administrative burden for beneficiaries.

Further simplifications concern **financial reporting**. According to the Cooperation Programme, one of the main causes for excessive administrative burden in project implementation during the last programming period was the lack of harmonised budget line definitions among ETC programmes. These inconsistencies led to the introduction of common pre-defined budget lines for staff, travel and accommodation, and external expertise and service costs as well as equipment and office/administrative expenditures. Furthermore, the ETC Regulation also introduced harmonised budget lines for "infrastructure and works" and a new hierarchy for eligibility rules specifying what is to be determined at EU and national level[42]. This new regulatory framework is at the basis of the specific budget line provisions defined in section C.2 of the current Implementation Manual. The section provides a definition, guideline of specific provisions of eligibility as well as reimbursement forms and specifications on reporting and audit trail, including useful examples for each of the six aforementioned budget lines which should lead to simplifications in the projects' financial reporting and the reduction of errors.

The focus group with national controllers organised in April 2018 confirmed that the reduction of administrative burden both for controllers and beneficiaries can be attributed to the simplification of financial reporting (e.g. reduced control time, fewer errors).

Compared to the previous programming period, beneficiaries highlighted the effectiveness of **simplification of the financial reporting procedure**, with 36% of beneficiaries with experience in the previous programming period finding this process has become easier. 40% found the procedures more or less at the same level as in 2007-2013.

In addition, more than 50% of beneficiaries with previous experience claimed that the process of **preparing project documents** (subsidy contract, partnership agreement, etc.) has been simplified. When asked whether reporting of the project progress has been simplified thanks to the harmonisation of application and reporting forms with other Interreg programmes, over half of them agree completely or partially.

The results of the beneficiary and simplification surveys suggest there have been simplifications whose benefits were, however, reduced by the double reporting to be made towards the JS through eMS and towards national controllers. The **first-level reporting** is considered more complex because national controllers show differences in terms of control processes and implementation rules. According to the

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[42] see Art. 18 of ETC Regulation 1299/2013 and Commission Delegated Regulation No. 481/2014.

qualitative feedback from beneficiaries, even though the light progress reports have slightly reduced the workload, the administrative burden, especially for LPs, is still considered high. Analysing answers from the beneficiaries' survey, some complain that more time is used on the preparation and compilation of project reports than on the project itself.

4.4.3.4 Introduction of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs)

As specified in Section 7 of the Cooperation Programme, simplified cost options (SCOs) were planned to be used to "a maximum possible extent" in the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme.

The positive uptake of the SCO by the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme was even mentioned in a recent European Commission study on the new simplification provisions of the 2014-2020 programming period: *"[…] For the Central Europe programme, the definition of the SCO system included strong interaction with key stakeholders. In particular: two workshops with first level controllers (FLC), which allowed a common set of rules to be applied and which also offered: (i) the programme the possibility to learn from the ground (FLC) specific issues/problems to be considered when defining the SCO; (ii) the FLC an introduction to a new certification approach. Beneficiaries were involved in specific training sessions and a YouTube channel with a tutorial for applicants was set up (see Interreg Central Europe YouTube channel)."* [43]

However, still not all projects are fully aware of SCOs. Only 19% of respondents of the programme survey to beneficiaries on simplification declare to apply SCOs[44]. Those who declare using SCOs barely encountered difficulties when applying them. Beneficiaries in the Czech Republic (31% of respondents per country) and Croatia (29%) are the most active in using SCOs, but also the usage in Slovakia (25%), Austria (22%), Germany (21%) and Slovenia (19.2%) is higher than the average. Beneficiaries in Hungary (17%), Poland and Italy (each 14%) show a usage below the average.

Beneficiaries find the use of SCO difficult, for example, because of the following reasons:

- The 20% threshold for flat rate reimbursements of staff costs (art.19 ETC regulation 1299/2013) is considered too low for ETC projects which mostly involve soft investments (i.e. staff costs represent more than 20% of the cost of operations). This aspect is corroborated by the EC study on the use of SCOs in ESI funds, which states that for "*ETC several programmes underline that the percentage proposed in Art.19 ETC Reg. is not adequate for the types of projects to be funded*" (p.48).
- Interviews for case studies show that not all project partners in a given project have the same level of knowledge on SCO. The use of SCO seems to be confusing to some of them or to the partnership as a whole. This might create an environment of uncertainty.

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[43] European Commission (2017), *Use of new provisions on simplification during the early implementation phase of ESIF,* p.258.

[44] However, all projects that declare preparation costs are automatically using a SCO, as preparation cost is only reimbursed as lump sum (SCO). Also all beneficiaries are obliged to use the flat rate (SCO) to declare 'administrative costs' (budget line 2). It seems that sometimes beneficiaries are not aware of what a SCO is and can be.

The use of SCOs was also discussed in a focus group with national controllers. For national controllers, the positive effects concerning flat rates for administrative costs relate to time savings for administration and control and a reduced number of errors. The introduction of SCOs led to initial problems, such as differences between the requirements for account keeping between controllers and beneficiaries and perceived problems in detecting double financing of beneficiaries participating in several projects. At the moment, too many different staff cost calculation methods are existing (even in one project) which has led to some confusion among beneficiaries and controllers, something even further enhanced through more variation among Member States and different ETC programmes.

Despite the difficult adaptation phase, the use of SCOs for staff costs has also had positive effects. Fewer documents need to be submitted/assessed by beneficiaries/controllers. Most national controllers agree that the introduction of SCOs has contributed to a reduction of errors and administrative burden in general. National controllers have reported that some beneficiaries partly struggled with miscalculations of staff costs due to unavailability of certain data (i.e. annual gross salary).

Despite the initial problems, the abovementioned almost 20% of beneficiaries who used SCOs, have given a highly positive feedback. All but one respondent rated SCOs as useful and claimed it is better to apply SCOs than real costs. The feedback shows that this simplification measure resonates extremely positively among those who actually included it into their project. It could be used as an incentive for the remaining 80% of beneficiaries who still base their calculations on real costs, to perhaps give it a try.

4.4.3.5   Introduction of the eMS and Harmonised Implementation Tools

Most simplifications in terms of implementation relate to the introduction of the eMS. Its introduction has led to a decrease of administrative burden for beneficiaries as it is able to generate pre-filled documents based on programme templates and the information provided by users (e.g. control documents, joint (light) progress reports, partner reports). In addition to the templates, the Implementation Manual gives a detailed explanation on filling in both the activity and financial parts of partner and progress reports in eMS through factsheets of the implementation toolbox (see above). Moreover, automatically triggered messages remind beneficiaries of reporting deadlines and notify them of submitted forms, contracting or national controller assignments/removals. Through the eMS, submitted documents stay electronically stored and available to their owners (and programme authorities) for later consultation and use.

As concerns support in reporting and the **use of the eMS**, respondents on the survey on simplification gave a generally positive feedback on the usefulness and efficiency of progress reporting through eMS. Almost three quarters (73%) of beneficiaries regarded the electronic reporting process as a (very) effective tool. According to qualitative feedback from both surveys, a limited number of beneficiaries considers the guidance and support documents on reporting not clear enough, despite considerable individual support from the JS. In particular, the formal reporting requirements slightly differ depending on the type of report (i.e. partner report, light report, project progress report) and recipient (lead partners, JS, national controllers). Some participants of the survey on programme management conducted in January 2018 brought up initial flaws within the eMS like the lack user-friendliness, design deficiencies and the complicated user interface.

Interviews with national controllers revealed that the eMS is considered as a significant improvement compared to the reporting tools (mostly Excel) used in the 2007-2013 programming period, especially because financial errors could be considerably reduced. National controllers agree that the eMS has led to a simplification for both programme bodies and beneficiaries. The FLC focus group participants, however, also mentioned some points to improve in the eMS such as the lack of storage capacities and user-friendliness, insufficient warnings/alerts and other IT-complexities. Moreover, national controllers mentioned that the system does not yet offer all relevant documents and the possibility to monitor national contributions/co-financing. The most relevant suggestion is to include a "warning" system where both beneficiaries and national controllers are alerted in case they insert invalid data in the expenditure section or forget to insert all necessary information before submitting the report. At the moment, data cannot be changed after submission. The introduction of such a feature would reduce delays and financial errors even more.

Interviews with lead partners, conducted in the framework of case study analyses, convey a similar message:

- overall, simplification measures (eMS, HIT tools and SCOs) led to considerable improvements in terms of efficiency and time-savings within the partnerships and improvements compared to previous programming periods;
- eMS was complex to use at first but was later considered user-friendly and overall leading to a more efficient management;
- the current reporting system is seen as a big step forward compared to the reporting done in Excel in the 2007-2013 period;
- some confusion in working with eMS was mentioned as it differs from IT systems used in some other Interreg programmes, even if eMS is used currently by 35 Interreg programmes.

4.4.3.6 Reduction of ineligible applications

The number of ineligible applications is generally considered as an indicator for the success of introduced simplifications, e.g. eligibility criteria and requirements, among other factors[45].

In the 2007-2013 programming period, the average share of eligible (meeting all formal and administrative requirements) applications to the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme was 79.3%.

An analysis of the data of the current programming period shows that the number of ineligible applications has generally decreased. The shares of eligible applications in all three calls exceeded 90%.

This can be considered a proxy for showing the effect of simplifications.

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[45] Factors that probably contributed to an improved eligibility rate are: improved capacities of project applicants, streamlined eligibility criteria, a streamlined application process (eliminating conditions that formerly led to ineligible applications), the use of eMS with internal warnings of incomplete sections, etc.

Table 4-4 Application eligibility rate in 2007-2013 (average) and 2014-2020 (Calls 1-3)

	All (or Step 1) applications	% of eligible applications (step 1)	Step 2 applications	% of eligible applications (step 2)
Average all Calls CE 2007-2013*	551	79.3%		
CE 2014-2020: Call 1	620	98.5%	90	98%
CE 2014-2020: Call 2	209	91.4%		
CE 2014-2020: Call 3	191	94.7%		

*It should be noted that eligibility criteria were different in 2007-2013 compared to 2014-2020.

Source: Data from the JS. January 2019.

4.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The main conclusions and recommendations on the organisation of the project cycle and support are the following:

- The **set-up of** the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE **reporting and monitoring processes** is evaluated as effectively contributing to the verification of project progress. This is due to the presence of a clear division of tasks and to procedures put in place through the programme's DMCS, Internal Manual and Implementation manual.
- The **timing for the reimbursement of claims** is adequate and respects the deadline of 90 days. The reimbursement process has improved and sped up compared to the previous programming period. The merging of MA and CA, in addition to the simplification that lead and project partners no longer have to provide hard copies of financial documents, are viewed by the JS as playing a role in the increased efficiency of reimbursement of payment claims.
- The **programme set-up is likely to reduce the risk of financial errors and de-commitment**, thanks to clear procedures allowing early detection of errors already at project level through LP control and thorough verification at every step (from LP to CA), but also to the introduction of simplification measures (eMS, harmonisation of budget lines). An aspect considered as potentially increasing the risk of errors is the lack of harmonisation of financial control, in particular first level control, among ETC programmes.
- The share of eligible applications is generally over 90% in 2014-2020, thus higher than the 2007-2013 average share (79.3%).
- Some difficulties in the efficiency and interaction with national controllers in certain participating Member States have been reported.
  - In view of the next programming period, further harmonisation efforts at EU/ETC level should be encouraged to ensure a consistent approach towards financial reporting among programmes.
  - The perceived lack of harmonisation between national controllers in MSs with a decentralised control system should be further analysed.
- The electronic monitoring system is positively evaluated in terms of allowing a **complete documentation of relevant data** (with special regard to progress reports and payment claims).

The system has been set up so as to thoroughly store data at all stages of the project lifecycle, from application to closure, including payment claims.

- The **programme has effectively set up quality controls at project and programme level** to ensure the **monitoring of project output quality** and their progress towards the set targets. The effort of the programme to group programme-specific indicators in typologies (Strategies, tools, pilot actions and trainings) common to all SOs allows for a more effective measurement of outputs at programme level.

- The feedback from beneficiaries as well as the analysis of programme documents allows to positively evaluating the **support provided by the programme** on reporting and using the eMS and on communication, target group involvement and mainstreaming of project outputs and results.

- The **introduction of simplification measures has noticeably reduced the administrative burden** for applicants and beneficiaries in the application phase, including a decrease in the number of ineligible applications, and in reporting through the introduction of eMS and HIT and SCOs, although SCOs have not been widely used. One likely reason might be the 20% threshold for the flat-rate reimbursement of staff costs (Art.19 of the ETC regulation).

    - The low uptake of SCOs by Interreg CE beneficiaries compared to the ETC average deserves attention and a more in-depth investigation on the causes.

    - The methodologies to calculate staff costs still require further simplification (e.g. reduce number of calculation methods and apply the same methods for staff cost calculation in all ETC programmes.

5 Operational evaluation of the progress of programme implementation for achieving the programme objectives

5.1 Evaluation of the progress in programme implementation

5.1.1 Introduction

This section looks into the progress in the programme implementation and achievements of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme. Further to this, it focuses on synergies of the programme with other Interreg programmes, with mainstream programmes, as well as with other EU instruments and policies.

5.1.2 Methods used

Desk research and analysis of monitoring data have been the main analytical methods used for this part of the evaluation. Basic documents reviewed include, inter alia, the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Cooperation Programme and the Annual Implementation Reports. Data analysis included monitoring data, financial implementation data and the up-dated situation of the programme's result indicators. Reviews of case study projects and interviews with programme authorities have helped to identify and assess the generation and use of synergies.

5.1.3 Evaluation question/s

The analysis was based on the following evaluation questions:

- How is the programme progressing towards the overall programme goal, specific objectives and expected results? Is the programme on track regarding programme implementation, in financial terms, in terms of achievements of milestones, in terms of programme objectives and results?
- How effective is the programme in coordinating and creating synergies with other European funding and support programmes, and with ESIF-co-funded national and regional programmes?

5.1.4 Main findings

5.1.4.1 Overall progress in programme implementation

Until March 2019, 129 operations have been selected to receive support from the programme. Of that, there are 85 advanced projects (calls 1 and 2) and 44 projects in an initial phase (call 3).

Priority Axes 1 (innovation) and 3 (culture and environment) are the most successful in attracting projects so far with a share of approx. 35% each. PA 2 (low carbon) has 18% of the projects, whereas PA 4 (transport) attracted 12%. This distribution of projects is in line with the anticipated division of the budget between priority axes outlined in the Cooperation Programme (see Table 5-1), which puts a focus on PA 1 and 3. Figure 5-1 shows the number of selected operations per Specific Objective (SO). SOs 1.1 and 3.2 are the objectives with most projects.

Figure 5-1 Number of selected operations per Specific Objective

Source: Data from JS. January 2019.

After three calls for proposals, the programme allocated 101.5% of the available funds to 129 projects. At the same time, 21.6 % of the programme funds have already been certified to the European Commission.

With regard to the financial allocation, the progress of the programme is shown in the table below. With an allocation rate of more than 100% by March 2019 the programme shows a very advanced progress. The level of allocation is the highest for Priority Axis 1, where even project savings are taken into consideration to be re-distributed to projects.

Table 5-1 Financial allocation rate per PA

PA	Allocation rate
1	105.7%
2	99.4%
3	99.6%
4	98.9%

Source: Data from JS. January 2019. Refers to planned ERDF support in Version 2 of the CP.

The data confirms that the programme is well advanced in financial terms, especially when taking into account that a fourth call has been opened beginning of March 2019.

Progress on output indicators

The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE programme is well on track with its programme implementation regarding output indicators. The majority of the SOs shows achievements of almost 30% of the targets

set in the Cooperation Programme[46], even if only 27% of all projects are advanced (call 1 projects) while the rest is still in an intermediate point of implementation (call 2 projects) or even in an initial phase (call 3 projects).

For the analysis of the achievements of the outputs against targets of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme, two aspects have been considered. First, the level of expected outputs of projects (calls 1-3 selected operations), as foreseen by the beneficiaries in the applications[47] ('expected outputs') and second, the progress based on actual achievements of projects in place[48].

Calculated values give the percentages in relation to the targets set in the Cooperation Programme (Version 3). For this, it has to be taken into account that projects are still on-going and, by definition, projects produce most outputs only in the final stages of project life.

Figure 5-2 Progress on implementation per PA
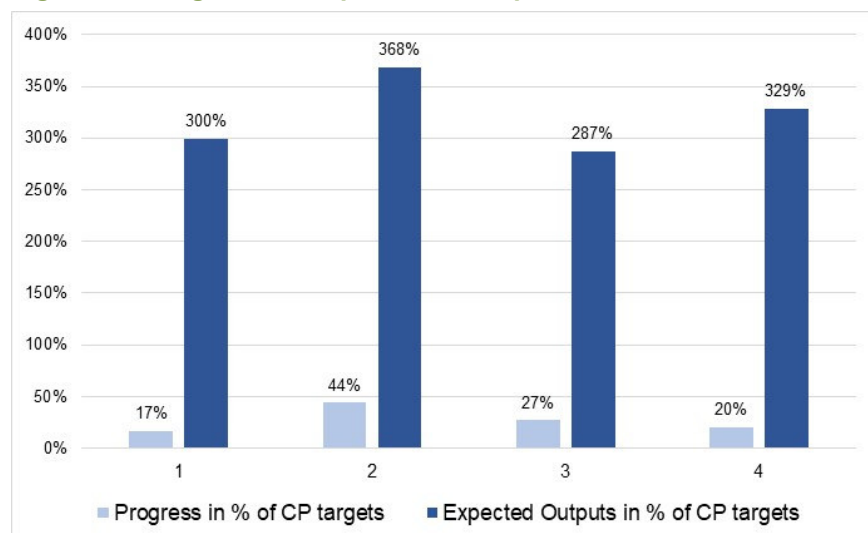
Source: Data from JS. January 2019.

The **average level of progress of actual achievements is 27%** until end of 2018. PA 2 shows a higher progress at this intermediate point in time, followed by PA 4, PA 4 and PA 3.

The **average level of expected outputs by selected operations is 321%** with regard to initial targets set by the programme in the CP (Version 3). This shows that forecasts by projects exceed the CP targets. The high level is due to an overall higher number of projects than expected, but also to a higher number of expected outputs per project. Even if the quality of outputs is not part of this quantitative

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[46] According to the Version 3 of the Cooperation Programme, adopted in April 2019.
[47] Output targets as defined by projects from Call 1, 2 and 3 in their Application Forms.
[48] Considering reported outputs by projects from Call 1 and 2 until December 2018.

analysis, this indicates an effective and well-performing project implementation. High effectiveness most likely was combined with a cautious planning of expected output targets during the programming phase.

Figure 5-3 shows the average progress per Specific Objective of the programme. Expected outputs as formulated in application forms are higher than 100% of the targets defined in the CP for all SOs, ranging from 287% for SO 3.3 to 400% for SO 2.1. This indicates a very good performance of the programme as a whole.

Effectiveness of output achievements ranges from 6% to 48%. The SO with the highest progress towards CP targets is SO 2.1, followed by SO 2.3, SO 3.3 and SO 4.1. SOs 1.2 and 3.1 show a considerably lower level of achieved outputs and SO 4.2 the lowest level with only 6%. This is likely because within call 1 less projects were approved in PA 4.

All figures regarding the output indicators are included as Annex 3 to this report.

Figure 5-3 Progress on implementation per SO
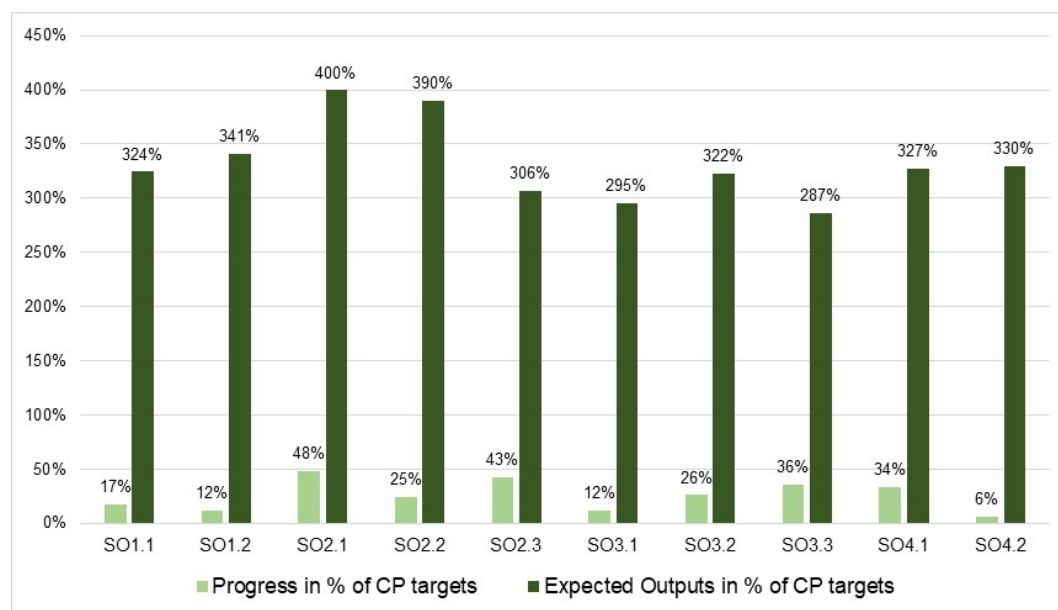
Source: Data from JS. January 2019.

When analysing the real progress of projects, comparing the achievements to the output targets as defined in projects' application forms, this shows that the average progress for the whole programme lies at 12% with range between 1% (SO 4.2) and 28% (SO 2.3).

Based on this analysis, SOs which can be recommended for an-depth analysis in the impact evaluation are SOs 2.1 and 2.3 (advanced relative progress), SOs 1.1 and 3.2 (highest number of projects), as well as SO 4.2 to highlight the reasons for later delivery of transport project outputs.

Examples of project achievements

Case study analyses have allowed identifying examples of early project achievements and results:

- FabLabNet: Three pilot actions have been implemented with great success so far. The pilot action implemented in the MUSE FabLab found four solutions to real-life problems of SME and artisan enterprises. The pilots implemented in the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Poland involved local communities of university students, high school students and citizens for the creation of prototypes based on real-life needs. A total of more than 600 persons have been trained in the framework of this pilot. In addition, the MUSE FabLab has developed three sets of training activities. This pilot action involved local NGOs, universities and artisan associations.

- FocusinCD: The partnership is developing three e-tools, which are learning platforms and guidelines for health care professionals and patients to improve celiac disease awareness, diagnosis and management in Central Europe. The association of gastroenterologists and the association of celiac disease patients of Europe have been involved in their development. The first e-tool for HCP is almost completed in English for the demo testing and will then be translated in the other project languages. English-speaking patients from the regions involved in the project are being recruited for the testing.

- GeoPLASMA-CE launched a web-based knowledge platform. The web-platform will enable stakeholders to know the limitations and opportunities in specific regions for the use of shallow geothermal energy. The project team started to prepare the integrative management strategies for shallow geothermal utilisation for heating and cooling in each partner region.

- SULPiTER: Trainings for 80 local public administrations have been organised. Through the analysis of the identified logistics trends in functional urban areas (FUAs), it has been possible to see how these trends, and the urgency to tackle them in a sustainable urban planning perspective, are perceived differently among public, private and R&D actors. Pilot actions in seven FUAs have been started aiming at better understanding freight demand in the project's FUAs.

- In RAINMAN, two pilot activities are being implemented in Hungary, specifically in "Tiszakécske" and "Kunhegyes". Both areas are characterised by low land. Because of the topographic conditions the runoff is slow and high precipitation can cause frequent inundations. In order to reduce damages caused by heavy rain the pilot action focuses on risk assessment and mapping as well as the development and implementation of mitigation measures.

- YOUInHerit, project aims at economic development of the regions through the valorisation and revival of traditional trades and crafts (intangible cultural heritage / assets) by involving young people The three-year project has highlighted different situations in European regions, and implemented different pilot actions.

- In the framework of LUMAT, the pilot action Ruda Slaska (PL) was implemented with additional ERDF funding from outside the Interreg CE programme. This investment has given the chance to use a new technology, previously developed by the lead partner, to stabilise the dangerous heavy metals in the pilot area (zinc dumping area).

Performance Framework

With regard to the milestones defined in the Performance Framework, the level of effectiveness is high. The detailed information on the indicators of the performance framework, their milestones, targets and achievements can be found in Annex 4.

Looking at the key implementation steps, milestone values for 2018 with regard to the number of approved operations and the amount of eligible expenditure certified to the EC have been achieved (and even exceeded) for all PAs. As can be expected from the number of projects and the output indicators, PA 2 and 3 are more advanced in progress of the Performance Framework indicators. With regard to the milestones set for 2018[49], most PAs exceed the expected values, while PA 4 matches the milestone set for the key implementation step.

As for the output indicators of the performance framework, no milestones or intermediate targets for 2018 were defined. However, the measurement at the end of 2018 shows that all output indicators are well on track towards the targets set for 2023[50]. PA 2 is the most advanced with regard to output achievements compared to CP targets in the performance framework.

In general, the programme is well on track regarding its planned outputs and in particular to achieve results. In this framework, the latest version of the CP[51] (after a change in 2019 with a corresponding update of budget size and shift of ERDF budget to PA 1), defines new (higher) target values for 2023. This change seems to be positive as it contributes to the usefulness and adequacy of the performance framework. Even with these changes, the programme is expected to over-achieve the planned outputs and to make a significant contribution to result indicators.

Additional thematic result indicators

A set of additional thematic result indicators was introduced in addition to output and programme-specific result indicators, in an effort to aggregate at programme level a number of common results achieved at project level.[52]

Important results by advanced projects can be observed through monitoring the current situation of the achievements on thematic result indicators (see Annex 5). The expected results of projects are considerable: more than 2,700 institutions are expected to adopt new or improved strategies and action plans, more than EUR 500 million of additional funds are expected to be leveraged, almost 2,800 jobs will be created based on project achievements and approx. 31,000 people will be trained.

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[49] Milestones for 2018 were set in the Cooperation Programme only for the financial indicator and for the key implementation step (number of operations approved under each PA).
[50] According to the Cooperation Programme (Version 3).
[51] Version 3 of the CP was adopted by the European Commission in April 2019.
[52] See chapter 4.4.1.5 for more detail on the thematic result indicators.

Within this framework, projects have already managed to leverage more than EUR 27 million of additional funds, have already trained more than 8,000 people, created 47 new jobs and engaged 267 institutions to adopt new or improved strategies and action plans.

With regard to the level of progress, there are obviously important differences between advanced and more recent projects. It can be observed that the average level of progress for call 1 projects reaches already 47% of the expected targets, whereas the progress of call 2 projects only reached an average of 3%. Call 3 projects are about to start and have no achievements so far.

Programme-specific result indicators

As far as trends for programme-specific result indicators can be updated and analysed at this intermediate point in time, the programme is well on track with regard to the achievement of expected results.

The programme has selected a number of result indicators (see Annex 6), which are based on a qualitative description of the situation, as no quantitative and comparable data is available on capacities, i.e. policy, legal and institutional frameworks, human resources developing and managerial systems[53]. The baseline for the result indicators was established in 2014/2015 through a survey, including semi-qualitative elements, combined with a focus group approach and five thematic expert panels to harmonise the results. The measurement of progress of the result indicators is foreseen for 2018 and 2020 and a final monitoring in 2023. For setting up the baseline, national thematic experts were asked to give an assessment on the situation of their country with relation to the result indicator and its components through a survey. The experts' appraisal of each result indicator is semi-quantitative, using a Likert scale (1 – very poor to 5 – excellent). The expert assessment was then discussed and confirmed by thematic focus groups.

The results of the update show that the situation of the indicators are considered by experts as generally more positive than in 2014, before the start of the programme. The trends are therefore positive in all SOs. Most progress compared to the baseline can be observed for the indicators related to the areas of SO 2.3, 3.2 and 4.1, slightly lower for areas of SO 1.1, SO 1.2, SO 2.1, and SO 4.2. It is difficult without further impact analysis to determine the exact contribution of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme to these positive trends. However, during the analysis, valuable hints and information could be raised to establish contribution linkages between positive trends and the programme.

5.1.4.2 Generation and use of synergies

The Common Provisions Regulations foresee synergies and coordination of programmes with other ESI Funds and relevant EU policies, strategies and instruments. Therefore, the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has developed a number of mechanisms to support the generation of synergies at project

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[53] Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Cooperation Programme, Version 2, Annex 8, pg. 23

level.[54] It has to be noted that synergies can only be achieved if other programmes are also interested in developing them. Without such responsiveness, efforts to achieve synergies are only burdensome.

At **project level**, applicants and beneficiaries are asked to initiate and exploit synergies with other projects and different programmes. In project application forms applicants have to make references to possible links with other programmes. The programme asks applicants to describe in their project applications the coherence and complementarity with national and regional ESIF programmes, with other European Union instruments and policies, which are relevant for the topics addressed in their proposals, as well as the complementarity with national policies and funding instruments. This mechanism helps developing **synergies and coordination** with other EU instruments. In this process, applicants need to clearly describe and give evidence of the added value of transnational cooperation.

At **application stage**, almost all projects indicated synergies with a number of other EU co-funded projects. Projects are aware of other projects from other programmes in the wider area and refer to their possible links and complementarities in their application forms. Apart from quite a wide variety of **other Interreg and IPA programmes** as well as other **ESIF programmes**, and linkages with **Regional Innovation and Smart Specialisation Strategies**, synergies were also mentioned to other EU funding programmes and instruments including[55]:

- FP5, FP6, FP7, Horizon 2020;
- Intelligent Energy – Europe (IEE), Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (CIP) 2007-2013, Programme for the Competitiveness of enterprises and SMEs (COSME) 2014-2020;
- Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) 2007-2013, Erasmus+;
- Information and Communication Technologies Policy Support Programme (ICT-PSP);
- LIFE+ 2007-2013, EEA Grants;
- TEN-T, Connecting Europe Facility (CEF);
- PROGRESS 2007-2013.

It is difficult to identify and assess concrete achievements of the different synergies during project implementation. In general, case studies confirm that there are achievements, mostly between projects and due to the involvement of project partners in different Interreg CE projects or linked with projects of another EU funding scheme. Examples are:

- The SULPiTER project has presented its (first) results to projects of HORIZON2020, URBACT and Interreg Med.
- RUMOBIL complements TEN-T Corridor initiatives and aims to strengthen the links between TEN-T corridors and Central Europe's peripheral area. The RUMOBIL partners are collaborating with other Interreg projects tackling similar issues, such as the Mamba project funded by the Interreg Baltic Sea Region programme. The LP is also part of the exchange platform "Transregio

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[54] Section 3.1.4.9 details the support for generating synergies at programme level.
[55] Own elaboration based on Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Application Forms

Alliance" on public and cargo transport projects in Interreg programmes with transport ministries from other federal states in Eastern Germany.

- Several partners of LUMAT are involved in the development of the European research agenda on "Soil and land use" under the HORIZON 2020 coordination action "INSPIRATION" (2015-2017) and will benefit from the synergies established between these two initiatives, e.g. on new scientific knowledge on ecosystem services and land use. (www.inspiration-europe.eu).
- GeoPLASMA-CE highlights synergies with international projects and programmes such as TransGeoTherm, ReGeoCities, and Intelligent Energy Europe. Likewise, synergies are also expected with the Alpine Space project GRETA, which involves the lead partner as well and analyses the potential of near-surface geothermal energy use.

It can be expected that most projects exploit synergies in line with their expectations described in application forms.

The programme bodies foster the generation of synergies through diverse coordination and cooperation measures[56]. As described above, call 4 is a relevant example to stimulate the generation of synergies. The activities at programme level can be evaluated as effective to generate synergies, even if there seems to be room for improvement, e.g. through disseminating concrete examples of synergies to other projects and applicants.

5.1.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The following conclusions and recommendations can be drawn for the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme progress and implementation:

- After three calls for proposals, the programme allocated 101.5% of the available funds to 129 projects. 21.6 % of the programme funds have already been certified to the European Commission. To maximise the absorption of funds, the fourth call will be funded through savings generated by projects approved in earlier calls.
- The programme monitoring and control system is well functioning and beneficiaries are fully implementing their projects, leading to good programme performance from both the physical and the financial point of view.
- Performance milestones planned for 2018 have been successfully achieved and surpassed.
- The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme is well on track with its programme implementation regarding output indicators. The average level of progress of the programme is 27% actual achievements compared to CP targets set for 2023. This is a very positive level of effectiveness, considering that projects usually produce the bulk of outputs towards the end of the project life and only 27 % of projects are advanced. Also, the expected outputs by selected operations indicate a very positive progress in implementation of the programme (321%). The high level of progress is due to an overall higher number of projects than expected, but also to a higher number of expected outputs per project.

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[56] See also chapter 3.1.4.9 on the coordination efforts at programme level.

- SOs which can be recommended for an-depth analysis in the impact evaluation are SOs 2.1 and 2.3 (advanced relative progress), SOs 1.1 and 3.2 (highest number of projects), as well as SO 4.2 (to highlight the reasons leading to later delivery of transport project outputs).

- Examples of project outputs and results identified through case studies show the wide range of topics and relevant outputs in practice. They range from training schemes to pilot actions, from leveraged investments funds to commitment on further action.

- With regard to monitoring the additional thematic result indicators that have been defined by the programme, first project results can be observed. The expected results of projects are considerable: more than 2,700 institutions are expected to adopt new or improved strategies and action plans, more than EUR 500 million of additional funds are expected to be leveraged, almost 2,800 jobs will be created based on project achievements and approx. 31,000 people will be trained. Within this framework, projects have already managed to lever more than EUR 27 million of additional funds, have already trained more than 8,000 people, created 47 new jobs and engaged 267 institutions to adopt new or improved strategies and action plans.

- As for the programme-specific result indicators, it is still too early for a thorough analysis. The results of the 2018 update show that the situation of the indicators are considered by experts as generally more positive than in 2014, before the start of the programme. The trends are therefore positive in all specific objectives.

- The programme has well developed mechanisms in place for developing synergies with other programmes and EU instruments. The programme bodies foster the generation of synergies through diverse coordination and cooperation measures, both, at programme and project level. The activities can be evaluated as effective to generate synergies, even if the Programme can further support generation of synergies with communicating examples.
  - Some examples at project level: The SULPiTER project has presented its (first) results to projects of HORIZON2020, URBACT and Interreg Med. RUMOBIL complements TEN-T Corridor initiatives and aims to strengthen the links between TEN-T corridors and Central Europe's peripheral area. Several partners of LUMAT are involved in the European research agenda on "Soil and land use" under the HORIZON 2020 coordination action "INSPIRATION" (2015-2017), and will benefit from synergies. GeoPLASMA-CE highlights synergies with international projects and programmes such as TransGeoTherm, ReGeoCities, and Intelligent Energy Europe.

5.2 Evaluation of stakeholder involvement and partnership structure

5.2.1 Introduction

The evaluation of stakeholder involvement and partnership structures looks into the evolution of involvement since the beginning of the CENTRAL EUROPE CP implementation. This includes assessing the characteristics of involved stakeholders, describing partnership structures and evaluating the outreach to relevant target groups.

5.2.2 Methods used

The consultation of the Cooperation Programme and Annual Implementation Reports for 2015 to 2017 provided the context for the analysis. Stakeholder involvement and partnership structure analyses used application data and data on project partners selected in calls 1 to 3. Other important sources of information have been the surveys to project applicants of calls 1 to 3 and, with respect to communication, the beneficiary surveys carried out in 2014 and 2017. The analysis of case studies was used to assess project partnership structures and communication details at project level. For communication, this was complemented with data from feedback surveys to participants at programme events such as National Info Days.

5.2.3 Evaluation question/s

The analysis was based on the following evaluation questions:

- What are the characteristics of the stakeholder and target group involvement (thematic scope, per type of target group, involvement of most relevant institutions, intensity of involvement, territorial coverage etc.)?
- Does the programme foresee mechanisms to effectively address and involve the relevant target groups?
- How effectively is communication planned and carried out at project level for involving relevant target groups and achieving the planned project outputs and results as well as supporting their transfer and sustainability?

5.2.4 Main findings

The Programme has so far managed to involve 4,200 organisations as applicants. Most of the organisations involved are public authorities (with a high share of local and regional authorities and a minor share of national authorities), higher education and research institutions, SMEs and interest groups including NGOs. Other types of organisations are involved to a lesser extent. Organisational composition of relevant target groups is comprehensive and relatively balanced. A considerably high level of newcomers has been attracted to the programme (24%). More than 41% of applicants were organisations working under private law. It has been found that the programme foresees adequate mechanisms to involve all relevant target groups. Projects have at their disposal a set of tools to reach out to final target groups. They are supported by the programme in this undertaking.

5.2.4.1   Characteristics of applicants and beneficiaries by type of organisation

A total of about 4,200 different organisations applied as project partners or lead partners in calls 1 to 3, submitting a total of 1,020 applications (thereof 495 full applications) including, in some cases, resubmissions of the same projects in different calls.

When considering the composition of all applicants, a leading role is occupied by public authorities, followed by higher education and research institutions, SMEs, and interest groups including NGOs. Within the group of public authorities, most of them are local and regional public authorities (23%). More

specific types of organisations, such as international organisations and EGTCs have shares below 1% each, reflecting a general low number of these types of organisations.

Thus, as depicted in Figure 5-4, organisational composition of relevant target groups is comprehensive and relatively balanced.

Figure 5-4 Distribution of applicants by organisation category
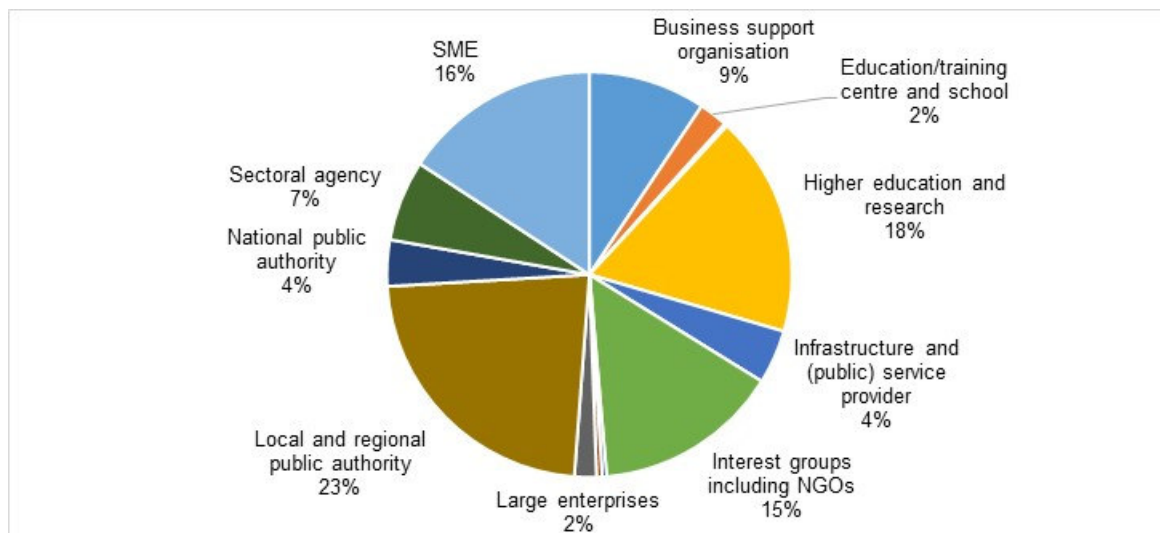
Source: CENTRAL EUROPE Programme application forms. Calls 1, 2, and 3. Own calculation.

Most organisations (67%) took part in just one application, while almost one third (30%) applied to between 2 and 9 projects. On average, each organisation took part in 2.1 applications. 107 applicant organisations were very prolific and submitted 10 or more applications, with a peak of 58 applications by one single organisation[57]. 90% of organisations to be involved in 10 applications or more are public, mostly higher education and research organisations (38%), followed by sectoral agencies (22%). Considering the experience with ETC programmes in general, this seems to be a normal distribution and no further action has to be taken, unless the Programme would like to limit the number of applications/project per organisation.

Distribution of lead partners gives an indication for the drivers of applications. One fourth of applications are led by higher education and research organisations (25%), while local, regional, and national public authorities lead slightly fewer applications (45%, with 37% accounting for local and regional organisations). Indeed, higher education and research organisations tend to appear more often as lead

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[57] The record holder is a public business support organisation dedicated to assisting local SMEs in obtaining financing and working in partnership with the regional economic and labour organisations. This organisation seems to be key in disseminating project results to SMEs and is, thus, involved in many applications as a relevant partner.

partner than as project partner. In contrast, SMEs, quite well represented among project partners, account for only a minor share of lead partners (2%), as do interest groups and NGOs (3%).

A high share of higher education and research institutions among applicants and lead partners may be due to the high number of applications for projects under Priority Axis 1 "Cooperating on innovation". For instance, looking at PA 1, projects under this priority are focused primarily on business investment on R&I, including a focus on SMEs; linkages with academia and research are key to the Smart Specialisation concept and for enabling and empowering innovative capacity at local, regional and national level.

Figure 5-5 Distribution of project partners by organisation category
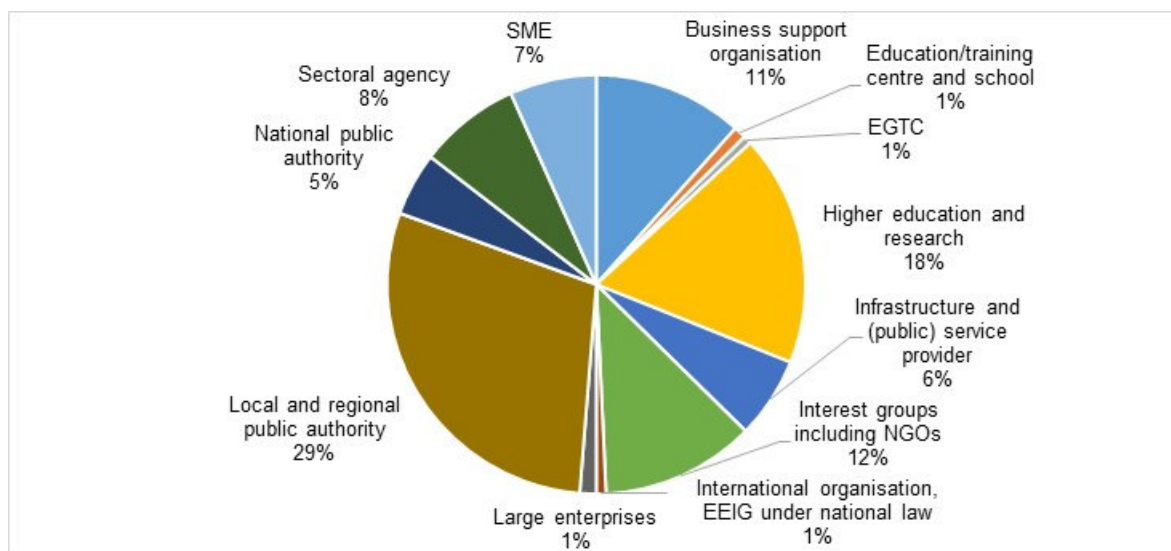
Source: CENTRAL EUROPE Programme monitoring system. Calls 1, 2 and 3. Own calculation.

The distribution of different types of organisations in approved projects mostly reflects that for applications. Key differences are a somewhat higher share of local and regional public authorities and a lower effective SME involvement. Of course, the concrete topics of projects influence the types of institutions involved. There are differences between the different PAs and SOs that are discussed further below. This may reflect differences in experience between these two types of partners or may be due to obstacles encountered in the contracting phase, such as state aid issues or administrative burden that hamper the involvement of SMEs as partners, despite an interest expressed in an application.

The average number of projects in which each beneficiary participates is 1.4 (down from an average of 2.1 applications per organisation). 95 beneficiaries are involved in three or more projects, while 20 organisations are involved in five or more projects. The highest number of projects in which a partner has been involved is 10.[58] Business support organisations, higher education and research

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[58] This is the case of the Slovenian "E-Institute for comprehensive development solutions" (E-zavod, zavod za projektno svetovanje, raziskovanje in razvoj celovitih rešitev), which is a business support organisation.

organisations, regional public authorities, and sectoral agencies are the types of organisations most likely to be active in different projects, while SMEs and NGOs are usually involved in only one project.

The most represented category of lead partners, even more so than in the case of overall partners, are local and regional public authorities. Among approved projects, the share of local and regional public authorities, national authorities and business support providers acting as lead partners is higher than their share in applications. Other types of organisations, such as sectoral agencies, service providers, interest groups including NGOs, large enterprises and SMEs have a lower share as lead partner as compared to their share in applications. These differences indicate that the capacity for presenting a successful application to the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme is not evenly distributed between different types of organisations. Higher education and research institutions, together with national public authorities and business support organisations, are the types of organisation that are most likely to be successful in applying as lead partner.

Figure 5-6 Distribution of lead partners by organisation category
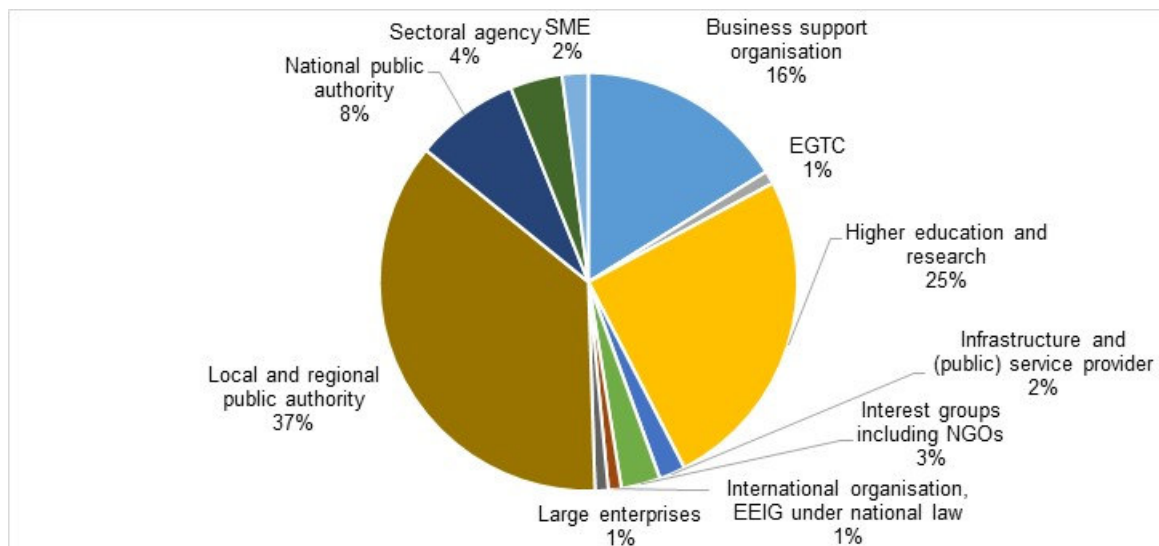
Source: CENTRAL EUROPE Programme monitoring system. Calls 1, 2 and 3. Own calculation.

5.2.4.2 Involving private partners

Overall, the Programme has managed to attract a large number of private partners in the application phase. More than 41% of applicant organisations, including lead partners and project partners, applying to calls 1 to 3, were organisations working under private law. The overall share of selected private actors under calls 1 to 3 is 29%. This signals that Interreg is less attractive to private organisations – who might find better suited programmes for them – as compared to public organisations. The rates of private partner involvement are different across the different PAs and SOs, and closely linked to the thematic

focus of selected projects. Private participation is higher than in other transnational programmes, as far as data is available[59].

It is key to point out that, out of 42 applications led by SMEs in calls 1 and 2, none was approved, bringing the number of SME lead partners to zero in these two calls. Just two projects led by SMEs were approved in call 3, increasing the overall share of SME lead partners to 2%. Of the eight project applications in call 1-3 led by large private enterprises, none was accepted. This reflects certain issues that affect small private organisations to take the lead in an Interreg project. Taking into account the considerable complexity in project management and the administrative workload, the leading role might be more suitable for larger and/or public organisations.

There is a strong interest among private organisations for the topic of innovation (PA 1), although these are more likely to be involved as project beneficiaries, and rarely involved as lead partners. There is a "driving" role of public and education organisations in this field: the high participation of private partners means that knowledge transfer can nonetheless happen. The results are different for PA 4 about transport, where private organisations and enterprises are more often involved as beneficiaries, although never as lead partners. The nature of PA 2 on low carbon strategies implies that private companies and enterprises have a lower representation, as public authorities take up most of the shares, the only exception being the two enterprises that lead projects under SO 2.3. PA 3 about natural and cultural resources has low shares of both enterprises and other private organisations in general. In this latter case, the share of private applicants was in line with other SOs, but the selected projects were including less of them.

Private partner involvement and success rate are slightly lower in those SOs, which also have low shares of private sector applicants. These are in particular all SOs under PA 2 on low carbon initiatives, and SO 4.1 on planning and coordination for regional passenger transport systems. In contrast, SO 4.2 on the coordination of freight transport stakeholders, has a relatively high share of involved private partners, and is the only case in which the success rate of private partners has been higher than that of public institutions. This is particularly relevant since the objective puts a strong focus on essentially private freight transport stakeholders.

More data on private partner involvement is presented in Annex 7.

5.2.4.3 Characteristics of applicants and beneficiaries by geography

The country with the largest number of applicants (20%) was Italy, followed by Hungary, Poland, Germany, and Slovenia, with 10% to 13% each, and Croatia, Austria, Czech Republic, and Slovakia, with 7% to 9% of applicants. 71 applicant organisations, 1.7% of the total number of applicants, were

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[59] 24% in Interreg Baltic Sea Region, based on the Midterm Evaluation Report (2018) and 19% in Interreg Alpine Space Programme, based on Evaluation of programme communication, effectiveness and stakeholder involvement. Final Report. 2018.

located in countries outside the programme area. The proportions are roughly similar when limiting the analysis to lead partners.

The picture is considerably different when looking at the distribution of partners in relation to each country's population. The table below shows how smaller countries are much more prolific in participating to the programme, both in terms of applications and selected partners. Particularly outstanding in this regard is the performance of Slovenia.

Table 5-2 Applicants and selected partners per million inhabitants by country[60]

Country / Partners per 1 million inhabitants	Austria	Croatia	Czech Republic	Germany	Hungary	Italy	Poland	Slovakia	Slovenia
Applicants	40	94	33	12	54	29	15	51	204
Selected partners	11	21	8	3	10	6	3	9	46
Lead partners	0.7	0.2	0.1	0.5	0.9	1.0	0.2	0.4	1.5

Source: CENTRAL EUROPE Application Forms and monitoring data. Calls 1, 2, and 3. Own calculation.

Looking just at lead partners, their distribution in approved projects, with respect to the population size in the respective countries, shows differences between countries and gives some hints on the capacity of organisations across the different territories. Comparing lead partners and applications, three groups of countries emerge:

1. Countries with a high share of lead partners with respect to overall population size are Slovenia, Italy, and Hungary, to a lesser extent, Austria. Experience in leading projects meets with a strong interest in the programme and a strong capacity of lead partners. Croatia is very active but still lacks the necessary experience to present many lead partners.
2. Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia and Austria are very active in participating in applications. They have a strong interest in the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme. Slovenia and Croatia have, by far, the highest number of project partners considering their size of population.
3. Czech Republic and Poland have relatively low shares of lead partners and also relatively low numbers of applications compared to population size, reflecting perhaps comparatively more relevance of other Interreg or mainstream ERDF programmes. The same applies, although to a lesser extent to Germany, which has relatively low number of applications and partners taking into account the population size.

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[60] For Germany and Italy, only the regions in the programme area were considered for the calculation.

Geographic project partner distribution is balanced across Specific Objectives. Differences between SOs are quite small. Some findings are:

- A high representation of Austrian partners in SO 3.1 about integrated environmental management capacities. Other countries, such as Italy and Poland, are underrepresented in this SO.
- A similar phenomenon is observed with the role of Italy in SO 3.2 about cultural resources. Here, Italian partners have a predominant role due to their experience in the topic, overall the distribution of partners across other countries is rather balanced in comparison with SO 3.1.
- Likewise, there seems to be a rather high concentration of partners involved in environmental urban management (SO 3.3) in Poland and Croatia. Other Member States are well represented, with the exception of Germany, which has a relatively low share of partners involved.
- Representation of Croatia and Austria in projects under SO 4.2 about multimodal environment-friendly freight solutions is relatively weak. Overall, this SO seems to focus on the northernmost area of the programme, between Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. This is likely to be due to the number of transversal freight corridors with several interconnections existing between these countries.

5.2.4.4 Involving new partners

The involvement of newcomers to the programme is assessed through applicant survey responses. Questionnaires to call 2 and 3 applicants asked whether the applicant had been previously involved in Interreg projects. 86 out of 362 (24%) respondents indicated that it was their first involvement with an Interreg programme[61]. This is quite an impressive rate of newcomers for a long-standing programme such as CENTRAL EUROPE[62]. This may be due to a relatively high visibility of the programme in the programme area and effective attraction of newcomers through communication activities.

To further evaluate this aspect, the Programme should define what a "newcomer" or "new partner" is[63] and what its expectations are with regard to newcomers[64]. To evaluate this aspect in the next programming period, there could be a statistical data collection and follow-up on this aspect during project application. Otherwise, surveys to applicants and/or beneficiaries could include more questions about this aspect to have more data available to analyse.

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[61] Unfortunately, the available data does not allow to deepen the analysis or to draw further conclusions on this.

[62] In general, there is no comparability with other Interreg programmes, as definitions and goals related to "newcomers" differ.

[63] There is no general definition of what a "newcomer" is. For example, it can be an organisation new to Interreg in general or new to this Programme, an organisation new to the Programme in the current period, or the unit of the organisation is new to the Programme, or people involved are new to the Programme.

[64] The goal could be to have many newcomers to spread the Programme to ever more organisations and regions. However, the goals could also be to prefer experienced partner organisations and to be satisfied with a moderate rate of newcomers. Goals could also be different for project partners and lead partners.

5.2.4.5   Partnership structure

When looking at the approved projects, an average of 10.4 partners is involved in each project. The average partnership size is almost identical across the four priority axes.

The analysis of case studies highlights how projects usually follow a functional approach when selecting partners to be involved.

Two effective types of partnerships can be found. The first type involves generally organisations with similar functions or interest in a given field from different regions and countries, although they may be represented by different types of institutions. The aim of these partnerships is to establish networks for the future, to learn from each other and to further develop their work and their joint topic, for example, developing new proposals for legislative frameworks or creating new knowledge e.g. through producing data on needs and requirements for certain specific target groups.

> The project FabLabNet, for example, involves nine FabLabs across central Europe, which have quite diverse features. Some of them are promoted by different types of public bodies such as regional development agencies, municipal museums, and public universities (Polish, Italian, Czech, Slovak, and Slovenian partners). Some others are private organisations, either independent or supported by large corporations (Croatian, Hungarian, and German partners). There is an overall balance between types of partners, however they share similar goals and target groups: FabLabs are based on the participation of citizens, and often target schools, universities, and businesses as users.
>
> The YouInHerit project has a similar approach entailing the involvement of different types of partners active in the same field, in this case old crafts and cultural preservation.
>
> GeoPLASMA develops integrated management capacities for local authorities in order to expand the scope of application of shallow geothermal energy use. Most involved partners are research institutions and/or public offices/authorities, working together on the same topic.

The second type of partnership applies an **integrated or systemic approach** and involves deliberately different stakeholders that contribute to a certain service, value chain or (e.g. innovation or transport) system and even users and target groups.

> In the example of Focus IN CD, a network for the sharing of knowledge about celiac disease among health professionals, patients and other relevant stakeholders, the main involved type of partners reflect the variety in settings of healthcare providers in target countries and regions. The three main types of partners – medical facilities, universities and research institutions, and patients' associations and foundations – show different types of institutional settings, although all are either public organisations or private NGOs. A business support organisation, a regional authority and a municipality complete the list of participants.
>
> The SULPiTER project, while focusing on the capacity building of authorities in Functional Urban Areas, applies an integrated triple helix approach and therefore includes a broad range of stakeholder types.

Another project applying a similar integrated approach is RAINMAN, where so far effective collaboration between local authorities and knowledge organisations has been effectively applied.

The RUMOBIL project appears to be particularly effective in involving a broad range of partners. Its 13 partners include five regional authorities, three enterprises (two public and one private), two research and education organisations, one public authority for local transport, one municipality, and one NGO. The high number of regional authorities is due to one key element of the project being the improvement of regional transport plans.

There are also two principal ways of integrating target groups, a) as partner in the project and looking for active contribution from them to project activities and results, or b) as final beneficiaries of generated knowledge, new applications, new services or improved conditions. Therefore, target groups' representatives including associated partners do not have to be necessarily involved in project activities as partners. In this case, it is foreseen that projects develop wide-reaching communication strategies and try to reach out to adequate organisations that represent target groups, such as clusters, associations, local NGOs. The next chapter analyses this outreach to target groups at project level.

To enhance impact at local, national and transnational level, it can be important to not only look at the structure of the transnational partnership, but also to ensure an effective partnership in each country or region.

For example, the LUMAT project, targeting knowledge transfer and capacity building for local authorities in the area of sustainable land use, adopts a structured approach in this regard. In most cases a partnership in a functional urban area is created by two stakeholders, one generally being a municipality or a regional institution, usually complemented by a research centre. The success of this approach lies in balancing competences and capacity from the two types of partners. This highlights the positive aspect of ensuring a balanced representation not only at project level but at the level of local partners in a given functional urban area and within a project.

5.2.4.6 Outreach to target groups at project level

The analysis of target groups reported by selected projects in applications shows that the most numerous target group is represented by SMEs adding up to 42% of the overall target, local and regional public authorities come second with 19%, and most other categories make up each between 2% and 8% of the total number of target organisations. International organisations and EEIG make up only 0.4% of the total, representing 189 organisations that were indicated as target groups by projects. The general public concerned as target group, and not included in this representation, amounts to a total of 6.8 million people.

Private organisations and enterprises as well as public authorities are targeted by most projects across all four priorities, with a notably higher-than-average representation of private organisations/enterprises in PA 1[65].

The focus on private organisations/enterprises as target groups under PA 1 is outstanding (see Figure 5-7), whereas the distribution is more even between the other Priority Axes.

Education and research organisations are mostly targeted by projects under PA 1 and PA 4, while they are relatively less prominent in projects under PAs 2 and 3. Public authorities are targeted mostly in PA 2 and 3, but also in PA 1.

Figure 5-7 Types of target groups addressed by projects
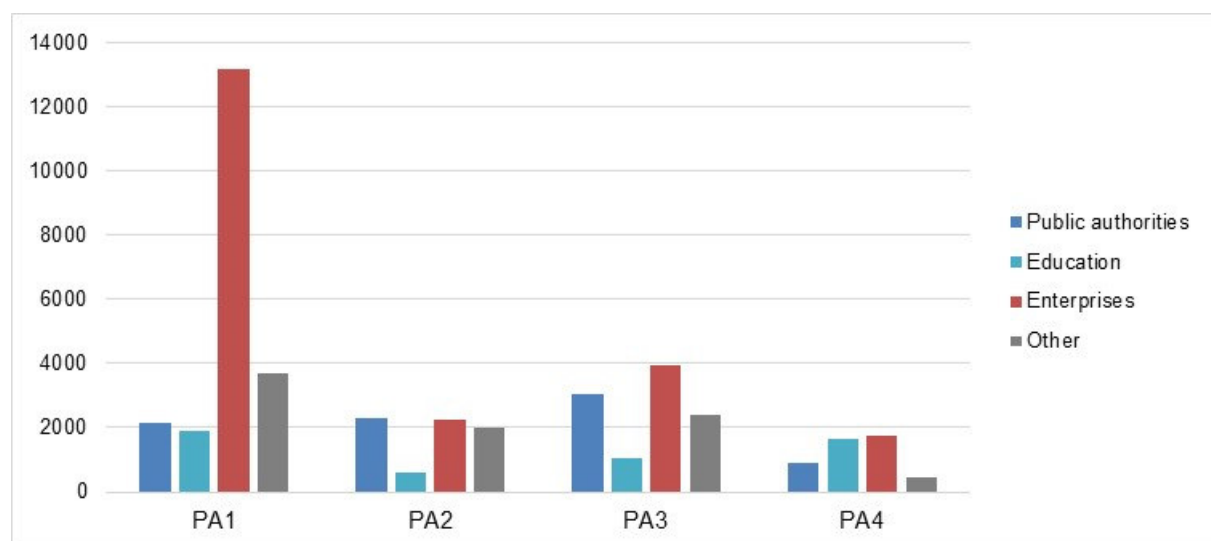
Source: CENTRAL EUROPE programme application forms. Calls 1, 2 and 3. Own calculation.

Another category of a possible target group is the general public. The general public is targeted predominantly by projects under PA 2 (3.8 million people), and PA 3 (2.5 million people), followed by projects under PA 4, which target 417,000 people. Innovation projects under PA 1, in coherence with their scope, only target a limited number of members of the general public, with 47,000 indicated by the projects.

5.2.4.7 Organisation of communication to reach target groups

All projects foresaw tools for external communication, establishing strategies for communicating with target groups, and for involving them in project activities. External communication uses a range of tools, including 'soft' measures such as the maintenance of the project website, regular mailing lists, the

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[65] For the purpose of the following analysis, target groups have been aggregated in four main categories: public, education-related organisation, enterprises and private, and other organisations. See Annex 7 for more detail.

production of publications and brochures, social network presence, or media visibility. 'Hard' measures for direct involvement include, for instance, pilot actions, events, workshops and open meetings, the participation in conferences and the establishment of liaisons with sectoral organisations for dissemination purposes. Websites, newsletters, events, workshops and conferences are among the most popular and – in the eyes of the projects – effective means of project result dissemination and target group involvement. Common branding has been regarded as a positive element for the promotion of project achievements.

Certain measures have been found to positively affect the capacity to reach out to target groups. For example, external communication activities, initially carried out in English, were found to be more effective when tailored to the local context by applying local languages. Pilot actions were often used and were found to be particularly useful tools in fostering cooperation and involvement of target groups, especially in developing on-the-job partnerships between enterprises and academic or research institutions for specific problem solving. A shortcoming of pilot activities is that they tend to focus on a specific localised experience. However, this can be overcome by complementary activities to stimulate mutual learning and evaluation of pilot actions at transnational level. In some cases, web-based knowledge transfer platforms have been established to overcome this issue. In other cases, the limited number of active target group counterparts has been enlarged by administering surveys in which a larger number of target group members were asked to provide a contribution.

In many cases, diversity of partner involvement has been a key feature of projects since their onset, so finding the way to enable cooperation was necessary to unlock the projects' full potential. There have been cases in which the involvement of certain types of target groups, such as local public authorities and NGOs, was difficult. This may be linked to the low capacity of these types of target groups to provide the necessary follow-up to projects, due to limitations in staff capacity, and in some cases a low intrinsic interest in transnational activities due to the specifically local focus of the organisation's activities. A high turnover at local public authorities has also been cited as an issue to cooperate with this target group in some cases, which could pose risks to the continuity of the project. Countermeasures to these common issues have been envisaged by some projects. The specific issue of low capacity of local public institutions, for instance, has been tackled by one project by pairing in each territory a local public institution and a research organisation. This type of partnership ensures both the involvement of target groups (local public administration), and the quality and continuity of technical expertise.

Overall, project communication strategies at project level have proved to be well developed and taking into account a wide range of elements to ensure the communication with target groups. However, sometimes a lack of professional capacity or insufficient resources leads to limitations for a wider target group involvement. The key role of communication in project implementation seems sometimes to be underestimated by projects. This could be improved in the future by linking communication activities at project level to project management and/or by further guidance, training or support via tutorials for highly effective communication.

5.2.5 Conclusions and recommendations

- The programme has so far managed to involve 4,200 organisations as applicants and/or project partners. When considering the composition of applicants, a leading role is occupied by public authorities (27%), followed by higher education and research institutions (18%), SMEs (16%), and interest groups including NGOs (15%).
- The most represented category of partners (34%) and lead partners (45%) are public authorities.
- Private partner involvement is positive, with 41% of overall applicants being private organisations. The share of private partners in selected operations is 29%, which is still a considerable share and higher than in other transnational programmes, as far as data is available. Private partner involvement is rather heterogeneous across different thematic fields, which mirrors the different importance of private entities for different Priority Axes and Specific Objectives. It can be observed that the share of SMEs (16%) is relatively large in applications, however only 7% of project partners are SMEs.
- Private partners, including also SMEs and large enterprises, are thematically predominant in projects under PA 1 and SO 4.2 on the coordination of freight transport stakeholders. This SO shows the importance of links between public organisations and enterprises.
- Applicants are geographically distributed in a relatively even way. Countries with a high share of lead partners with respect to overall population size are Slovenia, Italy, Hungary, and to a lesser extent, Austria. In absolute terms, partners are well distributed geographically, but with a marked predominance of lead partners from Italy. Smaller MS like Slovenia and Croatia are very active in applying, whereas partners from Czech Republic and Poland, somehow also Germany, are comparatively less active in the programme.
- The analysis shows that 24% of applicants are newcomers to Interreg. This is quite an impressive rate of newcomers for a long-standing programme such as CENTRAL EUROPE. This may be due to a relatively high visibility of the programme in the programme area and effective attraction of newcomers through communication activities. To evaluate this aspect further, in the next programming period the Programme should define what a "newcomer" or "new partner" is and what its expectations are with regard to newcomers. To evaluate this aspect in the next programming period, there could be a statistical data collection on this aspect during project application or more specific questions in surveys to applicants.
- The programme is generally successful in involving a diverse set of target groups, with a focus on private organisations and enterprises, in particular, for PA 1.
- Projects make use of a very broad range of tools and methods for communication with target groups, and, in most cases, it was found to be well planned.

5.3 Evaluation of compliance with horizontal principles

5.3.1 Introduction

The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme included the three horizontal principles as of Article 8(7) of Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 in the Cooperation Programme. The present chapter analyses the effectiveness of the integration of these principles both at programme and at project level. This was done by consulting and confronting a number of different sources, detailed below.

5.3.2 Methods used

For the analysis as of the present chapter, the starting point has been a review of all main programme documents, including the Cooperation Programme and all its annexes, the Communication Strategy, Annual Implementation Reports for years 2015, 2016, and 2017, selected data from approved projects application forms, and assessment reports. Case studies and interviews conducted within the frame of the evaluation part 2 have also been analysed.

5.3.3 Evaluation question/s

The current chapter follows the following evaluation questions:

- To what extent are the horizontal principles integrated in the programme management arrangements?
- To what extent do funded projects incorporate activities aimed at sustainable development, equal opportunities and non-discrimination, equality between men and women?

5.3.4 Main findings

The horizontal principles of sustainable development (environmental protection requirements, resource efficiency, climate change mitigation and adaptation, disaster resilience and risk prevention and risk management), equal opportunities and non-discrimination (based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation), and equality between men and women, are integrated in the Cooperation Programme as guiding principles for the selection of operations.

In addition to the programme's commitment to apply the principle in the selection of operations, and to encourage the incorporation of activities coherent with such principles in the projects, the programme provides for the application of the general principles in its management arrangements.

5.3.4.1   Integration of horizontal principles in programme management arrangements.

The programme commits to the application of horizontal principles in programme management arrangements as referred to in the specific section of the Cooperation Programme about horizontal principles (section 8). The modes of application of these principles are not specified in detail in this section of the Cooperation Programme. A review of other programme documents allows to gain an understanding of how this commitment has been put in practice. Details of how these principles have been integrated are presented in the sub-sections below.

Horizontal principles are briefly referred to in section 5 of the Cooperation Programme about implementing provisions, with no specification of the arrangements to ensure their application. Likewise, no mention of horizontal principles is made in the Cooperation Programme's definition of PA 5 about technical assistance. No specific mention of horizontal principles is made in the annexes to the programme which specify the functions of the individual programme bodies. While this can be due to the fact that horizontal principles are understood to be a joint commitment and an overarching endeavour driving actions by all actors involved in the programme, the identification of a responsible authority, body,

or person, could positively influence the ownership, and therefore the effectiveness of efforts toward the effective application of these principles.

The Communication Strategy makes little mention of issues connected with horizontal principles. The only existing point is the mentioning of ensuring communication activities' accessibility for people with disabilities. However, no countermeasures are proposed when accessibility is limited. Other themes related to equal opportunities or gender equality are not addressed although they could be relevant in communication efforts. Issues related to sustainable development are less relevant to communication, however, some aspects related to environmental protection and resource efficiency could be part of the strategy.

Integration of the sustainable development principle in programme management arrangements

Sustainable development as a broad-ranging goal is embedded in the programme's Priority Axes. This is particularly the case for Priority Axes 2 (low-carbon strategies) and 3 (cooperating on natural and cultural resources for sustainable growth), as well as for Specific Objective 4.2 for coordination toward multimodal environmentally-friendly freight solutions. This is reflected in the definition of priorities as well as in the selection of programme specific output indicators for operations under these priorities, and therefore the focus cascades on the monitoring efforts. Output indicators under the performance framework, as well as result indicators, also reflect this focus and include the monitoring of sustainability-related measures. The Annual Implementation Report 2016, including information on horizontal principles, states that sustainable development arrangements (such as green procurement procedures, giving preference to environmentally-friendly mobility options for short travel distances, organisation of conferences, events and meetings in a sustainable way) are integrated with programme management arrangements under PA 5.

Integration of the equal opportunities principle in programme management arrangements

Unlike sustainable development, the promotion of equal opportunities is not part of the main thematic focus and strategic priorities of the programme. This is reflected in the fact that equal opportunities are not mentioned in the definition of priorities, except for a general mention of equality as an overarching principle in the selection of operations. Likewise, equal opportunities are not a focus of either output or result indicators, or of the performance framework. As mentioned, accessibility for people with disabilities is marginally mentioned in the Communication Strategy, while other aspects of equal opportunities are not tackled. The Annual Implementation Report 2016, including information on horizontal principles, states that equality arrangements (e.g. during recruitment of staff) are integrated with programme management arrangements under PA 5, however, without further reflection in programming documents.

Integration of equality between men and women in programme management arrangements

As for the case of equal opportunities, equality between men and women is included in the management of the programme. Gender equality is mentioned as a general principle in the selection of operations. During procurement, the MA is required to integrate measures for women promotion in its tender

documents. A programme level self-assessment exercise with regard to gender mainstreaming is foreseen.

5.3.4.2 Incorporation of horizontal principles in funded projects

Projects must comply with horizontal principles at every stage of the project lifecycle. Projects assess and state their contribution to horizontal principles starting from application forms and reporting on it in the final reports. The obligation to comply with the Community rules of horizontal policies such as equal opportunities, non-discrimination and gender equality, and with relevant policies and rules on environment protection and sustainable development, is included in the subsidy contract of each operation.

Horizontal principles are considered as a horizontal issue during the quality assessment of applications. In practice, horizontal principles are included in one of the strategic assessment sub-criteria[66] together with other considerations (relevance to existing policy framework and contribution to macro-regional strategies), as reported in assessment reports for calls 1, 2 and 3. For call 1, principles have been included in the quality assessment only in step 2 of the procedure. This reflects a lower importance of the horizontal principles in the selection in comparison with other criteria.

The programme's Implementation Manual details how horizontal principles are to be integrated in projects. The manual provides a description of the considerations that projects should make in order to take the principles into account. The main responsibility for their application is put on the projects.

Annual Implementation Reports do not report on horizontal principles every year, as this is not required by the European Commission. An exception is the monitoring of indicators that refer to issues linked with sustainable development. A specific section in Annual Implementation Reports provides updated information about the application of horizontal principles, provided in years 2017, 2019, and in the final implementation report. The information provided in 2017 with reference to the year 2016 is summarised below for each horizontal principle. Information is complemented with a review of the descriptions of horizontal principles contribution from project application forms.

Incorporation of the sustainable development principle in funded projects

The analysis of application forms for selected projects[67] highlights that nearly all projects foresee a positive effect on sustainable development. The remaining project foresees a neutral effect. When asked about the effects on the environment, 88% deemed the project to have the potential to have positive environmental effects, while the remaining anticipated a neutral effect. The Annual Implementation Report 2016 refers to one project as an example of sustainable project management arrangements: the project NUCLEI which laid down internal provisions to reduce CO_2 emissions during project implementation.

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[66] As reported in the quality assessment methodology in assessment reports for calls 1 to 3.
[67] Application forms of operations selected under Call 1 and 2, available at the time of the evaluation.

The high share of projects foreseeing a positive effect on sustainable development is in line with the nature of the programme and the fact that the thematic focus includes many innovation- and sustainability-oriented actions. The descriptions of each project's expected effects follow closely the thematic focus and stress the potential of the project activities toward a broad range of positive sustainable development objectives. Depending on project features, some focus more on the economic and social side of development improvements (such as, for example, health-focused projects), while others, such as transport related projects, are almost exclusively centred on environmental impacts.

For a number of projects, environmental sustainability is matching with the key project goals, while for many others environmental sustainability is just a secondary, possible, or corollary effect. Many of the projects for which this is the case have anyway declared a commitment to include environmentally sustainable practices in their internal organisation and communication arrangements. All projects reporting a neutral effect on the environment were under PA 1 (innovation). While the contribution to environmental sustainability is obvious for projects under PAs 2 and 3, it is a positive sign that all projects under PA 4 about transport mention positive environmental consequences. The commitment to reduce the environmental impact of the project structure as much as possible has also been reported by most projects, which indicated a neutral effect on the environment.

Overall, a complete and diverse set of different aspects connected with sustainable development is tackled nearly all projects, and in many cases these aspects coincide with main project goals. Given these considerations, the incorporation of the sustainable development horizontal principle in projects is deemed to be very high.

Incorporation of the equal opportunities principle in funded projects

71% of projects declared in application forms a positive effect of their project on equal opportunities, while the remaining share anticipated a neutral impact. Two projects are indicated in the Annual Implementation Report 2016 as examples for how to apply the equal opportunities horizontal principle in projects. One was the COME-IN! project specifically targeting accessibility for people with disabilities to small- and medium-sized museums. The second project is the STREFOWA project dealing with food waste reduction, with a potential to improve knowledge on inequalities affecting food production and disposal. In particular, projects under SO 1.2 about social innovation might contribute considerably to equal opportunities, if their project themes are linked to relevant challenges, such as demographic change, social enterprises, migration etc.

Also in the case of equal opportunities and non-discrimination, the principle is embedded in some projects as part or direct consequence of their main goals. One project example is again COME-IN!, trying to improve access to cultural sites for people with permanent and transient disabilities. In other cases, the principle is tackled indirectly. It is mentioned with reference to methodologies or tools that the project foresees to use, such as participatory approaches, and in the relation with partners, stakeholders, and target groups. Some projects additionally committed formally all project partners to safeguarding equal opportunities.

Figure 5-8 Share of projects by contribution to the equal opportunities principle – per SO
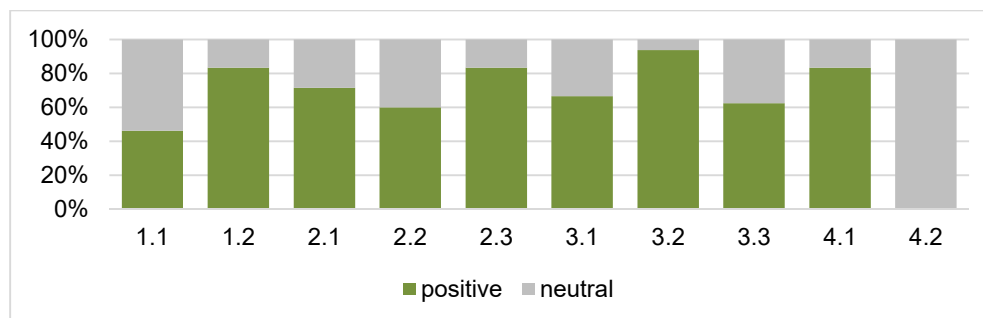
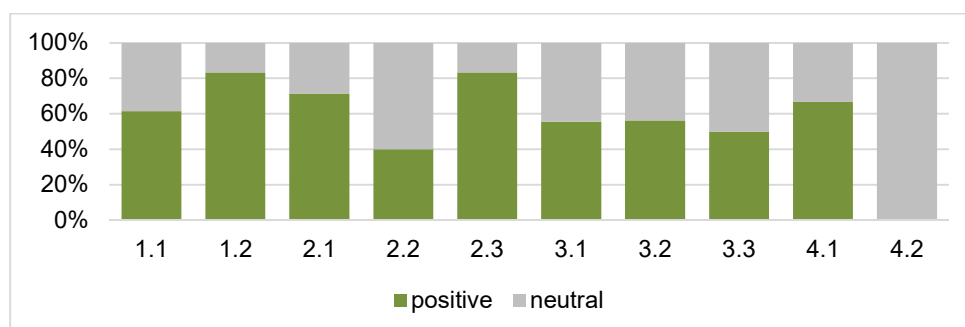Source: Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE application forms of selected projects. Own calculation.

Looking at the distribution of positive and neutral foreseen effects, the picture reflects closely the thematic focus. Projects under SO 3.2, SO 2.1, SO 2.3 and SO 4.1 report comparatively higher positive contribution to equal opportunities than other SOs. Notably, projects under SO 4.2 on the coordination among freight transport stakeholders, foresee none or only neutral effects, as effects on equal opportunities may, if any, be secondary.

Incorporation of the equality between men and women in funded projects

In application forms, 61% of approved projects deemed their project to have a positive effect on the equality between men and women, while the remaining share anticipated the effect to be neutral. This is the case mostly for projects under SO 1.2, SO 2.3, as well as for SO 2.1, SO 4.1 and SO 1.1.

In the Annual Implementation Report 2016, in particular, the STREFOWA project was deemed to be relevant for gender equality.

Figure 5-9 Share of projects by contribution to the equality principle – per SO

Source: Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE application forms of selected projects. Own calculation.

Unlike the other two principles, no project has gender equality as one of its primary goals. Nonetheless all projects, both those indicating positive and neutral effects on this principle, committed to ensure gender equality in project management and activities.

The distribution of projects with positive effects on gender equality is roughly similar to the pattern for the general equal opportunities principle. Projects under SO 4.2 are the least likely to have a direct effect on equality, including gender equality. In general, contribution to equality and equal opportunities can be favoured by the project theme, but does not seem to be directly linked to it.

5.3.5 Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions are drawn and corresponding recommendations are given with respect to each of the two evaluation questions guiding this chapter:

- The horizontal principles are integrated in the Cooperation Programme and in programme management arrangements as general statements. Their possible implementation tools and methods are briefly referred to in later programme documentation. The incorporation of principles in the key phase of project selection seems to be the most powerful tool that the programme has used to promote them. Principles are included as part of the selection criteria.
- The horizontal principles are well integrated in projects, with a large quantity of operations tackling sustainable development, including environmental sustainability, and equality as parts of their key goals. The thematic focus of the programme can be encouraging the promotion of topics closely related with horizontal principles, e.g. SO 1.2 on social innovation or the protection of the environment under SO 3.1. However, the contribution to sustainable development, equality and equal opportunities does not always depend on the project theme, as all projects – despite their topic – can make a positive contribution to the principles. The analysis shows for most SOs that a considerable share of projects contributes to the horizontal principles, even if projects under SO 4.2 show a more neutral profile.

5.4 Evaluation of contribution to the EU 2020 Strategy and macro-regional strategies

5.4.1 Introduction

This section focuses on two relevant issues: First, on the contribution of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme to the Europe 2020 Strategy and, second, on the contribution of the programme to relevant macro-regional strategies.

5.4.2 Methods used

For the analysis of the contribution of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme to the Europe 2020 Strategy and macro-regional strategies, different methods have been used. These range from desk reviews of programme documents, such as the CENTRAL EUROPE Cooperation Programme, the ex-

ante assessment evaluation report, the Annual Implementation Reports and project application forms, to interviews with programme bodies and project managers of case study projects.

5.4.3 Evaluation question/s

The evaluation questions that guided the analysis were:

- To what degree does the programme implementation contribute to the EU2020 strategy?
- To what degree does the programme implementation contribute to relevant macro-regional strategies? How are macro-regional strategies connected to the implementation of the programme?

5.4.4 Main findings

Contribution of the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme to the EU 2020 Strategy focuses mainly on the dimensions of smart and sustainable growth. Inclusive growth is tackled adequately within the frame of the programme. Since the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE programme is not clearly devoted to any of the four currently existing EU macro-regional strategies (MRS) but its territory is overlapping with all four strategies, the programme has a special bridging function and contributes differently to the four macro-regional strategies both at strategic and project level.

#### 5.4.4.1   Contribution to the EU2020 Strategy

Compliance of the territorial cooperation programmes with the EU 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth is required by Art. 55 of the Common Provisions Regulation. According to the Central Europe Operational Programme, "*the overall programme strategy is formulated in direct response to the EU 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*" (p.13).

Based on these three overarching Europe 2020 Strategy goals, the programme has selected four Thematic Objectives and translated them into four priority axes addressing mainly smart and sustainable growth. Correspondingly, the ex-ante evaluation highlights that the programme is in accordance with the Europe 2020 Strategy and addresses the challenges and needs of the area, while it also points out that the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme will have "*stronger contributions to the dimensions of smart and sustainable growth, rather than to the inclusive growth*", as the references to research and development and the energy and climate appear strongest (pg.78).

These priorities are confirmed by the actual funding distribution to the different Priority Axes.

The figure below categorises the projects under smart and sustainable growth objectives.

Figure 5-10 Number of projects per Specific Objective
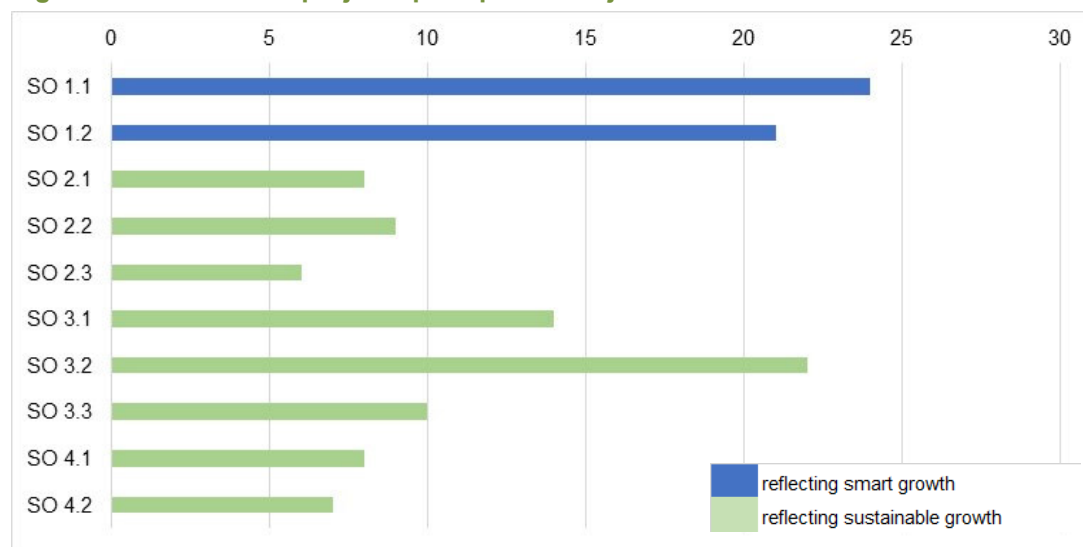
Source: Interreg CE project application forms. Calls 1, 2 and 3. Own Calculation.

The majority of the funding is targeting the EU2020 **sustainable growth objective**. Approx. 65% of projects reflect the sustainable growth objective.

The contribution to the smart growth goal is also high. 35% of projects contribute through activities and results to the wider objective of smart growth. This confirms the initial concept of the programme to concentrate contribution to these two Europe 2020 objectives.

Nevertheless, also inclusive growth is embedded in the programme and implied in some of the projects of different Specific Objectives. This is more obvious in SO 1.2, where projects contribute to social innovation, or to bridging and reducing innovation divides and addressing relevant social challenges. In the SOs of the other Priority Axes, the inclusive growth is implied rather indirectly in projects when addressing e.g. inclusion and participation.

In general, it can be said that all projects contribute to at least one of the EU2020 goals. Even if the contribution per project is minor and contributes more at local and regional level than at an observable national level. Still, the accumulated contribution at programme level through practical, on-the-ground solutions, pilot actions and transnational knowledge transfer and learning is deemed as very important to move forward towards the strategic goals of Europe 2020. Many Interreg projects bring new insights, methods and knowledge into local, regional and national policy-making and for other players in regional development. It is questionable that the EU2020 goals could be achieved without on-the-ground projects such as the ones from Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE, among others.

Below are some examples of how and in which areas projects contribute to the different EU2020 goals.

Table 5-3 Examples of projects contributing to EU2020 goals

EU2020 "Smart Growth"	
BIOCOM-PACK-CE	Contributing to the aim of increased use of renewable resources, the project uses innovative solutions and links R&D institutions with companies in the area of paper plastics packaging to introduce verified biodegradable materials in paper and cardboard packaging.
Digital IFE4CE	Developing an IT toolbox system to map and visualise integrated digital healthcare solutions, defining new tools and developing a network based modular learning system, identifying healthcare excellence spots, to boost innovation in health and achieve improved digital health innovation landscape.
Focus IN CD	Addressing the goals on tackling major challenges as health and demography, the project supports innovative patient centred health care services. It promotes the use of innovative e-services among stakeholders, the development and testing of celiac disease services and the uptake of skills and awareness.
PPI2Innovate	Targeting public procurers at all administrative levels to boost public procurement of innovative solutions, a powerful tool to boost innovation. Three thematic PPI2Innovate tools for SMART Health, SMART Energy and SMART ICT customised to six national institutional frameworks. Six regional competence centres for PPI and a central European network in plan, action plans and PPI projects and pilots.
SYNERGY	Contributing to innovation through building links, cooperation and synergies between companies, industry, research intermediaries and policy makers, on additive manufacturing and 3D printing, micro-nano technology and industry 4.0. Design thinking workshops, sharing or using someone's infrastructure to develop innovative products, testing and using platform with crowdfunding, crowdsourcing and micro-working solutions are among the benefits.
EU2020 "Sustainable Growth"	
CIRCLE2020	The project contributes to the transition towards circular economy through an innovative cross-value chain waste governance models and transnational analytic tools. A set of pilot actions, a methodology and a set of tools to raise awareness on the role of waste in circular economy are in the focus of the project.
GreenerSites	The project contributes to green growth through an environmental rehabilitation of brownfield sites. The project supports the improvements of un- or underused industrial areas, brownfield regeneration, through a common tool for brownfield regeneration, nine strategic action plans, eleven pilot actions and a training package.
ENERGY@SCHOOL	The project supports energy optimisation in school buildings and implements energy smart schools. The project engages teachers and students and raises awareness, provides strategies and plans, mobile phone applications and pilot solutions for energy efficiency and renewable energy applications in schools.
LUMAT	Contributing to the goal of 'a resource efficient Europe', the project aims to implement sustainable land use and integrated environmental management pilot projects in seven Central Europe functional urban areas. Developing training material on ecosystem services, land use conflict reduction tools for land management.

RAINMAN	The focus is on integrated heavy rain risk management, for which the project tries to integrate heavy rain risks in proper flood management frameworks. The aim is to increase knowledge of local and regional administrations, develop warning systems and prevention measures through the support of the toolbox.
Sulpiter	Enhancing the capacity in urban freight mobility planning to develop and adopt sustainable urban logistics plans. Functional urban areas working on transnational policy capacity building and the development of transnational analytical and governance tools.
EU2020 "Inclusive Growth"	
COME-IN	The project contributes to inclusive growth by making cultural heritage accessible to everyone, through increasing the capacity of small and medium-sized museums to be accessible to a wider public with different kinds of disabilities.
INNO-WISEs	The project improves the capacity of Work Integration Social Enterprises to offer qualified jobs to disadvantaged groups, connects actors from these enterprises, research, technological experts and relevant public authorities. It contributes to a stronger entrepreneurial culture and greater social cohesion.
SENTINEL	The project aims to reduce inequalities and hence supports social entrepreneurship through encouraging social enterprises, which provide job opportunities to local people of disadvantaged regions. Mentoring and networking pilots in place to improve employment in disadvantaged regions.
Social(i) Makers	The project supports social innovation through working with financiers, entrepreneurs, policy makers and citizens on how to generate new lively ecosystems. A unique educational package involving the partner regions, training of actors to develop innovation initiatives and activities to put the acquired skills in practice are among the objectives.

Source: Project Application Forms and websites, Case Study Reports

5.4.4.2 Contribution to relevant macro-regional strategies

Interreg programmes are in most cases the main funding mechanism of macro-regional projects[68]. The study on 'Socio-economic challenges, potentials and impacts of transnational cooperation in central Europe' also confirms that transnational cooperation programmes "*support the macro-regional strategies through funding as transnational cooperation programmes provide targeted solutions designed for specific regions, bridging gaps between national and EU-wide initiatives*" (pg. 241). This is more obvious for the Interreg transnational programmes that cover territorially the same area as a macro-regional strategy. The added value of the macro-regional strategies for the programmes in this case is closely linked to better quality projects and wider dissemination of project results (INTERACT Programme, 2017).
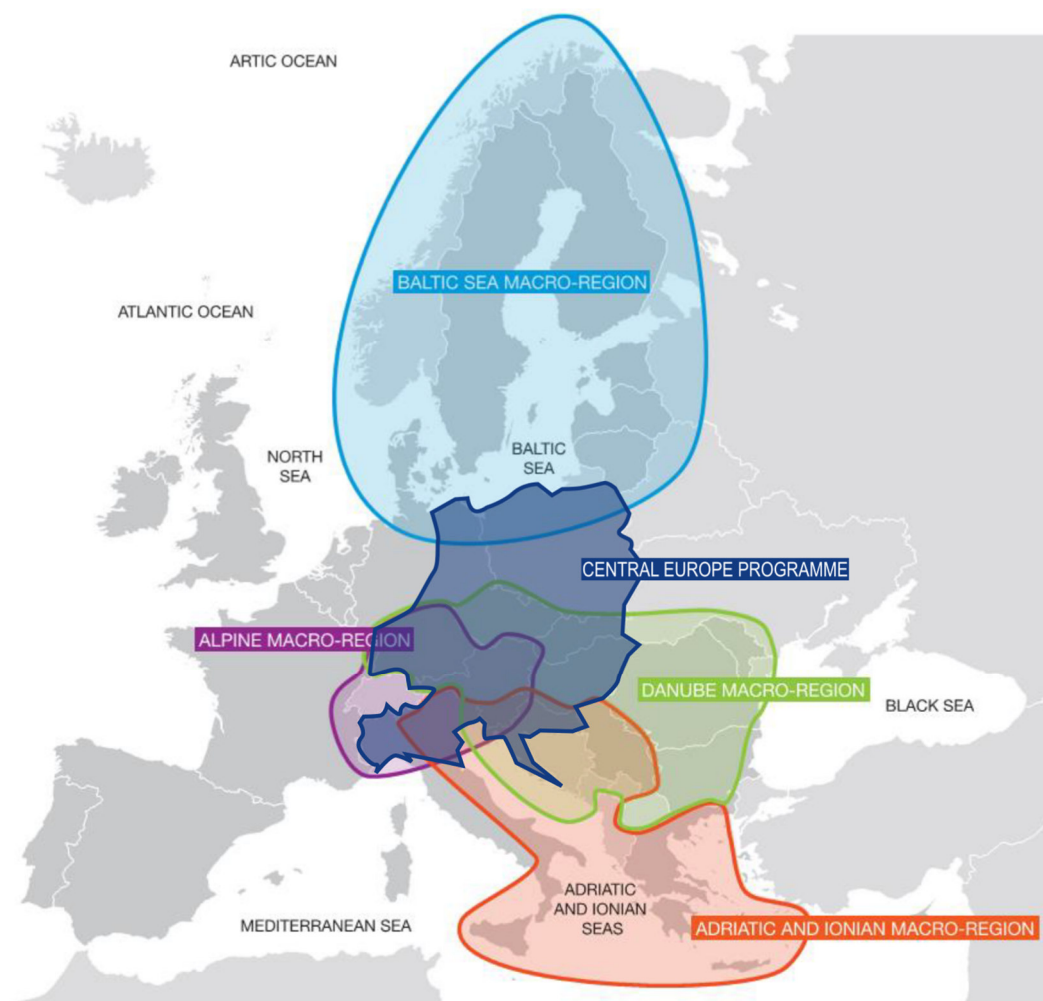
The contribution of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme to the macro-regional strategies can be considered as a special case. The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme is not clearly devoted

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[68] A macro-regional project is a jointly established development process that aims to create a broad impact and achieve objectives and targets of the macro-regional strategies. Macro-regional project is implemented through interlinked activities (e.g. thematic working groups, networks) and operations (projects). Interact and Horizontal Action Capacity, 2017: What is a macro-regional project?, Input paper.

to one of the four currently existing EU macro-regional strategies. Its geography covers, however, parts of all four macro-regional strategies, as shown by the map below. The programme shares large parts of the Danube macro-regional strategy (EUSDR) and the Alpine Space strategy (EUSALP) and smaller parts of the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) and the Adriatic-Ionian strategies (EUSAIR).

Therefore, the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme can support projects that have a clear link between the programme's and the relevant macro-regional strategy's objectives and envisaged impact, but also links across different macro-regional strategies when addressing topics in several territories belonging to different macro-regional strategies.

Map 5-1 CENTRAL EUROPE Programme and macro-regional strategies' geographical overlaps

Source: Spatial Foresight, adapted from European Commission, DG Regio, 2017, Study on the macro-regional strategies and their links to cohesion policy

In consequence, the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme can be a common platform for developing ideas, creating synergies between macro-regional strategies. Given these various overlaps of macro-regional strategies in the area of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme, the programme acts rather as a 'bridging programme' between all four macro-regional strategies.

The degree to which the different projects contribute to the objectives of the four macro-regional strategies varies. Looking at the project application forms approved projects, two different approaches to the macro-regional strategies can be observed. The first approach regards the geographical coverage alignment and the second a priority alignment.

The geographical coverage alignment becomes visible from the strategies being more or less referred to by the project applications. The EUSDR and the EUSALP are the two most referenced macro-regional strategies in the project applications, with only very few projects not referring to them. When it comes to the EUSAIR, the strategy is referred to by 83.5% of projects. The least referred macro-regional strategy is the EUSBSR, but still a significant amount of projects (81%) makes a reference to it.

The number of projects referring to the different macro-regional strategy somehow relates to the geographical overlaps of the programme area with the four macro-regional strategies. The observed differences in the frequency of relating to one of the four MRS mirror the differences in territorial overlaps between the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme and the four strategies. However, even if the territorial overlap with, for example, the EUSBSR area is not large the share of projects that reports a contribution to it can still be considered as high.

Table 5-4 Share of projects referring to macro-regional strategies

Macro-regional strategy	Share of projects with reference
EUSDR	96.5%
EUSALP	94.1%
EUSAIR	83.5%
EUSBSR	81.2%

Source: Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE applications forms of selected projects. Own calculation.

Most projects refer to macro-regional strategies in a general manner. Geographical coverage alignment refers to when regions, or in some cases even Member States, that are part of a project are also part of one or more macro-regional strategies. This general alignment is described in the application forms of projects.

However, a considerable number of projects also shows a more detailed contribution to macro-regional strategies via a more thorough thematic alignment to specific action areas. The thematic alignment is reflected in the priorities of the projects, which are in line with the objectives of the macro-regional strategies. Projects that refer to macro-regional strategies in their application forms state which of their objectives match and could potentially contribute to the thematic objectives of the macro-regional

strategies. Here, a clearer contribution could be observed, as project results may support detailed objectives of the strategies.

The following table gives some examples of direct contributions and thematic alignments of projects with MRS.

Table 5-5 Examples of projects contributing to MRS

EUSBSR
COME-IN! contributes to the EUSBSR Action Plan objective to "preserve and further develop the cultural heritage of the region and to ensure and promote public interest in and access to these assets".
SULPiTER's mission on improving freight mobility planning in urban areas is relevant to the EUSBSR sub-objective: "Good transport conditions" and the Priority "Connect the region". The project contributes with training, new tools and Sustainable Urban Logistics Plans for functional urban areas.
Social(i)Makers: The project will have an impact on two main intervention areas of the EUSBSR's Action Plan (connect the region; increase prosperity), which entail working on people, cross-border crime and economic dynamism.
TalkNET: The project contributes to the EUSBSR objective "Connecting the region" by improving links within the region and to the rest of the EU. Better connections and efficient transport networks are needed. Within the project intermodal connections will be developed from Polish sea and inland ports to Central and Eastern European regions.
EUSDR
The project TalkNET is in line with EUSDR Priority 1 "Connecting the Danube Region" – Priority Area 1a and 1b "To improve mobility and intermodality" since the project contributes to the "development of efficient multimodal terminals at Danube river ports and dry ports to connect inland waterways with rail transport by 2020".
The project ProteCHt2save is in line with the EUSDR Priority 3 "To promote culture, tourism and people to people contacts" and in particular with the target 6 addressed to ensure the sustainable preservation of cultural heritage.
PROLINE-CE will provide sound recommendations for implementation of EUSDR within the Member States and the IPA countries and will contribute to Priority Area 4 and 5 (Action 2: to reduce flood risks, measures will be reviewed and monitored within the Pilot Areas).
LUMAT: EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Priority area no. 6 "To preserve biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soils", Priority Area 7 "To develop the Knowledge Society (research, education and ICT)", Priority Area 10: "To step up institutional capacity and cooperation" are coherent with LUMAT specific objectives.
PPI2Innovate: In EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) PPI is crosscutting issue and PPI2Innovate project contributes to PA 7 "Knowledge Society" through support in implementing the "Innovation Union", PA 8 "Competitiveness" by increasing capacities to innovate which is linked with Action 'To support creativity and entrepreneurship' and PA 10 "Institutional capacities and cooperation".
SMART COMMUTING is strongly linked to PA 1B "Mobility-Rail-Road-Air", especially Action (4) - "To ensure sustainable metropolitan transport systems and mobility" & PA 10 "Institutional capacities and cooperation".
UGB, showing a good geographic match with the Danube region, highly contributes to PA 6 "Biodiversity, landscapes, air & soil quality" of EUSDR, particularly to its target of maintaining and enhancing ecosystems and their services by establishing green infrastructure and restoring at least 15% of degraded ecosystems.

TRANS³net contributes to PA 7 "Development of a knowledge society". Two goals of this strategy: 1) investment of 3% of GDP in R&D by 2020 and 2) increase of number of patents obtained in the region by 50% are also supported aims of the proposed project.
SMART_watch is connected to the Pillar Building Prosperity -PA8-to support the competitiveness of enterprises, including cluster and to Pillar Strengthening the Danube Region –PA10-to step up institutional cooperation.
EUSAIR
CONNECT2CE will support the implementation of EUSAIR, in particular the following actions identified by the EUSAIR Area: 1) "Improving the accessibility of the coastal areas and islands"; 2) "Cross-border facilitation – example of possible actions: Re-launch cross-border bus or train connections for passengers".
The project ECRR contributes to EUSAIR Pillar 4.1 "Diversified tourism offer", which under its Action "Sustainable and thematic tourist routes" specifically mentions pilgrimage routes as one example of desired projects. The thematic route segments developed in Slovenia and Italy will cut through the EUSAIR region.
INTENT aligns with EUSAIR Objective 1.1. It supports development of regional innovation systems by improving the innovation governance system for healthcare professionals & by enabling stakeholders from SI/IT/HR who are integrated in healthcare systems via hospitals & universities.
The project RUINS can contribute to objective "Diversify the macro-region's tourism products and services, and tackle the issue of seasonal tourism" within EUSAIR Pillar 4 "Sustainable tourism" through elaboration of tools for sustainable protection, modern management and sustainable re-use of historical ruins in Croatia, Italy and Slovenia enabling transformation of these historical ruins into attractive tourist sites.
SHAREPLACE contributes to EUSAIR Pillar 1 - Topic 2 "to develop reliable transport networks and intermodal connections with the hinterland, both for freight and passenger". SHAREPLACE will support such priority by providing solutions to improve the interconnection among transport systems.
EUSALP
ROSIE contributes to EUSALP priority on "Improving and developing support for enterprises" by improving skills among entrepreneurs and innovation actors to promote responsible innovation in companies. The project develops and tests tools and training to improve capacity to implement innovation responsibly.
FIRECE will contribute to EUSALP Pillar 3 further on the position of the Alpine Region as excellent in terms of energy efficiency and regional energy plans. The development of new financial instruments (considered by the Strategy as crossing theme) will support investments by the private and public actors. FIRECE will improve the operability and efficiency of the Public Actors and increase the productivity and the private sector.
The project CULTURECOVERY supports the EUSALP Pillar 3 Objective "Ensuring sustainability in the Alps: preserving the Alpine heritage and promoting a sustainable use of natural and cultural resources".
RURES contributes within Pillar 3 Objective "Ensuring sustainability in the Alps" to the second main priority "building further on the position of the Alpine region as world class in terms of energy efficiency and renewable energy".
The project YOUINHERIT contributes to Pillar 3 of the EUSALP "Environment and Energy" with a focus on Action Group 6 "To preserve and valorise natural resources, including water and cultural resources". Its objectives and activities are in line with EUSALP's declaration on the meaning of valorisation: "resources are not only the essential basis but also the medium of territorial development."

Source: Project Application Forms and Websites. Case Study Reports.

Overall, the majority of the CENTRAL EUROPE projects touches upon specific themes, trying to identify and match priority specific action lines or topics or an action of the respective macro-regional strategy.

In most cases, the actual contribution to the macro-regional strategies is yet to be seen, as projects are still on-going and contribution will materialise in many cases in the final phases of a project (the dissemination of results) or even thereafter.

Table 5-6 Most common links between project objectives and macro-regional strategy objectives

Objectives	EUSDR	EUSALP	EUSAIR	EUSBSR
Research & innovation		X		X
Bio-economy				X
Blue technologies			X	
Knowledge society	X			
Renewable energy	X			X
Energy efficiency	X	X	X	
Low carbon policies		X		
Sustainability		X		
Biodiversity			X	
Natural heritage		X		
(Sustainable) Tourism	X		X	X
Cultural heritage / culture	X			X
Mobility / transport	X	X		X
Connectivity			X	
People and skills	X			

Source: Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE application forms of selected projects.

It is interesting to see that there are certain patterns of preferred topics for each of the MRS to which CE projects contribute. The reason for this might be that some topics are more popular and show more progress than others in each MRS. Stakeholders are already quite active and are more prone to cooperate within a new Interreg project on the topic. This attracts then further attention and raises interest to create new partnerships to contribute to these prioritised themes. This would support the hypothesis that macro-regional strategies (e.g. through existing thematic networks and offering a transnational strategic framework) facilitate the creation of partnerships for Interreg projects, but that also Interreg projects contribute to implement the general and specific objectives of MRS (e.g. through concrete actions "on the ground"). This means, there is a mutual benefit relationship between Interreg and MRS. The high number of projects aligned to at least one MRS supports this hypothesis.

At programme level, interviews with the JS confirm the efforts of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme to have continuous contact and information exchange with all MRS in the programme area. The programme visits relevant macro-regional events, such as Annual Fora, and understands itself as one of the funding instruments to support projects of macro-regional importance. It also presents its projects at the macro-regional strategies' Annual Meetings. The programme sees its role in contributing to all four MRS, but without the need to support governance-wise one MRS directly (as it is the case for

other Interreg programmes, such as Alpine Space, Danube, ADRION and Baltic Sea Region). This has two effects. First, it causes additional work for the programme to participate in the macro-regional Annual Fora and similar events, but on the other side, the programme can be flexible and selective in its cooperation – without having additional tasks related to macro-regional strategies' implementation or management. The programme can select when, where and how to create links with the strategies, if necessary or useful. In any case, all stakeholders recognise that active links with the strategies increase the visibility of projects and the programme.

All in all, the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has a significant contribution to all four macro-regional strategies, as it supports and promotes transnational collaboration at strategic and project level. Most projects contribute directly to at least one MRS. Even if the contribution is not concentrated on one single MRS, many projects have an important contribution through implementing objectives of four different macro-regional strategies "on the ground".

5.4.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The following conclusions and recommendations can be drawn from this chapter:

- Overall, the programme contributes considerably to the Europe 2020 Strategy. All projects contribute to at least one of the strategic goals of EU2020. The majority of the funding is targeting the EU2020 sustainable growth objective with approx. 65% of the projects reflecting the sustainable growth objective. In addition, the contribution to the smart growth goal is high with 35% of projects contributing. This confirms the initial concept of the programme to concentrate contribution to these two Europe 2020 objectives. Nevertheless, also inclusive growth is embedded in the programme and implied in some of the projects of different Specific Objectives. This is most obvious in SO 1.2, where projects contribute to social innovation, or to bridging and reducing innovation divides and addressing relevant social challenges.
  - o Even if the single contribution per project is minor, the accumulated contribution at programme level through practical, on-the-ground solutions, pilot actions and transnational knowledge transfer and learning is deemed as very important to move forward towards the strategic goals of Europe 2020.Highlighting the contributions to Europe 2020 goals, including the inclusive growth contribution in the dissemination of programme results could be envisaged.
- Due to its special geography, being in the centre of the EU, the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme functions as a bridging programme between different macro-regional areas.
- 81-84% of projects declare to contribute to the EUSBSR and EUSAIR, whereas more than 90% indicate a contribution to EUSALP or to EUSDR (almost 97%). Most projects contribute directly to at least one MRS. Even if the contribution is not concentrated on one single MRS, many projects have an important contribution through implementing objectives of four different macro-regional strategies "on the ground".
  - o At programme level, there is a continuous contact and information exchange between the programme and all MRS in the programme area. As suggestion, the programme should continue with regular contacts and information exchanges with the MRS in the programme area. The programme can advocate further on its

bridging role for developing a functional area in the region to bridge the East-West divide. Detailing and communicating the available information about expected and achieved contributions to MRS in specific publications or news would support this idea.

6 Overall conclusions and recommendations

This report brings together and updates the conclusions and recommendations made at earlier stages of the evaluation, in particular for part 1 of the evaluation, and findings from the second part of the evaluation. The following section reviews earlier recommendations and their follow-up by the programme. This includes both, recommendations of the first evaluation report and ad-hoc recommendations. Thereafter, conclusions and recommendations developed for part 2 of the evaluation are structured along the three main evaluation chapters of this report.

6.1 Implementation of recommendations during the evaluation

The first evaluation report (2016) led to a set of recommendations to further improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme management system and processes. Thus, changes have been made since 2017 to amend certain flaws of the system or to further improve its efficiency and quality. Most recommendations have been tackled by the relevant programme authorities (mainly JS, MC and NCP) and brought the desired improvements. Only punctual recommendations could not be attended without larger efforts and costs that would outrun the benefit of the improvement. In these cases, the recommendations have been taken on board for the 2021-2027 programming period.

In the course of the evaluation additional recommendations were forwarded to the JS leading to immediate action. These are included below as well.

More in detail, the following measures have been undertaken to follow up on the given recommendations:

Summarised previous recommendations included in Evaluation Report Part 1	Follow-up
Programme management structures	
Some differences in the understanding of the role of NCPs. Further exchange on different practices would be beneficial.	Recommendation attended. On-going process. Dedicated NCP meeting on Call 3 support measures including train the trainer´s workshop. Harmonised concept for Call 3 national applicant trainings including JS participation.
Continue identifying and exploiting existing potentials for simplification. Further increased use of IT tools for enhancing efficiency.	Recommendation attended. On-going process. Continuous process of identifying and exploiting simplification potentials and relevant IT tools, e.g. webinars for applicant support. Application and assessment processes have been further simplified. Less administrative burden according to Beneficiary Survey.
Seize opportunities to discuss the strategic orientation of the programme and sharpen the strategic profile and positioning.	Recommendation attended. On-going process. For example, 6th MC meeting (June 2017) with strategic discussions on Call 3. 8th MC Meeting (October 2018) with

Summarised previous recommendations included in Evaluation Report Part 1	Follow-up
	an open-ended workshop on discussing possibilities for Call 4.
Initiate more exchange among NCP network if this is wished by all NCPs. NCPs should become more pro-active in using the already available communication means and fora.	Recommendation attended. First steps taken. Discussed in a focus group during the evaluation. Proposed to be implemented, as it is difficult to include more face-to-face events for the NCP network, but NCP meetings can also be done via skype.
Programme Communication	
Specifically identify external factors that could hamper the achievement of communication results. Clearly assign the specific responsibility of the actors involved in the implementation of communication activities.	To be taken into account for 2021-2027. The specific responsibilities for communication are defined more clearly in the work plans and not in the strategy. Lesson for 2021-2027: The JS will analyse if external factors will be included in the next communication strategy, as the 2014-2020 strategy will not be updated. This effort would go beyond the expected benefit.
For some communication output indicators, a revision or up-date of baselines values, target values or indicator definitions is recommended.	Recommendation attended. First steps taken. Relevant baseline and target values have been updated. Up-dating of social media indicators stays challenging as calculation of social media user data changes continuously. Thus, their usefulness as indicator within the strategy is limited. Lessons learned for 2021-2027.
Further promote the use of social media, both by programme stakeholders and projects. Some room for improvement still exists for events organised by the NCPs, national websites, as well as social media, and print publications.	Recommendation attended. On-going process. Continuous programme efforts for using social media. However, limited access and organisational restrictions by some programme and project stakeholders limit the use of social media more actively during working hours. NCP event feedback scored much higher in 2017 already than in previous years. National websites (outside the programme website) out of scope of Programme management.
Project application and selection processes	
Priority-specific outreach and support activities are recommended on national and transnational level to further promote the participation of priority 4 'transport' stakeholders.	Recommendation attended. JS participation in meetings of EU MRS transport coordinators and INTERACT thematic network for transport. Comprehensive support measures for the third call (all priorities including a dedicated workshop on transport)
Current national/ regional representation of applicants and beneficiaries could be an incentive for NCPs of underrepresented countries to become more active in support and communication activities.	Recommendation attended. First steps taken. More intensive action in underrepresented countries and regions. To date, 90% of NUTS 2 regions represented in projects as partners.

Summarised previous recommendations included in Evaluation Report Part 1	Follow-up
	Applicant support measures at national level (national applicant trainings) show a very positive feedback and good outreach.
Available data do not allow inferences to be drawn on the actual number of programme newcomers among successful applicants.	Recommendation attended. First steps taken. A related question was introduced in the following beneficiary surveys. The data gave useful information on newcomers.
Apply more rigorously the filtering of projects in the 1-step procedure. Given the very high standards pursued, the programme might also consider adjusting the balance between quality and time required for the application and assessment process.	Recommendation attended. On-going process. Revision of assessment methodology for the third call: - Strengthening the relevance filter, - Streamlining of assessment sub-criteria, - Procedure for consensus building between assessors, - Presentation of assessment results. Changed procedure led to more efficient project selection (call 3 had 30% of applications (54) rejected during the relevance filter).
The choice of call procedures, i.e. 1-step vs. 2-steps, can serve the programme as an instrument to steer how many applications and which kind of applicants come in by lowering or increasing the entrance barrier.	Recommendation attended. On-going process. The programme has intensively discussed the procedures and foci for calls 3 and 4 and taken dedicated decisions in view of the objectives followed by each call.
If the relevance filter is to be used in forthcoming calls, the prerogative of single MC delegations to revert the outcome of the relevance filter could be reconsidered.	Recommendation attended. Relevance filter results were discussed and agreed by consensus by the MC during a dedicated MC Meeting.
Evaluators encourage an open-ended discussion of the current project selection mode.	Recommendation attended. On-going process. During the 6th MC meeting (June 2017) intensive discussions on MC decision-making for project selection were launched, based on several options proposed by MA/JS. Further changes to the selection procedure were rejected by the MC. The MA/JS proposed for call 4 a new method for project selection which allows more strategic discussions of the MC.
The navigability of call-specific application manual could be improved (e.g. by introducing bookmarks or hyperlinks).	Recommendation attended. First steps taken. For call 4 the application manual was shortened and streamlined (reducing from 5 parts to only 1 document). In addition, to be taken into account as lesson for 2021-2027.
Additional recommendations added during Part 2 of the evaluation (2018/2019)	
A review of the Cohesion Policy open database and clarifications with other JS of transnational	Recommendation attended.

Summarised previous recommendations included in Evaluation Report Part 1	Follow-up
programmes revealed that common output indicators were not coherently calculated due to an insufficient definition of the indicator and its calculation method by the EC. This refers to CO26, CO41 and CO42, in particular. An adaption of monitoring (target values) and counting method for common output indicators was recommended to comply with the comparability objective of common output indicators.	The programme submitted a CP amendment request to the European Commission in February 2019, including the change of target values of common output indicators CO 1, 26, 41 and 42. This modification (CP Version 3) was adopted by the European Commission in April 2019.

6.2 Programme management systems and processes

In addition to the recommendations of Part 1 of the evaluation and the additional ad-hoc recommendations, the evaluators defined for each evaluation topic a table with an overview on conclusions and further suggestions for improvement, both for the current programming period and for 2021-2027.

Given the high level of quality of programme management and implementation, there was actually no need for recommendations to be implemented in order to increase efficiency, effectiveness and quality. Minor suggestions have been included that might add to the quality or help the programme preparing for the next programming period.

Below we present the main conclusions and recommendations regarding programme management systems and processes.

Area	Conclusions	Recommendations
Programme management system	• The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has a well-defined management structure. • The adequateness of the distribution of roles and processes is confirmed by the overall results of the programme management. • The programme is managed smoothly and according to the planned activities and established targets in the Cooperation Programme and in detailed Annual Work Plans. • Workflows have been optimised as a result of learning from the past programming period. The relationship	**Minor suggestions for improvement:** • No further suggestions. **Recommendations for 2014-2020:** • No further recommendations for the on-going programming period are necessary. **Recommendations for the next programming period 2021-2027:** • Informal exchanges with other ETC programmes to avoid overlaps and double funding are helpful and might be formalised in the future. • Even if differences in rules between Interreg programmes cannot be fixed by the CENTRAL EUROPE

Area	Conclusions	Recommendations
	between available resources and tasks is efficient. • The processes and administrative procedures foresee an adequate and timely flow of information. MC members and NCPs confirmed that they feel well informed and appreciate the regular provision of updates on developments in the programme. • Decisions concerning the programme are taken by consensus, striving for a balance of interests and positions. The consensual decision-making process is actively supported by the MA/JS. • The Programme bodies have established adequate mechanisms to involve relevant partners during programming and implementation and to promote coordination with other programmes. The cooperation with centrally managed EU programmes through call 4 can be highlighted as good practice among European transnational programmes, even if the call is still on-going and results are still lacking. • Differences in rules between Interreg programmes raise uncertainty among national contact points, applicants and beneficiaries. There is room for more harmonisation that can be taken forward to the EC.	Programme, the wish for more harmonisation of rules can be taken forward to the relevant decision-makers also by the CE Programme.
Communication	• Programme Communication Strategy is sufficiently sound, concrete and coherent to support effective programme management and implementation. • There is a considerable progress on implementing communication measures which is complete aligned with overall programme progress. • The programme has a wide array of support measures to projects and to beneficiaries on communication. Beneficiaries and users of communication tools and activities are highly satisfied with the support given by the programme on communication.	**Minor suggestions for improvement:** • The Programme should further promote that project partners have sufficient professional capacity in communication and outreach. **Recommendations for 2014-2020:** • No further recommendations for the on-going programming period are necessary. **Recommendations for the next programming period 2021-2027:**

Area	Conclusions	Recommendations
	• Overall, the communication approach can be assessed as very advanced and highly effective. • All communication tools can be considered user-friendly, up-to-date and well-targeted. There are diverse tools and channels to increase outreach to new groups and new applicants. • The communication of results is based on a well-defined and integrated approach. As a good practice, the Programme has developed a social media monitoring tool. The Programme encourages also capitalisation of project results.	• One element to be improved is the proactive communication activity of projects. For the next programing period, the JS could inform applicants on the relevance of communication and support projects, for example, through more specific workshops and video tutorials. • With regard to the communication strategy, it is recommended to identify external factors that could hamper the achievement of communication results or change the context. • Continue innovating on quantifying social media-related indicators so that they are useful and comparable over the whole programming period. Given the high volatility of social media channel uses and algorithms to describe usage, this is a challenge.
Project application and selection processes	• Application and selection procedure/s have been evaluated as rather efficient. • The assessment criteria used during selection are considered balanced, aiming at innovative projects with a high strategic relevance and high potential impact, but also at a high operational quality. • The relevance filter can be considered a useful and effective instrument to assure efficiency of the application and selection process. • The selection process is considered fair and impartial, giving each application with sufficient quality an equal chance of being selected for funding. • According to one Member State, there is room for improvement regarding strategic decision-making for consensus on project selection. • The fourth call is the first of its kind in European Territorial Cooperation. It might bring valuable insights on future coordination, complementarity and coherence between EU funds.	**Minor suggestions for improvement:** • Continue improving user-friendliness of the eMS and of support documents such as application manuals. **Recommendations for 2014-2020:** • No further recommendations for the on-going programming period are deemed necessary. **Recommendations for the next programming period 2021-2027:** • The use of the relevance filter and the 4-eyes principle in the assessment might be considered a good practice and starting point for discussions about assessment and selection tools for the next programming period.

6.3 Organisation and management of the project cycle and project support

Below we present the main conclusions and recommendations regarding project cycle and project support.

Area	Conclusions	Recommendations
Project cycle management and monitoring	- The set-up of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE reporting and monitoring processes is evaluated as effectively contributing to the verification of project progress. - The timing for the reimbursement of claims is adequate and respects the deadline of 90 days. The reimbursement process has improved and sped up compared to the previous programming period and in the course of the 2014-2020 period. The merging of MA and CA has played an important role in the increased efficiency of payment processes, as well as abandoning the need for hard copies. - The programme set-up is likely to reduce the risk of financial errors and de-commitment, thanks to clear procedures allowing early detection of errors already at project level through LP control and thorough verification at every step (from LP to CA), but also to the introduction of simplification measures (eMS, harmonisation of budget lines). - An aspect considered as potentially increasing the risk of errors is the lack of harmonisation of financial control, in particular first level control, among ETC programmes. Some difficulties in the efficiency and interaction with national controllers in certain participating Member States have been reported. - The share of eligible applications is generally over 90% in 2014-2020, thus higher than the 2007-2013 average share (79.3%). - The programme has effectively set up quality controls at project and programme level to ensure the monitoring of project output quality and	**Minor suggestions for improvement:** - Further harmonisation of national control systems and rules might reduce perceived uncertainties and/or time delays. **Recommendations for 2014-2020:** - It is recommended to skip the next monitoring of progress as scheduled for 2020, as it will bring hardly new insights. It is seen as sufficient to anticipate the verification of the final achievements (2023) in order to feed still into the impact evaluation to be conducted in 2020/2021. **Recommendations for the next programming period 2021-2027:** - Even though it goes beyond the sphere of influence of the CE programme, further harmonisation efforts at EU/ETC level should be encouraged to ensure a consistent approach towards financial reporting among programmes and further reduce administrative burden.

Area	Conclusions	Recommendations
	their progress towards the set targets. The effort of the programme to group programme-specific output indicators in typologies (Strategies, tools, pilot actions and trainings) common to all SOs allows for a more effective measurement of outputs at programme level. • The use of additional thematic result indicators helps to monitor programme results. With them, the adequateness of the monitoring system to periodically measure programme results during implementation has increased. • The programme has defined also a set programme specific result indicators. In general, the monitoring process has to follow a strict methodology to be useful. Given the relatively low dynamics of the updated values characterising the entire programme area, monitoring of result indicators in dense time intervals as highly inefficient.	
Project support	• The feedback from beneficiaries as well as the analysis of programme documents allows to positively evaluating the support provided by the programme on reporting and using the eMS and on communication, target group involvement and mainstreaming of project outputs and results. • The electronic monitoring system is evaluated positively in terms of allowing a complete documentation of relevant data (with special regard to progress reports and payment claims). The programme bodies and beneficiaries are guided and supported through programme documents (DMCS, Implementation Manual) on how to store data effectively.	**Minor suggestions for improvement:** • Continue working on more simple manuals and application forms. • Continue working on user-friendly functionalities of eMS. **Recommendations for 2014-2020:** • No further recommendations. **Recommendations for the next programming period 2021-2027:** • No further recommendations.
Simplification measures	• The introduction of simplification measures has noticeably reduced the administrative burden for applicants and beneficiaries in the application phase, including a decrease in the number of ineligible applications, and in reporting	**Minor suggestions for improvement:** • No further suggestions. **Recommendations for 2014-2020:** • No further recommendations for this period.

Area	Conclusions	Recommendations
	through the introduction of eMS and HIT and SCOs, although the latter have not been widely used. One reason can be the 20% threshold for the flat-rate reimbursement of staff costs (Art.19 of the ETC regulation).	**Recommendations for the next programming period 2021-2027:** • Even though it goes beyond the scope of the CE Programme, it might encourage that methodologies to calculate staff costs and other rules are further simplified and harmonised (e.g. reduce number of calculation methods and apply the same methods for staff cost calculation in all ETC programmes).

6.4 Progress of programme implementation for achieving the programme objectives

The following conclusions and recommendations can be drawn with regard to **programme progress and implementation**:

Area	Conclusions	Recommendations
Progress	• After three calls for proposals, the programme allocated 101.5% of the available funds to 129 projects. 21.6 % of the programme funds have already been certified to the European Commission. To maximise the absorption of funds, the fourth call will be funded mostly through savings generated by projects approved in earlier calls. • The programme monitoring and control system is well functioning and beneficiaries are fully implementing their projects, leading to good programme performance from both the physical and the financial point of view. • Performance milestones planned for 2018 have been successfully achieved and surpassed. • The Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE programme is well on track with its programme implementation regarding output indicators. The high level of progress is due to an overall higher number of projects than expected, but	**Minor suggestions for improvement:** No further suggestions. **Recommendations for 2014-2020:** • SOs which can be recommended for an-depth analysis in the impact evaluation are SOs 2.1 and 2.3 (advanced relative progress), SOs 1.1 and 3.2 (highest number of projects), as well as SO 4.2 to highlight the reasons leading to later delivery of transport project outputs. **Recommendations for the next programming period 2021-2027:** • If possible, draw lessons from the achievements and results per project regarding output indicators to allow a more adequate planning of indicator target values for the next programming period.

Area	Conclusions	Recommendations
	also to a higher expected production of outputs per project. • Examples of project results identified through case study revision show the wide range of topics and relevant outputs in practice, from training schemes to pilot actions, from leveraged investments funds to commitment on further action. • With regard to monitoring the additional thematic result indicators that have been defined by the programme, first project impacts can be observed. The expected impacts of projects are considerable: more than 2,700 institutions are expected to adopt new or improved strategies and action plans, more than EUR 500 million of additional funds are expected to be leveraged, almost 2,800 jobs will be created based on project achievements and approx. 31,000 people will be trained. Within this framework, projects have already managed to lever more than EUR 27 million of additional funds, have already trained more than 8,000 people, created 47 new jobs and engaged 267 institutions to adopt new or improved strategies and action plans. • As for the programme-specific result indicators, it is still too early for a thorough analysis. The results of the 2018 update show that the situation of the indicators are considered by experts as generally more positive than in 2014, before the start of the programme. The trends are therefore positive in all relevant thematic areas.	
Synergies	• The programme has well developed mechanisms in place for developing synergies with other EU programmes. The programme bodies foster the generation of synergies through diverse coordination and cooperation measures. The activities at programme and project	**Minor suggestions for improvement:** • Continue mobilising all relevant players, e.g. national contact points, contact points of mainstream programmes and European funding instruments to exchange information in order to generate further synergies with other programmes.

Area	Conclusions	Recommendations
	level can be evaluated as effective to generate synergies.	• Promote synergies with national or regional programmes in the region through NCPs.
		Recommendations for 2014-2020: • Disseminate experience with coordination with EU programmes under direct management (call 4). • In the impact evaluation, include a comparative analysis for the creation on impacts in view of projects with and without explicit synergies.
		Recommendations for the next programming period 2021-2027: • No further recommendations.
Stakeholder involvement	• The programme has so far managed to involve 4,200 organisations as applicants and/or project partners. When considering the composition of applicants, a leading role is occupied by public authorities (27%), followed by higher education and research institutions (18%), SMEs (16%), and interest groups including NGOs (15%). • The most represented category of partners (34%) and lead partners (45%) are public authorities. • Private partner involvement is positive, with 41% of overall applicants being private organisations. The share of private partners in selected operations is 29%, which is still a considerable share and higher than in other transnational programmes, as far as data is available. Private partner involvement is rather heterogeneous across different thematic fields, which mirrors the different importance of private entities for different Priority Axes and Specific Objectives. It can be observed that the share of SMEs (16%) is relatively large in applications, however only 7% of project partners are SMEs. • Private partners, including SMEs and large enterprises are thematically predominant in projects under PA 1 and SO 4.2 on the coordination of freight	**Minor suggestions for improvement:** • Further analyse SO 4.2 on balanced public-private partnerships, is suggested (for example, in the impact evaluation). • In view of the role of enterprises as dominant target group under PA 1 analyse further their role in the impact evaluation in view of differences of involvement of enterprises as target group and as project partners. **Recommendations for 2014-2020:** • No further recommendations **Recommendations for the next programming period 2021-2027:** • Foresee data gathering through monitoring and/or surveys on newcomers and private partners to improve the availability of reliable data for evaluations and reflection.

Area	Conclusions	Recommendations
	transport stakeholders. This SO shows the importance of links between public organisations and enterprises. • Applicants are geographically distributed in a relatively even way. Countries with a high share of lead partners with respect to overall population size are Slovenia, Italy, Hungary, and to a lesser extent, Austria. In absolute terms, partners are well distributed geographically, but with a marked predominance of lead partners from Italy. Smaller MS like Slovenia and Croatia are very active in applying, whereas partner from Czech Republic and Poland, somehow also Germany, are comparatively less active in the programme. • The analysis shows that 24% of applicants are newcomers to Interreg. This is quite an impressive rate of newcomers for a long-standing programme such as CENTRAL EUROPE. • The programme is generally successful in involving a diverse set of target groups, with a focus on private organisations and enterprises, in particular, for PA 1. • Projects make use of a very broad range of tools and methods for communication with target groups, and, in most cases, it was found to be well planned.	
Horizontal principles	• The horizontal principles are integrated in the programme management arrangements as general statements of principle. Their possible implementation tools and methods are briefly referred to in later programme documentation. The incorporation of principles in the key phase of project selection seems to be the most powerful tool that the programme has used to promote them. Principles are included as part of the selection criteria. • The horizontal principles are well integrated in projects, with a large quantity of operations tackling	**Minor suggestions for improvement:** • Continue to give practical examples to projects on how to integrate the horizontal principles. **Recommendations for 2014-2020:** • Thematic publications of positive good practice examples of how horizontal principles are tackled by projects can help to further promote them. **Recommendations for the next programming period 2021-2027:** • Integrate horizontal principles in specific documents, such as the

Area	Conclusions	Recommendations
	sustainable development, including environmental sustainability, and equality as parts of their key goals. The thematic focus of the programme can be encouraging the promotion of topics closely related with horizontal principles, e.g. SO 1.2 on social innovation or the protection of the environment under SO 3.1. • However, the contribution to sustainable development, equality and equal opportunities does not always depend on the project theme, as all projects – despite their topic – can make a positive contribution to the principles.	Communication Strategy or the Implementation Manual with more specification, e.g. a more detailed specification of the bodies or authorities taking charge of the principles could be considered.
Contribution to Europe 2020	• The programme contributes considerably to the Europe 2020 Strategy. All projects contribute to at least one of the strategic goals of EU2020. The majority of the funding is targeting the EU2020 sustainable growth objective with approx. 65% of the projects reflecting the sustainable growth objective. In addition, the contribution to the smart growth goal is high with 35 % of projects contributing. This confirms the initial concept of the programme to concentrate contribution to these two Europe 2020 objectives. • Nevertheless, also inclusive growth is embedded in the programme and implied in some of the projects of the different Specific Objectives. This is most obvious in SO 1.2, where projects contribute to social innovation, or to bridging and reducing innovation divides and addressing relevant social challenges. • Even if the single contribution per project is minor, the accumulated contribution at programme level through practical, on-the-ground solutions, pilot actions and transnational knowledge transfer and learning is deemed as very important to move forward towards the strategic goals of Europe 2020.	**Minor suggestions for improvement:** • With a view to story-telling and disseminating results, the programme could consider a dedicated edition of stories on contributions to Europe 2020 goals. • Highlighting the inclusive growth contribution in the dissemination of programme results could be envisaged. **Recommendations for 2014-2020:** • No further recommendations **Recommendations for the next programming period 2021-2027:** • No further recommendations
		Minor suggestions for improvement:

Area	Conclusions	Recommendations
Contribution to macro-regional strategies	• Due to its geographic overlaps, the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme contributes to the four macro-regional strategies. • In consequence, the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme has a bridging function and a diverse contribution to the different macro-regional strategies. • 81-84% of projects declare to contribute to the EUSBSR and EUSAIR, whereas more than 90% indicate a contribution to EUSALP or to EUSDR (almost 97%). • Most projects contribute directly to at least one MRS. Even if the contribution is not so concentrated to one single MRS, many projects have an important contribution through implementing objectives of four different macro-regional strategies "on the ground". • At programme level, there is a continuous contact and information exchange between the programme and all MRS in the programme area.	• The programme should continue with regular contacts and information exchanges with the MRS in the programme area. **Recommendations for 2014-2020:** • No further recommendations **Recommendations for the next programming period 2021-2027:** • The programme can advocate further on its bridging role for developing a functional area in the region to bridge the East-West divide. As suggestion for the next programming period, the programme should continue with regular contacts and information exchanges with the MRS in the programme area.

7 Annex

7.1 Annex 1 Communication indicators

Table 7-1 Communication output indicators

Area and ID	Output Indicator	Unit	Baseline (2014)	Target (2023)	Achieved by Dec. 2018	Effectiveness 2018 (% of achieved target)	Comments
D.1 Start-Up Activities							
D.1.1.1	• Programme communication strategy developed and approved by the monitoring committee	Number	0	1	1	100%	--
D.1.1.2	• Annual work plans developed and approved by the monitoring committee	Number	0	9	4	44%	--
D.1.2.1	• Kick-off conference organised	Number	0	1	1	100%	--
D.1.3.1	• Programme brand book developed	Number	0	1	1	100%	--
D.1.4.1	• Project brand manual developed	Number	0	1	1	100%	--
D.1.4.2	• Project logos developed	Number	0	120	85	71%	Will be 129 in 2019 (108%)
D.1.5.1	• EU emblem permanently displayed	Number	2	2	2	100%	--
D.2 Digital Activities							
D.2.1.1	• Transitional programme website developed for years 2014 and 2015	Number	0	1	1	100%	Discontinued in 2018, as foreseen.
D.2.1.2	• Permanent programme website developed and kept up-to-date	Number	0	1	1	100%	--
D.2.2.1	• National contact point websites developed	Number	0	9	9	100%	Updated by NCPs
D.2.2.2	• Project websites developed	Number	0	120	85	71%	Will be 129 in 2019 (108%)
D.2.3.1	• Newsflashes published by JS and NCPs	Number	0	90	60	67%	Newsletters and direct mailings. JS 26, NCPs 34
D.2.4.1	• Facebook posts	Number	138/year	200/year	1120/year	560%	JS only
D.2.4.2	• Twitter tweets incl. retweets and national tweets	Number	674/year	750/year	2530/year	337%	JS: 1827; NCP IT: 510, NCP CZ: 193
D.2.4.3	• LinkedIn posts (not updates)	Number	0	12/year	11/year	92%	LinkedIn changed its strategy, now counting "articles"
D.2.4.4	• CENTRAL EUROPE Community put in place	Number	0	1	1	100%	--
D.2.5.1	• Short films realised	Number	0	6	61	1.016%	Tutorials and films on YouTube
D.2.6.1	• Multimedia applications realised for web and events	Number	0	6	3	50%	In addition to website and short films.
D.3 Publications							

Area and ID	Output Indicator	Unit	Baseline (2014)	Target (2023)	Achieved by Dec. 2018	Effectiveness 2018 (% of achieved target)	Comments
D.3.1.1	• Briefings produced and shared among programme bodies	Number	0	10	6	60%	--
D.3.2.1	• Manuals published for applicants and beneficiaries	Number	0	3	3	100%	--
D.3.3.1	• Leaflets produced	Number	0	10	5	50%	--
D.3.4.1	• Infographics produced	Number	0	30	21	70%	--
D.3.5.1	• Thematic brochures in which project achievements are portrayed	Number	0	4	3	75%	--
D.3.6.1	• Studies and reports published	Number	0	10	4	40%	--
D.4 Public Events							
D.4.1.1	• Programme conferences organised	Number	0	7	3	43%	--
D.4.2.1	• National public events organised	Number	0	90	17	19%	PL 10, SI 2, SK 1, IT 2, AT 4. Some NCP use other approaches.
D.4.3.1	• Programme exhibition created and gradually extended	Number	0	1	2	200%	--
D.4.4.1	• Active participation of programme representatives incl. NCP in multiplier events (excl. project events)	Number	0	300	172	57%	JS 99, NCPs 73. Data from 2014-2017, for 2018 not available
D.5 Targeted Events							
D.5.1.1	• National contact point meetings organised	Number	0	14	7	50%	--
D.5.2.1	• National information days organised by national contact points on calls	Number	0	36	33	92%	--
D.5.2.2	• National information days organised by national contact points on results	Number	0	18	1	6%	Data available for 2014-2017, for 2018 not available
D.5.3.1	• Lead applicant trainings organised	Number	0	6	4	67%	--
D.5.4.1	• Individual lead applicant consultations by the joint secretariat	Number	0	600	468	78%	In the third call, no individual consultations were offered to applicants. Thematic workshops with extended Q&A sessions were organised instead.
D.5.5.1	• Lead partner seminars organised	Number	0	4	4	100%	LP seminars were substituted by individual online sessions for each project. (here counted as 1)
D.5.6.1	• Project implementation trainings organised	Number	0	5	4	80%	Including additional communication training
D.5.7.1	• Workshops and focus groups organised (also as part of programme conferences)	Number	0	5	13	260%	Data from 2014-2018

Area and ID	Output Indicator	Unit	Baseline (2014)	Target (2023)	Achieved by Dec. 2018	Effectiveness 2018 (% of achieved target)	Comments
D.5.8.1	• Project competitions organised	Number	0	3	3	100%	--
D.6 Media Relations							
D.6.1.1	• News releases published online	Number	0	20	12	60%	--
D.6.2.1	• News conferences organised	Number	0	5	2	40%	--
D.7 Promotional material							
D.7.1.1	• Office and event items produced	Number	0	10	5	50%	--
D.7.2.1	• Other promotional items produced	Number	0	3	2	67%	--
D.7.3.1	• Gifts produced	Number	0	7	13	186%	--

Table 7-2 Communication result indicators

| Area and ID	Result Indicator	Unit	Baseline 2014	Target 2023	Achieved Dec. 2018	Effectiveness 2018 (% of achieved target)	Comment on Achievement
C.1 Strengthen the communication and support capacity within the programme							
C.1.1	• At least maintained positive feedback on overall communication by JS	Percentage	74	75/year	89 in 2017	114%	Data from beneficiary survey 2017
C.1.2	• At least maintained positive feedback on overall communication by NCP	Percentage	69	70/year	79 in 2017	109%	Data from beneficiary survey 2017
C.1.3	• Increased positive feedback on overall communication related to control activities	Percentage	62	65/year	76 in 2017	111%	Data from beneficiary survey 2017
C.2 Raise awareness of external audiences about the programme							
C.2.1	• Increased number of unique sessions on programme website	Number	114,526 /year	150,000/year	236,485 in 2018	158%	Data from Google Analytics.
C.2.2	• Increased number of unique page views on project websites on programme website	Number	14,544 /year	50,000/year	182,189 in 2018	364%	Data from Google Analytics.
C.3 Increase knowledge of external audiences about the programme							
C.3.1	• Maintained high satisfaction with information provided by the programme at events	Percentage	90	90	95 in 2017-2018	105%	--
C.3.2	• High satisfaction with information provided by the projects at events	Percentage	n/a	75	Not available*	--	See table foot note
C.4 Improve attitudes and behaviour of external audiences towards cooperating with the programme							
C.4.1	• Increased percentage of shares on Facebook (based on total number of posts)	Percentage	73/year	35/year	81 in 2018	146%	--
C.4.2	• Increased percentage of mentions on Twitter (based on total number of tweets)	Percentage	26/year	35/year	323 in 2018	388%	--
C.4.3	• High number of joint communication activities implemented by projects with external stakeholders	Percentage	n/a	100/year	Not available*	--	See table foot note

Source: JS data. February 2019.

* This figure is currently not available. The JS changed the reporting obligations for projects to reduce admin burden. They now have to include this figure only in their final reports and not in progress reports anymore.

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7.2 Annex 2 Beneficiaries' satisfaction with project support during implementation

In the framework of the survey on programme management conducted in 2018, beneficiaries rated the support offered by the JS during project implementation. According to positive qualitative feedback from beneficiaries, the JS has been kind, helpful, fast and flexible in supporting projects during the implementation phase. The staff gave detailed and fast answers and prepared informative guideline documents and web material (factsheets, Application and Implementation Manuals, toolboxes, etc.) of high quality.
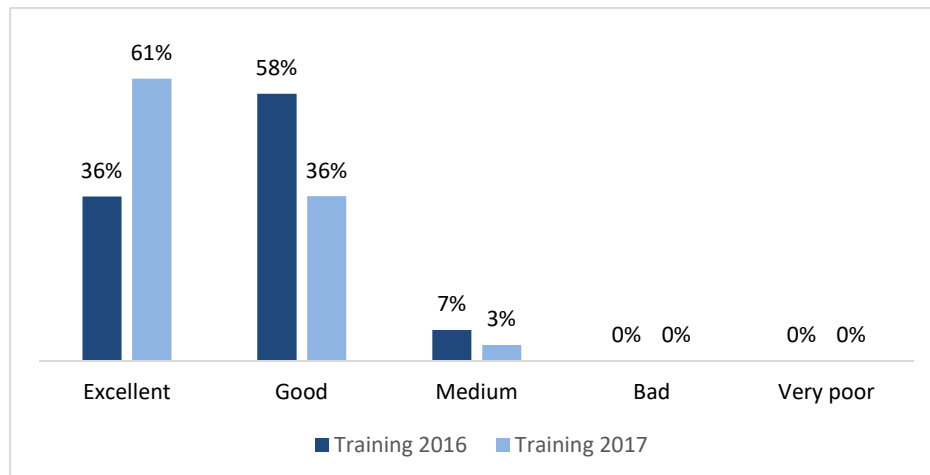
Figure 7-1 Rating of support provided by the JS in project implementation
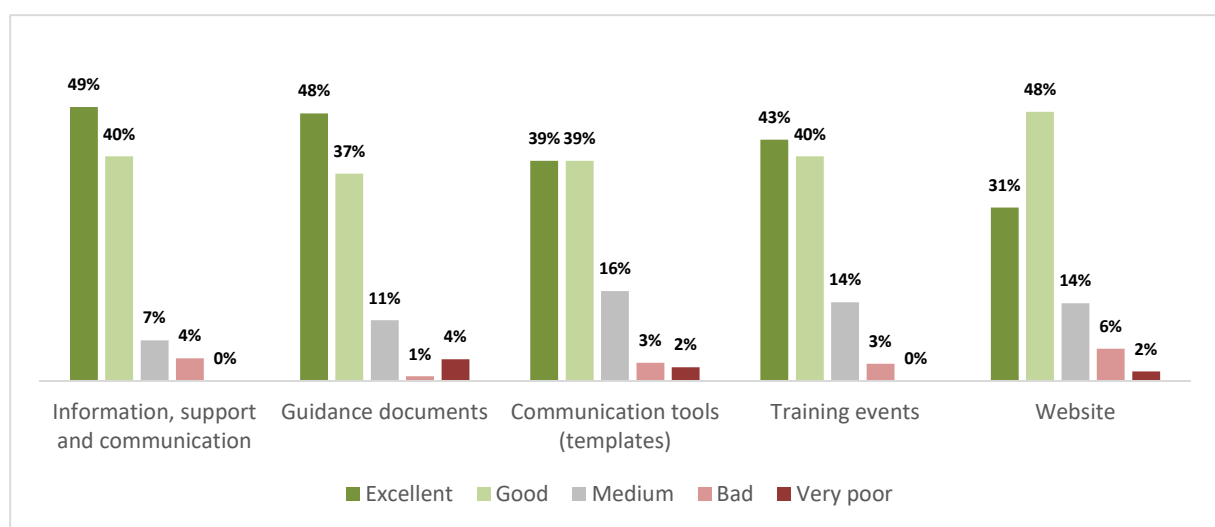
Source: Interreg CE survey on programme management (2018), own elaboration

Project management teams appreciated the Project Implementation Trainings (PIT). The second PIT organised in 2017 was rated even higher, with 96.6% of the 59 participants labelling it "excellent" or "good".

Figure 7-2 Feedback of participants of Project Implementation Trainings

Source: Feedback survey from the Project Implementation Trainings 2016 and 2017

Another important programme authority in programme implementation are the National Contact Points (NCPs). According to the beneficiary survey on programme management (January 2018), almost 80% of all respondents rated the general information, support and communication provided by the NCPs as "excellent" or "good".

Figure 7-3 Rating of support provided by NCPs in project implementation
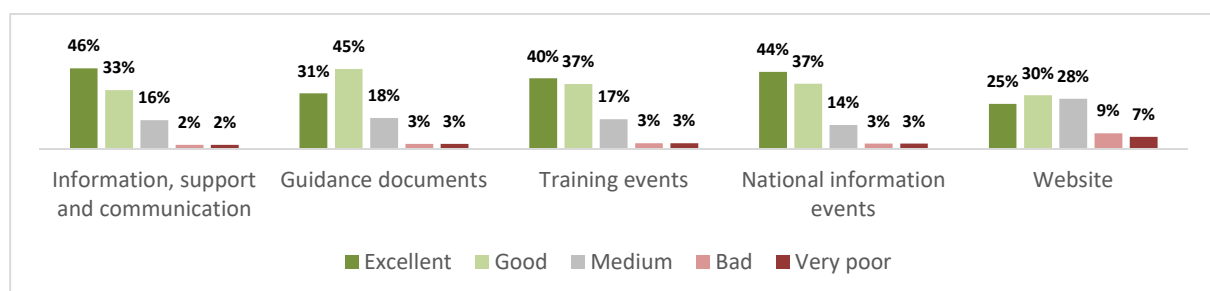
Source: Interreg CE survey on programme management (2018)

7.3 Annex 3 Progress of output indicators per PA

The source for all data in this chapter is:

- CENTRAL EUROPE Cooperation Programme. Data reported by JS January 2019. Achieved as of December 2018. Expected by selected operations of calls 1 to 3.

Data of the columns has the following references:

- Colum A: Targets values for each indicator correspond to the values defined in Version 3 of the Cooperation Programme.

- Column B: The achieved values correspond to the progress (already reported achievements of projects selected under calls 1 and 2 (status of end of December 2018).

- Column C: The values for "expected results by selected operations" correspond to the planned outputs of selected projects under calls 1, 2 and 3 as defined in Application Forms (status of February 2019). These are likely results to be achieved at the end of the programme life.

However, the use of the **common output indicators**, in particular CO 1, 26, 41 and 42[69], has shown that measuring progress on these indicators was not homogeneous among Interreg Programmes, in particular, CENTRAL EUROPE used another definition and counting method as many other programmes.

As it is the aim of the common Indicators to assure comparison and aggregation of data among Interreg programmes, the evaluator team recommended during the evaluation to up-date target values and to re-count the achievements for Common output indicators. This recommendation, inter alia, led to the request for programme modification and to proposed changes on the common output indicators[70].

Since the evaluation took place before the adoption of the new values, the analysis is based on achievements and expected outputs of common output indicators (CO1, CO26, CO41 and CO42) registered according to the old counting method.

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[69] CO1: Number of enterprises receiving support (priority axes 1-4), CO26: Number of enterprises cooperating with research institutions (priority axis 1), CO41: Number of enterprises participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (priority axes 1-4), CO42: Number of research institutions participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (priority axes 1-4).

[70] Programme revision (CP Version 3) adopted by the European Commission in April 2019.

Table 7-3 Expected and actual progress of output indicators in PA 1 (as of January 2019)

PA	Output Indicator	A	B	C	D= % B/A	E= % C/A
		CP Target Value (2023)	Achieved	Expected by selected operations	Level of Progress	Level of expected total achievements
1	1b.1_Number of strategies and action plans developed and/or implemented for strengthening linkages within the innovation systems	50	14	141	28%	282%
1	1b.2_Number of strategies and action plans developed and/or implemented for improving skills and competences of employees and entrepreneurs	33	5	125	15%	379%
1	1b.3_Number of tools and services developed and/or implemented for strengthening linkages within the innovation systems	62	24	100	39%	161%
1	1b.4_Number of tools developed and/or implemented for improving skills and competences of employees and entrepreneurs	55	15	76	27%	138%
1	1b.5_Number of innovation networks established	23	5	57	22%	248%
1	1b-6_Number of pilot actions implemented for strengthening linkages within the innovation systems	87	11	155	13%	178%
1	1b.7_Number of pilot actions implemented for improving skills and competences of employees and entrepreneurs	77	0	121	0%	157%
1	1b.8_Number of trainings implemented for improving innovation capacity and mind-sets	90	31	190	34%	211%
1	CO1_Number of enterprises receiving support (common indicator)	2400	19	12,508	1%	521%
1	CO26_Number of enterprises cooperating with research institutions (common indicator)	2200	19	9,960	1%	453%
1	CO41_Number of enterprises participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	2400	19	12,508	1%	521%
1	CO42_Number of research institutions participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	300	57	1,034	1%	345%
	Average	**-**		**-**	**17%**	**300%**

Table 7-4 Expected and actual progress of output indicators in PA 2 (as of January 2019)

PA	Output Indicator	A CP Target Value (2023)	B Achieved	C Expected by selected operations	D= % B/A Level of Progress	E= % C/A Level of expected total achievements
2	4c.1 _Number of strategies and action plans developed and/or implemented for improved energy efficiency and renewable energy use in public infrastructures	18	10	60	56%	333%
2	4c.2_Number of tools and/or services developed and/or implemented for improved energy efficiency and renewable energy use in public infrastructures	13	22	93	169%	715%
2	4c.3_Number of pilot actions implemented for improved energy efficiency and renewable energy use in public infrastructures	36	0	48	0%	133%
2	4c.4_Number of trainings implemented for improved energy efficiency and renewable energy use in public infrastructures	16	9	103	56%	644%
2	CO1_Number of enterprises receiving support (common indicator)	40	6	148	15%	370%
2	CO41_Number of enterprises participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	40	6	148	15%	370%
2	CO42_Number of research institutions participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	50	13	116	26%	232%
2	4e.1_Number of strategies and action plans developed and/or implemented for improving local/regional energy performance	27	3	63	11%	233%
2	4e.2_Number of strategies and action plans developed and/or implemented for low-carbon mobility in functional urban areas	17	22	52	129%	306%
2	4e.3_Number of tools developed and/or implemented for improving local/regional energy performance	10	10	91	100%	910%
2	4e.4_Number of tools and/or services developed and/or implemented for low-carbon mobility in functional urban areas	10	8	15	80%	150%
2	4e.5_Number of pilot actions implemented for improving local/regional energy performance	27	0	48	0%	178%

PA	Output Indicator	A CP Target Value (2023)	B Achieved	C Expected by selected operations	D= % B/A Level of Progress	E= % C/A Level of expected total achievements
2	4e.6_Number of pilot actions implemented for low-carbon mobility in functional urban areas	21	6	59	29%	281%
2	4e.7_Number of trainings implemented on low-carbon solutions	28	10	134	36%	479%
2	CO1_Number of enterprises receiving support (common indicator)	250	6	867	2%	347%
2	CO41_Number of enterprises participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	250	6	867	2%	347%
2	CO42_Number of research institutions participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	90	19	212	21%	236%
	Average	-	-	-	**44%**	**368%**

Table 7-5 Expected and actual progress of output indicators in PA 3 (as of January 2019)

PA	Output Indicator	A CP Target Value (2023)	B Achieved	C Achieved as expected by selected operations	D= % B/A Level of Progress	E= % C/A Level of expected total achievements
3	6c.1_Number of strategies and action plans developed and/or implemented for the protection and sustainable use of natural heritage and resources	45	4	95	9%	211%
3	6c.2_Number of strategies and action plans developed and/or implemented for the sustainable use of cultural heritage and resources	69	8	140	12%	203%
3	6c.3_Number of tools developed and/or implemented for the protection and sustainable use of natural heritage and resources	37	4	66	11%	178%
3	6c.4_Number of tools developed and/or implemented for the sustainable use of cultural heritage and resources	57	24	89	42%	156%
3	6c.5_Number of pilot actions implemented for the protection and sustainable use of natural heritage and resources	52	0	86	0%	165%

PA	Output Indicator	A CP Target Value (2023)	B Achieved	C Achieved as expected by selected operations	D= % B/A Level of Progress	E= % C/A Level of expected total achievements
3	6c.6_Number of pilot actions implemented for the sustainable use of cultural heritage and resources	80	7	142	9%	178%
3	6c.7_Number of trainings implemented on the protection and sustainable use of natural heritage and resources	30	10	104	33%	347%
3	6c.8_Number of trainings implemented on the sustainable use of cultural heritage and resources	46	41	256	89%	557%
3	CO1_Number of enterprises receiving support (common indicator)	700	10	3,201	1%	457%
3	CO41_Number of enterprises participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	700	10	3,201	1%	457%
3	CO42_Number of research institutions participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	170	48	424	28%	249%
3	6e.1_Number of strategies and action plans developed and/or implemented for the improvement of environmental quality in functional urban areas	25	15	74	60%	296%
3	6e.2_Number of tools developed and/or implemented for the improvement of environmental quality in functional urban areas	25	8	67	32%	268%
3	6e.3_Number of pilot actions implemented for the improvement of environmental quality in functional urban areas	40	0	64	0%	160%
3	6e.4_Number of trainings implemented on the improvement of the environmental quality in functional urban areas	20	25	85	125%	425%
3	CO1_Number of enterprises receiving support (common indicator)	140	4	452	3%	323%
3	CO41_Number of enterprises participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	140	4	452	3%	323%
3	CO42_Number of research institutions participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	70	20	148	29%	211%

PA	Output Indicator	A	B	C	D= % B/A	E= % C/A
		CP Target Value (2023)	Achieved	Achieved as expected by selected operations	Level of Progress	Level of expected total achievements
	Average	-	-	-	27%	287%

Table 7-6 Expected and actual progress of output indicators in PA 4 (as of January 2019)

PA	Output Indicator	A	B	C	D= % B/A	E= % C/A
		CP Target Value (2023)	Achieved	Achieved as expected by selected operations	Level of Progress	Level of expected total achievements
4	7b.1_Number of strategies and action plans developed and/or implemented for the improvement of regional passenger transport	22	1	68	5%	309%
4	7b.2_Number of tools and/or services developed and/or implemented for the improvement of regional passenger transport	14	4	19	29%	136%
4	7b.3_Number of pilot actions implemented for the improvement of regional passenger transport	22	0	69	0%	314%
4	7b.4_Number of trainings implemented on the improvement of regional passenger transport	16	19	48	119%	300%
4	CO1_Number of enterprises receiving support (common indicator)	30	5	140	17%	467%
4	CO41_Number of enterprises participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	30	5	140	17%	467%
4	CO42_Number of research institutions participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	20	10	60	50%	300%
4	7c.1_Number of strategies and action plans developed and/or implemented for multimodal environmentally-friendly freight transport	14	1	77	7%	550%
4	7c.2_Number of tools and services developed and/or implemented for multimodal environmentally-friendly freight transport	10	1	22	10%	220%
4	7c.3_Number of pilot actions implemented for multimodal environmentally-friendly freight transport	17	0	50	0%	294%

PA	Output Indicator	A	B	C	D= % B/A	E= % C/A
		CP Target Value (2023)	Achieved	Achieved as expected by selected operations	Level of Progress	Level of expected total achievements
4	7c.4_Number of trainings implemented on multimodal environmentally-friendly freight transport	14	0	30	0%	214%
4	CO1_Number of enterprises receiving support (common indicator)	300	1	1,304	0%	435%
4	CO41_Number of enterprises participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	300	1	1,304	0%	435%
4	CO42_Number of research institutions participating in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects (common indicator)	30	8	48	27%	160%
	Average	-	-	-	20%	329%

7.4 Annex 4 Performance Framework

The analysis was carried out in January 2019 and took into account the target values for 2023 and milestones for 2018 of Version 3 of the Cooperation Programme.

Table 7-7 Performance Framework

		A	B	C	B/A
PA	**Performance Framework indicator**	**Milestone 2018**	**Achievement 2018***	**Target 2023**	**Effectiveness on Milestone**
1	Number of strategies, action plans, tools and pilot actions developed and/or implemented for strengthening linkages within the innovation systems	0	49	199	
1	Number of strategies, action plans, tools and pilot actions developed and/or implemented for improving skills and competences of employees and entrepreneurs	0	20	165	
1	<u>Key implementation step:</u> Number of approved operations in PA 1	21	25	47	119%
1	Total amount of eligible expenditure certified to EC for PA 1	10,100,000	13,678,787.63	91,497,242	135%
2	Number of strategies, action plans, tools and pilot actions developed and/or implemented in the field of improved energy efficiency and renewable energy use of public infrastructures	0	32	67	
2	Number of strategies, action plans, tools and pilot actions developed and/or implemented for improving local/regional energy performance	0	13	64	
2	Number of strategies, action plans, tools and pilot actions developed and/or implemented for low-carbon mobility in functional urban areas	0	36	48	
2	<u>Key implementation step:</u> Number of approved operations in PA 2	13	18	25	138%
2	Total amount of eligible expenditure certified to EC for PA 2	6,500,000	10,925,032.43	51,427,229	168%
3	Number of strategies, action plans, tools and pilot actions developed and/or implemented for protection and sustainable use of natural heritage and resources	0	8	134	
3	Number of strategies, action plans, tools and pilot actions developed and/or implemented for sustainable use of cultural heritage and resources	0	39	206	
3	Number of strategies, action plans, tools and pilot actions developed and/or implemented for the improvement of environmental quality in functional urban areas	0	23	90	
3	<u>Key implementation step:</u> Number of approved operations in PA3	27	33	48	122%

PA	Performance Framework indicator	A	B	C	B/A
		Milestone 2018	Achievement 2018*	Target 2023	Effective-ness on Milestone
3	Total amount of eligible expenditure certified to EC for PA3	13,000,000	21,127,963.62	102,974,940	163%
4	Number of strategies, action plans, tools developed and/or implemented and pilot actions for the improvement of regional passenger transport	0	5	58	
4	Number of strategies, action plans, tools and pilot actions developed and/or implemented for multimodal environmentally friendly freight transport	0	2	41	
4	Key implementation step: Number of approved operations in PA 4	9	9	16	100%
4	Total amount of eligible expenditure certified to EC for PA 4	4,300,000	4,436,065.94	33,361,124	103%

*including selected operations in calls 1 to 3.

Source: CENTRAL EUROPE Cooperation Programme and Data from JS. March 2019.

7.5 Annex 5 Additional thematic result indicators

Table 7-8 Additional thematic result indicators

Indicator	A Expected by selected operations*	B Achievements**	B/A Level of progress in %
Number of institutions adopting new and/or improved strategies and action plans	2,756	267	9.7
Number of institutions applying new and/ or improved tools and services	4,049	668	16.5
Amount of funds leveraged based on project achievements in EUR	503,509,000	27,869,851	5.5
Number of jobs created based on project achievements in FTE	2,759	47	1.7
Number of trained persons	31,058	8,023	25.8

Source: JS. Programme Monitoring system. April 2019.

* Includes selected operations in call 1-3.

** Includes achievements by operations selected under call 1-2.

7.6 Annex 6 Programme specific result indicators

Table 7-9 Programme result indicators (2018)

SO	Result indicator	Baseline 2015	Situation 2018	Target 2023
1.1	Status of linkages among actors of the innovation systems achieved through transnational cooperation in central European regions	3.0	3.4	3.3
1.2	Status of capacities of the public and private sector for skills development of employees and entrepreneurial competences achieved through transnational cooperation driving economic and social innovation in central European regions	2.7	3.1	3.0
2.1	Status of capacities of the public sector and related entities for increased energy efficiency and renewable energy use in public infrastructures achieved through transnational cooperation	2.9	3.3	3.2
2.2	Status of capacities of the public sector and related entities for territorially based low-carbon energy planning and policies achieved through transnational cooperation	3.0	3.2	3.3
2.3	Status of capacities of the public sector and related entities for low-carbon mobility planning in functional urban areas achieved through transnational cooperation	2.5	3.0	2.8
3.1	Status of integrated environmental management capacities of the public sector and related entities for the protection and sustainable use of natural heritage and resources achieved through transnational cooperation	3.2	3.4	3.5
3.2	Status of capacities of the public and private sector for the sustainable use of cultural heritage and resources achieved through transnational cooperation	3.0	3.5	3.3
3.3	Status of integrated environmental management capacities of the public sector and related entities in functional urban areas achieved through transnational cooperation for making them more liveable places	2.9	3.2	3.2
4.1	Status of coordinated planning capacities of the public sector and related entities for regional passenger transport systems linked to national and European transport networks achieved through transnational cooperation	3.0	3.5	3.3
4.2	Status of coordination among freight transport stakeholders for increasing multimodal environmentally-friendly freight solutions achieved through transnational cooperation	2.6	3.0	2.9

Source: CENTRAL EUROPE Cooperation Programme and Data from JS. April 2019.

## 7.7 Annex 7 Stakeholder involvement and partnership structure

This section contains further data and analysis of the stakeholder involvement in programme implementation.

Table 7-10 Distribution of partners in each SO by country

| Country \ SO	Austria	Croatia	Czech Republic	Germany	Hungary	Italy	Poland	Slovakia	Slovenia	Total
1.1	9%	7%	9%	15%	12%	16%	15%	6%	11%	100%
1.2	10%	11%	6%	13%	9%	20%	11%	6%	14%	100%
2.1	12%	13%	8%	11%	11%	18%	11%	1%	13%	100%
2.2	11%	12%	5%	20%	8%	15%	13%	1%	15%	100%
2.3	10%	13%	10%	11%	14%	19%	10%	5%	10%	100%
3.1	16%	10%	10%	13%	13%	12%	12%	5%	10%	100%
3.2	8%	11%	6%	12%	11%	19%	12%	5%	17%	100%
3.3	8%	8%	11%	8%	8%	20%	23%	5%	10%	100%
4.1	10%	9%	11%	15%	10%	20%	10%	6%	11%	100%
4.2	4%	3%	9%	25%	14%	20%	13%	6%	8%	100%

Source: CENTRAL EUROPE Application Forms. Calls 1, 2 and 3. Own calculation.

Figure 7-4 Distribution between public and private applicant organisations by SO (project partners, lead partners, and associated partners)
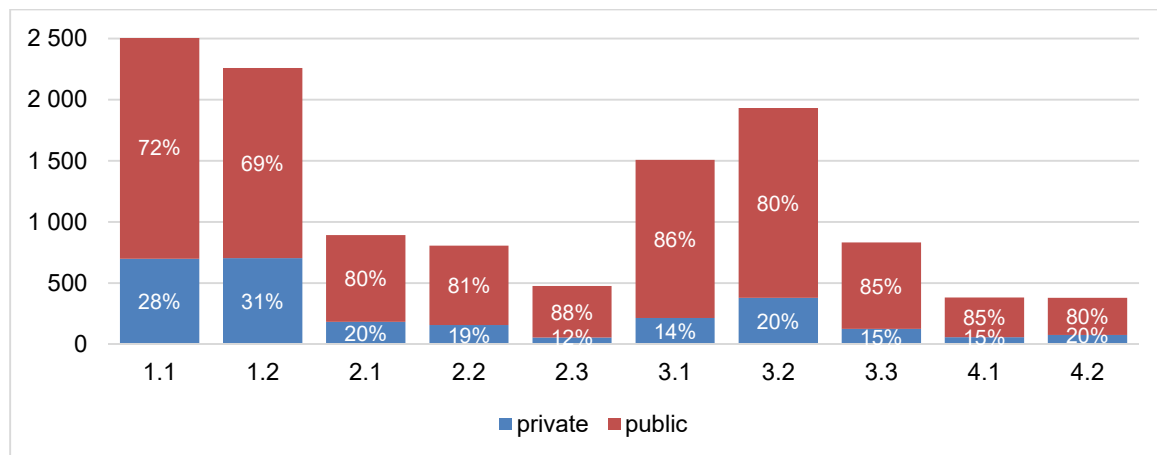
Source: CENTRAL EUROPE Programme. Application forms. Calls 1, 2, and 3. Own calculation.

Figure 7-5 Distribution between public and private beneficiary organisations by SO (project partners, lead partners, and associated partners)
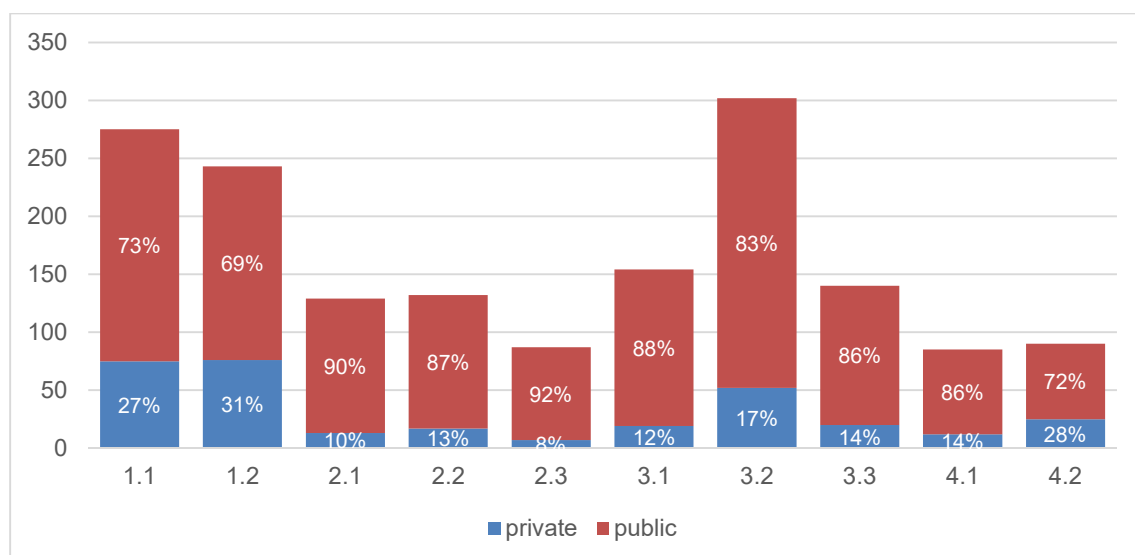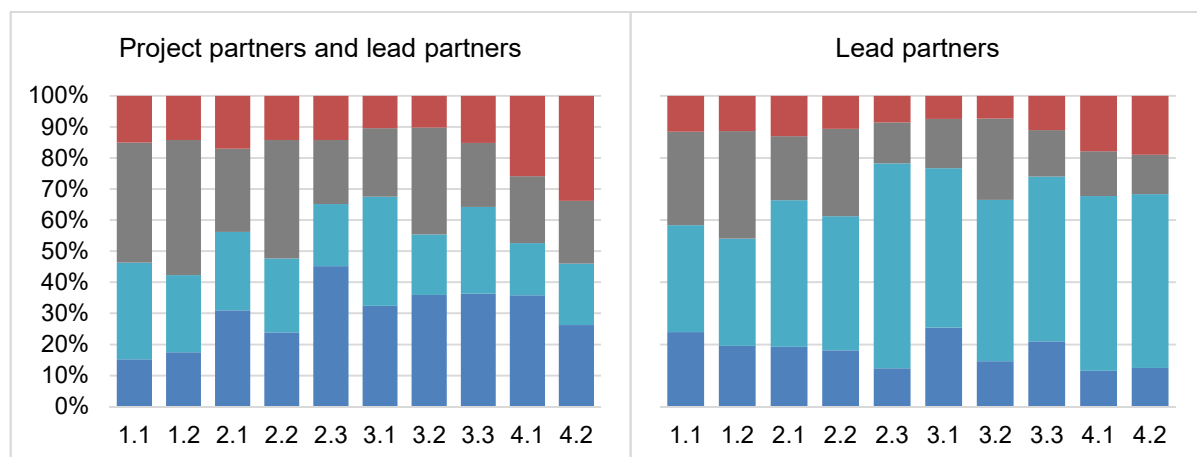

Source: CENTRAL EUROPE Programme. Application forms. Calls 1, 2 and 3. Own calculation.

For the purpose of the following analysis, organisations have been aggregated for simplicity in four main categories:

- Public authorities: including national, regional, and local public authorities;
- Education: including education organisations, training centres, schools, and higher education and research institutions;
- Enterprises and private organisations: including SMEs, large enterprises, and infrastructure and (public) service providers. These include both public and privately owned enterprises, although they are, for the most part, organisations established under private law;
- Other: including sectoral agencies and business support organisations, interest groups including NGOs, international organisations, and others.[71]
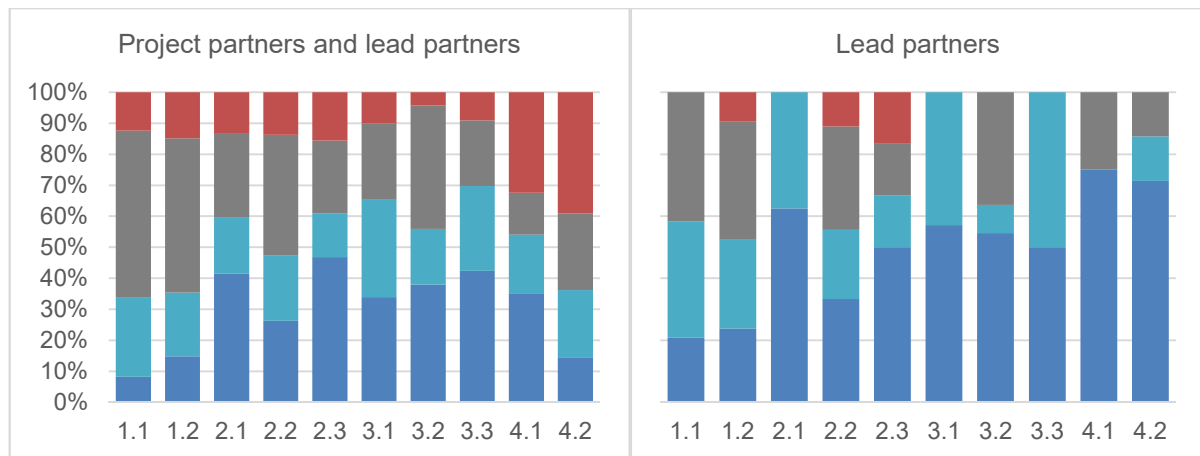
Figure 7-6 Distribution of project applicant typology by SO

Source: CENTRAL EUROPE Programme. Application forms. Calls 1, 2, and 3. Own calculation.

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[71] In this section, partner typology is distributed on an application or project basis: this means that organisations participating to several projects under the same Specific Objective are double counted. This is chosen in order to be able to show the characteristics of the average project under each SO, rather than illustrating the overall distribution of single partner typologies.

Figure 7-7 Distribution of project partner typology by SO

Source: CENTRAL EUROPE Programme monitoring system. Calls 1, 2, and 3. Own calculation.

7.8 Annex 8 List of projects analysed as case studies

Programme priority	Programme specific objective	Project acronym	Project title	Call
1. Cooperating on innovation to make CENTRAL EUROPE more competitive	1.1 To improve sustainable linkages among actors of the innovation systems for strengthening regional innovation capacity in central Europe	FabLabNet	Making Central Europe more competitive by unlocking the innovation capacity of Fab Labs within an enhanced innovation ecosystem	1
	1.2 To improve skills and entrepreneurial competences for advancing economic and social innovation in central European regions	Focus IN CD	Innovative patient centred health care services - advantages of establishing a close CE network in celiac disease patient health care	1
2. Cooperating on low-carbon strategies in CENTRAL EUROPE	2.2 To improve territorial based low-carbon energy planning strategies and policies supporting climate change mitigation	GeoPLASMA-CE	Shallow Geothermal Energy Planning, Assessment and Mapping Strategies in Central Europe	1
	2.3 To improve capacities for mobility planning in functional urban areas to lower CO2 emissions	SULPITER	Sustainable Urban Logistics PlannIng To Enhance Regional freight transport	1
3. Cooperating on natural and cultural resources for sustainable growth in CENTRAL EUROPE	3.1 To improve integrated environmental management capacities for the protection and sustainable use of natural heritage and resources	RAINMAN	Integrated Heavy Rain Risk Management	2
	3.2 To improve capacities for the sustainable use of cultural heritage and resources	YouInHerit	Youth involvement in the innovative valorisation and revival of traditional trades and crafts as cultural heritage to make urban regions more attractive and competitive in a dynamic age	1
	3.3 To improve environmental management of functional urban areas to make them more liveable places	LUMAT	Implementation of Sustainable Land Use in Integrated Environmental Management of Functional Urban Areas	1
4. Cooperating on transport to better connect CENTRAL EUROPE	4.1 To improve planning and coordination of regional passenger transport system for better connections to national and European transport networks	RUMOBIL	Rural Mobility in European Regions affected by Demographic Change	1

Summary case study reports are attached as an additional document.